

# All quiet in the Baltics?

Estonians, Latvians and their Russian-speaking minorities:  
Different assessments of current European issues

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*This study is published within a series of policy briefs on Europe and its neighbours in the east and south. In this series we publish papers commissioned or produced by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in cooperation with regional partners in the framework of our work in this field. This policy brief is the product of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's cooperation with the Warsaw-based Institute of Public Affairs (ISP).*

The Baltic states, being off-centre from the European Union, too small to have a big influence on the majority voting in the EU-Council and too far away to go there as a tourist for the weekend, are generally very unknown EU partners. Their voice gets through only in such cases as discussing sanctions towards Russia or planning NATO training on their territory. The general perception of the opinions of the Baltic state societies towards Eastern policy is that they are very anti-Russian. It is not asked how far a clear position of the Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian president or minister in Brussels might bring him or her problems at home. Meanwhile, the societies in Latvia and Estonia are much more divided than that of societies in other EU countries.

For example, in assessing who is responsible for starting the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and what Europe and the respondents' countries should do in this respect, the Russian-speaking population has totally different opinions from the ethnic Latvian- or Estonian-speaking majority. In addition, the perception of the EU and EU membership advantages differ. In Western Europe, where societies are not divided along the lines of cultural and political affinity to Russia, there is little awareness of this phenomenon.

A division of opinions within the societies of two Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia, based on the main language respondents speak, is very clearly recognised in responses in an opinion polls study conducted in Latvia and Estonia, as well as in Lithuania and Poland in the summer of 2015.<sup>1</sup> People who claim their first language is Russian (in the sample of the residents of Estonia under analysis, they accounted for 30%, among the surveyed residents of Latvia – 40% of respondents<sup>2</sup>) had different opinions than respondents declaring Latvian or Estonian as

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted by TNS Polska on a representative sample of 1,000 Polish, 1,000 Lithuanian, 1,000 Latvian and 1,000 Estonian respondents aged 18-60, by way of Internet interviews. The survey took place August 3-17, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> In Lithuania, 3% of respondents declared that Russian is the main language they use at home. For 1% of respondents, this language is Polish, which constitutes too small a sample to draw any conclusions based on this category.

the main language.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, in both countries these divisions are very similar – the differences in percentages of individual responses between the group of ethnic Estonians and Latvians and the Russian-speaking groups living in these countries are comparable. These divisions are very strong and affect the overall results in a given country. When only the responses of the Estonian- or Latvian-speaking residents are analysed, it can be seen that their answers are, in many cases, closer to the responses of all Poles and Lithuanians than to those of the entire population of Estonia or Latvia. People who claim Russian is their main language have views that are much more pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian. In the following text these divisions are described and – for comparison - put together with figures from the whole Polish and Lithuanian society.

#### Perception of the responsibility for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

These pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian attitudes are very well demonstrated in the answers concerning the responsibility for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

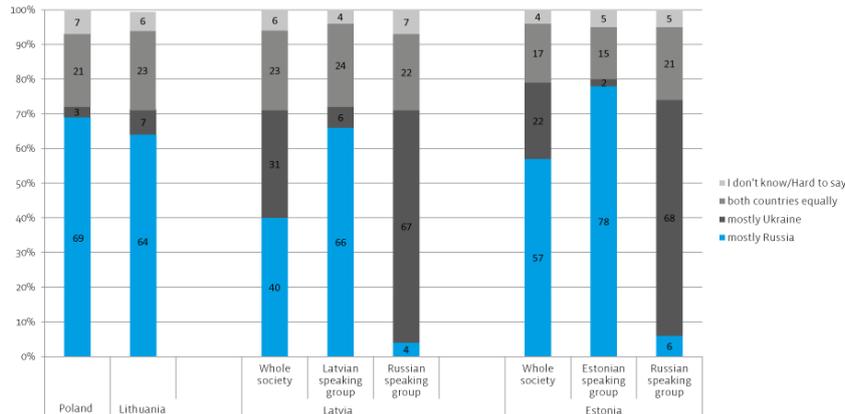
For example, in Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, the percentage of people who consider both sides of the conflict to be responsible is similar (21%, 23% and 23%, respectively), while in Latvia, the group pointing to Ukraine's responsibility is relatively large (31%). In Latvia, especially the Russian-speaking respondents put the blame on the authorities in Kyiv (67%), whereas they practically do not acknowledge any responsibility of Moscow (4%). In the case of inhabitants of Latvian ethnicity, the pattern is quite the opposite (66% of respondents from this group blame Russia, 6% blame Ukraine). The divisions are very similar in Estonia, where the local residents speaking Russian point to Ukraine as responsible (68%), and not to Russia (6%), whereas the Estonian-speaking majority points to Russia (78%) and not to Ukraine (2%).

<sup>3</sup> According to statistics, in Latvia 62.1% inhabitants declare Latvian and 37.2% Russian as their first language. See more: <http://www.csb.gov.lv/en/notikumi/key-provisional-results-population-and-housing-census-2011-33306.html>; <http://www.csb.gov.lv/en/notikumi/home-latvian-spoken-62-latvian-population-majority-vidzeme-and-lubana-county->

[39158.html](http://www.csb.gov.lv/en/notikumi/home-latvian-spoken-62-latvian-population-majority-vidzeme-and-lubana-county-39158.html)). In Estonia 68.5 %speak Estonian as first language and 29.6% - Russian. See more: <http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/Dialog/Saveshow.asp>. In both countries not only can Russians but also ethnic Belarussians, Ukrainians and Poles be found among the Russian speaking group.

Figure 1: Who bears the most responsibility for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict?

they have such concerns, and in the latter case, this group is smaller than the group of those who do not see such a threat – 55%.



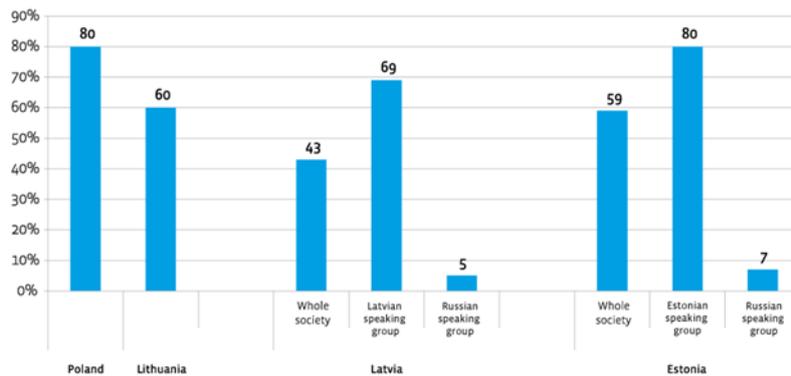
Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

The perceived threat from Russia

Clearly visible is the impact of language divisions on the survey results in the assessment of the military threat coming from Russia in the case of Latvia and Estonia. Among the people claiming they speak Estonian as their first language, the sense of military threat from Russia is almost identical with that of Poles (80%), and among the inhabitants of Latvia who use the Latvian language it is only slightly less frequent (69%). On the contrary, very few representatives of the Russian-speaking groups in Estonia (7%) and Latvia (5%) point to such a threat. As a result, only 59% of respondents from Estonia and 43% from Latvia admit that

Figure 2: Does Russia present a military threat to your country? (positive answers)

the views of Poles (62%) and Lithuanians (63%).

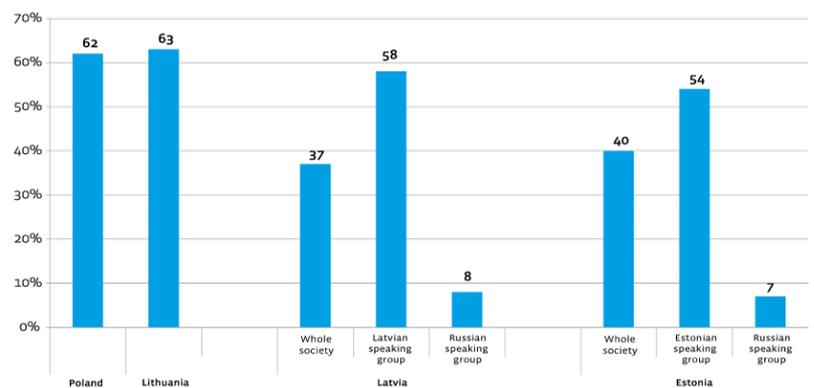


Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

Figure 3: Should NATO establish army bases on your country's territory where soldiers from other NATO member states would be stationed? (positive answers)

Attitude towards the proposal to establish NATO bases

Positions of the Russian-speaking group also affect the attitude of the whole group of inhabitants of Latvia and Estonia concerning the establishment of permanent NATO bases in the territory of their countries. Half of the inhabitants of Latvia (53%) and Estonia (48%) are against it. In Latvia, 85% of respondents who use Russian as their first language are against such bases, in Estonia 88% are against it. People speaking mainly Latvian and Estonian at home more frequently support the presence of NATO bases in the territory of their countries (58% and 54% respectively), and also in this case are much closer in their opinions to

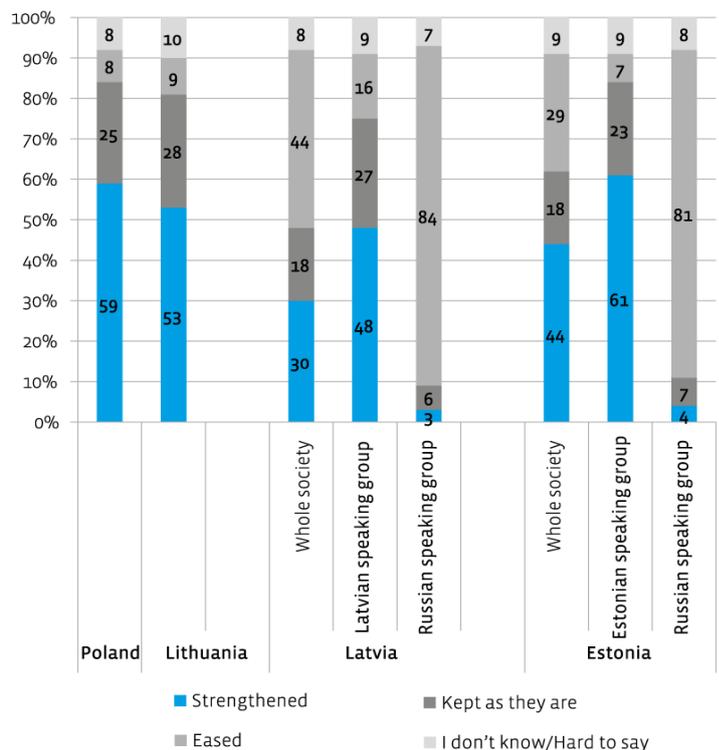


Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

Position on the sanctions against Russia

Russian-speaking groups living in Estonia and Latvia also very clearly oppose the sanctions towards Russia. They reject the idea of strengthening the sanctions (4% and 3% accordingly) and support their relaxation (81% and 84%), while the rest of the society oppose this idea (84% and 75%), choosing the option to strengthen the sanctions (61% and 48%) more similar to Poles (59%) and Lithuanians (53%). When analysing the entire Estonian and Latvian populations, in Estonia, slightly less than half of the respondents (44%) support strengthening of the sanctions, whereas in Latvia those who favour the relaxation of the policy towards Russia in this respect are more numerous (44%), and less than every third respondent (30%) supports strengthening of the sanctions.

Figure 4: Should the current sanctions against Russia, imposed by the European Union, be strengthened, kept as they are or eased?



Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

Opinions concerning support for Ukraine's membership in NATO and the European Union as well as economic assistance

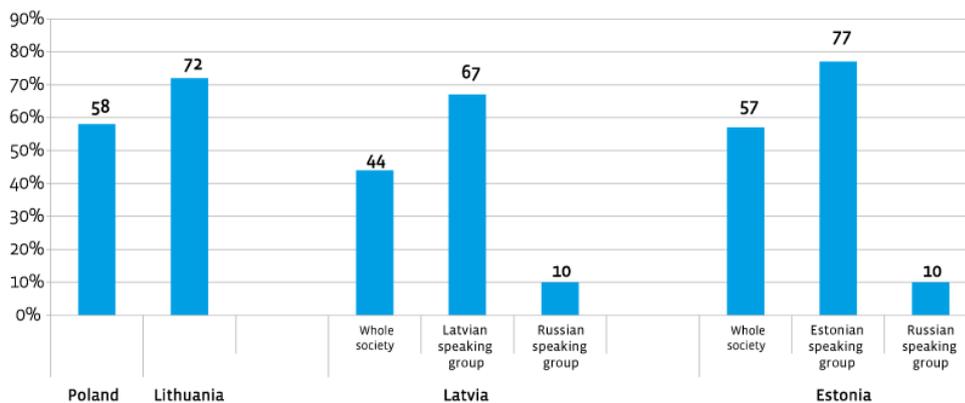
Again, in Latvia and Estonia, the attitude of the Russian-speaking groups affects the division of responses concerning supporting

Ukraine on its path to NATO. Three-quarters of these groups in both countries are against such support. If one looked only at the people from Estonian- and Latvian-speaking groups, the percentage of voices in favour would exceed the Lithuanian result – and nearly three-quarters of Lithuanians advocate such support.

makes it similar to the answers from Poland – 56%). The inhabitants of Latvia are – as a result of language differences – more divided, as less than half of the respondents (43%) are in favour of such support, with a group of its opponents of a similar size (40%).

The groups using mainly Russian are also reluctant to give economic assistance for Ukraine. Only 18% of Russian-speaking groups in Latvia and 22% in Estonia support economic assistance, which

Figure 5: In the face of the conflict in the east of Ukraine, should your country support Ukraine's efforts to join NATO? (positive answers)



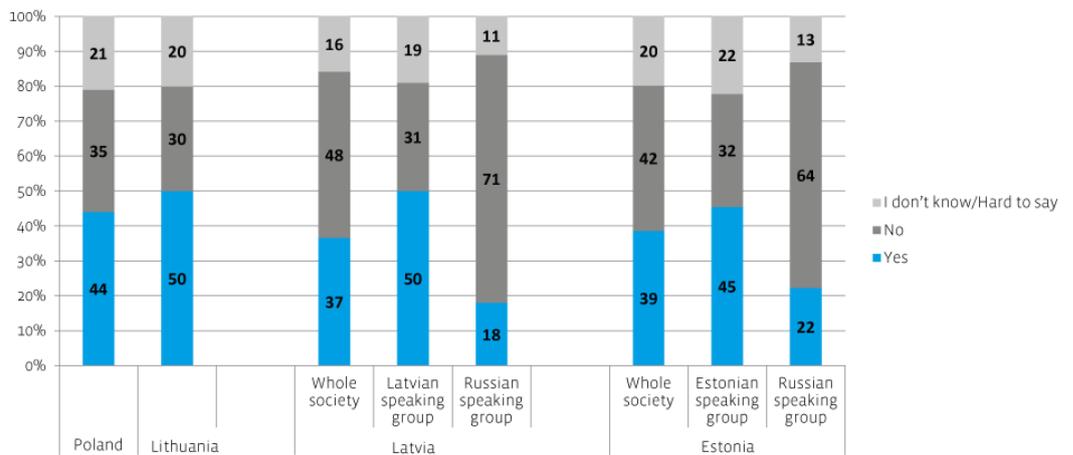
Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

As with NATO membership, Latvian- (65%) and Estonian- (76%) speaking people are as convinced as Lithuanians (75%) that support for Ukraine on its way into the European Union is necessary. Comparing the whole groups of inhabitants, this help is favoured by more than half of the inhabitants of Estonia (59%, which

influences the general numbers of answers from both societies. In Estonia and Latvia, the groups reluctant to such assistance are 42% and 48% respectively. Again, without the Russian-speaking groups the results would be close to the opinions of Poles (44% in favours) and Lithuanians (50% in favour).

Figure 6: In the face of the conflict in the east of Ukraine, should your country provide economic support to Ukraine?

accuses the policy of being too anti-Russian (31% and 32%) – and every fifth of not being strict enough towards Moscow (20% and 21%).



Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

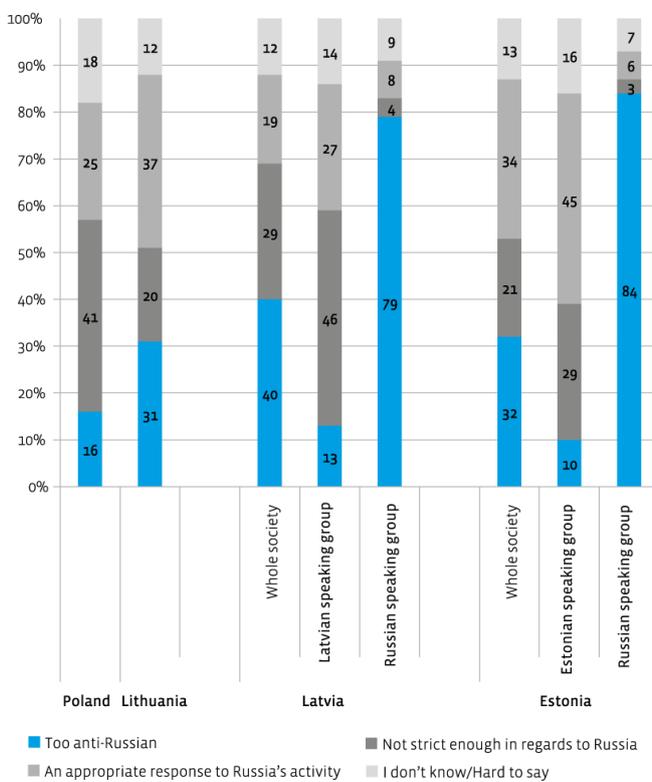
In Latvia, the predominant opinion is that the government's policy is too anti-Russian.

Assessment of the policy of respondents' own governments towards the conflict

Societies of the four countries under analysis are strongly divided internally in their opinions concerning the policies of their countries' government regarding Russia in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the annexation of Crimea. A similarity can be noticed in the distribution of opinions of the inhabitants of Lithuania and Estonia, where the biggest groups of respondents (although the majority is slight) consider the policy of their country's authorities appropriate (37% and 34%), but at the same time, almost every third respondent

These divisions are mainly because of the different opinions in Latvia and Estonia between the majority of society and those speaking Russian at home, which charge the governments of their countries with anti-Russian sentiment (79% and 84% respectively) and very rarely consider the government's policy appropriate (8% and 6%). The Estonian-speaking group, on the other hand, is even more satisfied with the policy of their government in this respect than Lithuanians and Poles. The opinions of people speaking Latvian at home and Poles are comparable.

Figure 7: How would you rate the policies of your country's government regarding Russia in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the annexation of Crimea? This policy is:



European integration. The Russian-speaking groups are also in both cases much less satisfied with membership of their countries in the EU. In Estonia, the benefits are seen by only 16% of respondents from this group, in Latvia by 14%. Those pointing at dis-advantages make up 37% of res-pondents speaking Russian in Estonia and 46% in Latvia.

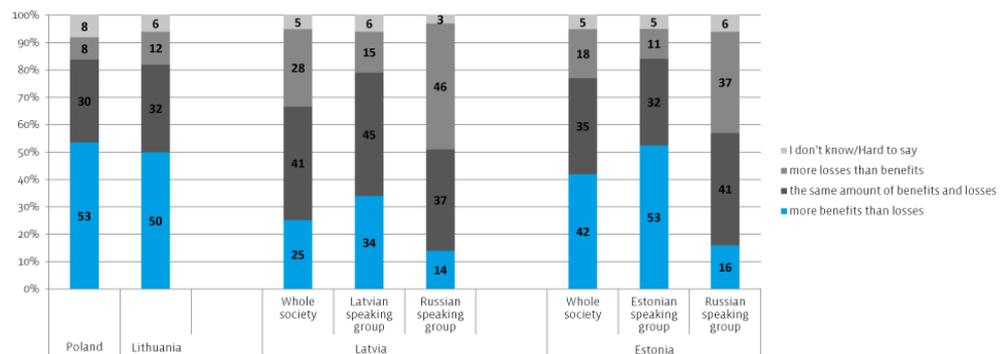
Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

Perceived advantages and disadvantages of European integration

The divisions between groups speaking Estonian/Latvian and Russian are not only visible while talking about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, but also when asking about the consequences of

Figure 8: Has your country's integration with the European Union brought your country more benefits or disadvantages?

differences are not as big as in the fields described above and amount to 13 percentage points. Those against it generally account for



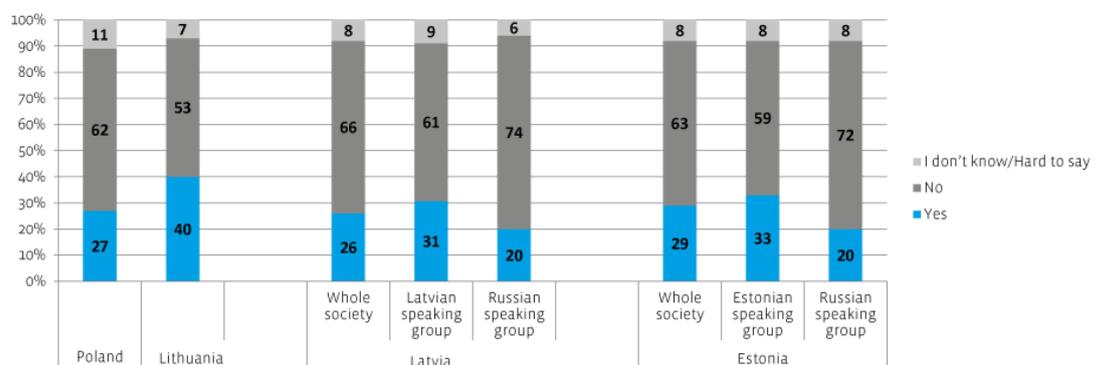
Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

66% of the inhabitants of Latvia, 63% of inhabitants of Estonia, and 62% of those living in Poland.

Attitude towards reception of refugees

Representatives of the Russian-speaking groups in Latvia and Estonia are also more sceptical

Figure 9: Do you think that your country should accept refugees from Africa and the Middle East, according to the European Commission's proposal?



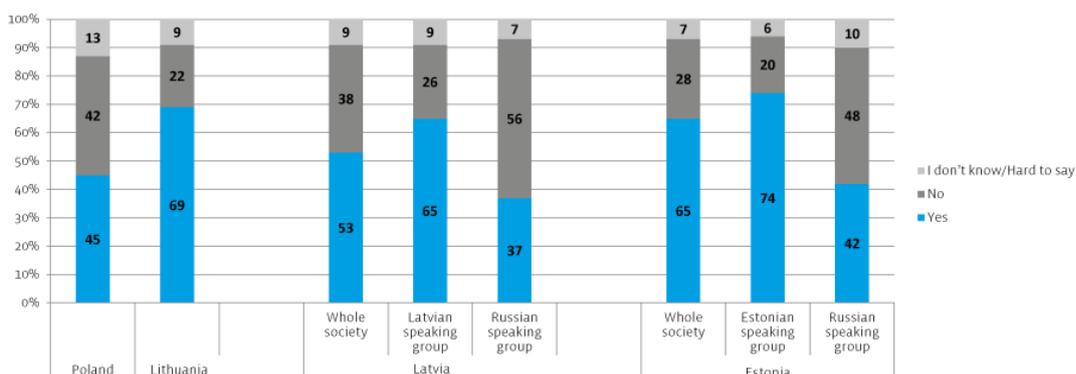
than other groups of respondents in those countries (74% and 72%, respectively) towards receiving refugees from North Africa and the Middle East. Here, however, the

Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

Ethnic divisions play a larger role when it comes to the question

concerning acceptance of refugees from Ukraine. The inhabitants of Estonia or Latvia who speak Estonian and Latvian as first languages are more open (in favour: 74% and 65% respectively) than people speaking Russian (42% and 37%). The former are very close in their answers to the opinions of Lithuanians (69%). Those speaking Russian answer similarly to the whole Polish population, as not many more Poles are in favour of taking Ukrainian refugees in (45%) than are against it (42%).

Figure 10: In the case of an upsurge in violence in Eastern Ukraine, do you think that your country should accept refugees from Ukraine?



Source: Data of the Institute of Public Affairs 2015

### Conclusions

The divisions between Russian-speaking and Latvian-/Estonian-speaking groups are especially

visible in such fields as: perception of a military threat coming from Russia, supporting Ukraine on its way to NATO and the EU, strengthening or easing sanctions, having NATO bases on the territory of the given country or assessing its own government policy towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Still remarkable are differences concerning perceived benefits of the EU-integration of respondents' country. The smallest divergence might be noticed in questions on refugees.

The fact of these and other divisions is often underestimated in the Western countries. It should be, however, reflected while analysing the opinions of the Baltic states. These divisions are, on the one

hand, an important factor influencing the foreign and European policy of both Estonian and Latvian governments, as a big part of the inhabitants do not share the government's position. So the politicians do not argue so loudly as Lithuanians representatives. The mentioned ethnical differences

might play a role here. Still, there are also some other factors, as strong economic ties with Russia. Especially in Latvia both this reluctance is quite high and the network with Russia strong, which is why this country is often perceived as a weak spot with a strong Russian influence. Part of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia (not only ethnic Russians, but also Ukrainians and Belarussians) do not have the right to vote as non-citizens. However, rather than having the effect of diminishing the pro-Russian agenda in foreign policy, this deficit of participation keeps the strong pro-Russian sentiment in part of the population alive (the same can be said to some extent of the presence of non-citizens in Estonia). Nevertheless, the Russian-speaking population is not the only factor at play, as Russian economic interests acting through strong lobbies are also a significant influence.

On the other hand, both governments are, for example, clear supporters of the sanctions towards Russia even though a big part of their societies does not back this position.

For the full text version see: Fuksiewicz, A., Łada, A., *Baltic Group. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in search of common interests*, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2015<sup>4</sup>

<http://www.isp.org.pl/publikacje,1,871.html>

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<sup>4</sup> The survey was part of a project co-financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland in the framework of the "Cooperation in the area of public diplomacy 2015" programme. This publication reflects the views of the authors

only and is not an official position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Project co-financed by the PZU Foundation.

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