

Globalizing the Ethnoscape

Shortly after the celebration of Latvian Independence Day in November 1997, the sociologist Tālis Tīsenkopfs published in *Diena*, Latvia's leading daily, an editorial entitled "Contemporary Latvia's Diverse Identities."¹ Tīsenkopfs cited an interview with Paul Goble, an American expert on the former Soviet Union who faulted Latvia for lacking a strong sense of identity or clear developmental orientation.² Whereas Estonians, in Goble's view, clearly identified themselves (and were identified) with Scandinavia, and Lithuanians with Poland and Central Europe, Latvians seemed to lack a vision of where they belonged or where they were heading. To the outside world, Latvia looked like a "blank spot," in Tīsenkopfs's words, poised between East and West. Tīsenkopfs concurred with Goble's assessment, conjuring the general ignorance of Latvia and Latvians with wry anecdotes from his travels in the West, where colleagues, when not confusing Latvia with Lithuania or the Balkans, "associate it with three things: oppressed Russians, Riga, and the Mafia."

Nonetheless, Tīsenkopfs saw a silver lining in this cloud of virtual nonexistence. "I like this blank spot on the map," he declared, "because it confers freedom and many choices for coloring it in." He noted that the 1997 United Nations Development Program's *Human Development Report* for Latvia had found that the country lacked a unified civic identity, but this very lack could be a great opportunity. It was time to shake off the nineteenth-century illusions of "ethnic nationalism," Tīsenkopfs argued, and embrace the diversity of identities itself as the "unifying principle for Latvia's constitutional and civic identity both internally and in foreign relations. . . . Why not unite on the basis of sound economic and legal values and develop Latvia as an economic and democratic space, viewed by the West with Hanseatic respect and by the East with Baltic wonder?" The beautiful capital city of Riga, Tīsenkopfs suggested, would be an ideal starting point for the construction of such an open, multicultural identity.

Coming just over a decade after the eruption of anti-Soviet Latvian nationalism under Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, Tīsenkopfs's interrogation of Latvian na-

tional identity was timely. On May 4, 1990, the newly elected Supreme Soviet of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic had declared the *de jure* restoration of the interwar Republic of Latvia. Full independence had been announced in August 1991, after the failed coup by Communist hardliners in Moscow, and Soviet troop withdrawal began in 1994. By the late 1990s, the former Hanseatic harbors were booming again, and Western investors had transformed the face of downtown Riga, where German, Swedish, and English could be heard almost as frequently as Latvian or Russian. The parliamentary political system functioned relatively smoothly, with multiparty contestation in free and fair elections every three years. With predominantly center-right, Western-oriented governments at the helm, Latvia joined the World Trade Organization in 1998 and became a formal candidate for membership in the European Union in 1999 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2002. Ethnic Latvians dominated political and cultural life, and tough laws had been enacted to protect the Latvian language against displacement by English and Russian, the past and future idioms of business and power. In short, Latvia could claim a place among the most successfully consolidated new nation-states of the post-Communist region.

At the same time, however, corruption was endemic in Latvia, and, outside the Riga metropolitan area, economic growth was slow. International organizations had sharply criticized Latvia for an exclusionary citizenship policy that disenfranchised much of the large Russian-speaking minority population. As the heroic images of the Baltic “singing revolution” faded from memory, both Western media portrayals and scholarly analyses of Latvia tended to focus—like Tīsenkopfs’s European colleagues—on the fraught relations between Latvians and Russophones. Meanwhile, internal Latvian debates on minority integration were haunted by the specters of demographic annihilation and a potential fifth column. While Latvia was well along the path of state building and democratization, in other words, the national character of this would-be nation-state, as well as its relationship to an expanding Europe on one border and an ambivalently postimperial Russia on the other, remained very much open to contestation. As Latvia struggled to chart its course amid the new pressures of globalization and the familiar pressures of its big neighbor to the east, Latvians were by no means certain about what it meant to be Latvian, and how to remain Latvian, in the new world order.

Not surprisingly, Tīsenkopfs’s essay sparked an impassioned debate among Latvian intellectuals that simmered on the editorial pages throughout the ensuing months. Many commentators endorsed his vision of openness, stressing Latvia’s historic role as an international crossroads, zone of cultural hybridity, and integral part of Europe. A historian declared:

From birth, the Latvian belongs historically, culturally, and geographically to Europe. Moreover, the blood of the German, Swedish, Polish, Jewish, Russian, and other nations flows in Latvians. The Latvian has gained from this—inherited many characteristics. For this reason the Latvian easily understands and assimilates the cultural and material values, the scientific and technical achievements, and ideas generated in Europe or America.³

Globalization was unavoidable, the historian warned, and Latvians must adapt to its flows. Another historian concurred: “In order to find our place successfully in the modern world, the people of Latvia must express themselves not solely in the categories of the national state. They must feel the link with processes that cross state boundaries.”⁴ Some embraced Latvia’s once and future international identity without going so far as to reject ethno-national “illusions.” Thus a doctoral student urged Latvians to feel pride as “a unique ethnos” and to celebrate the Latvian folkloric heritage, while at the same time he identified an innate tolerance of difference as a key marker of Latvianness. Latvians in the post-Soviet period needed to mend their tattered sense of “ethnocultural solidarity,” he argued, but most of all, “We will have to act as switchmen, because our train—Latvia—has once again traveled onto international tracks.”⁵

Others, however, rejected Tisenkopfs’s “postmodern” cosmopolitanism and economic rationalism as a direct threat to ethnic and national identity. The esteemed author Miervaldis Birze pleaded for the defense of Latvia not as “an economic and democratic space,” but as “the last and only refuge of the Latvian people” in the face of a demographic crisis of unprecedented proportions.⁶ A theater critic celebrated nationalism as an instrument in the struggle against “cultural and economic imperialism” and an instrument of particular importance for a small nation under “postcolonial” conditions.⁷ If for the internationalists the crucial symbol of Latvian national identity was the Hanseatic city of Riga, then for their ethno-nationalist critics it was the countryside. “It is hard to imagine how the state can survive without the countryside,” wrote the poet Anda Līce.⁸ “Every city dweller’s roots, after all, reach into the countryside of some Latvian district. For centuries the land has nourished the nation spiritually. . . . Does anyone, in speaking the word ‘homeland,’ imagine it only as the city?” Answering her own question, she quoted the novelist Arnolds Apse, who located the “soul of the homeland” not in the teeming polyglot streets of Riga, but in the classic agrarian landscape: “A rain sonata on a gray plank roof. White birches on a lonely hillside. A threshing barn sunk into the ground, its roof covered with moss. An old willow by the side of the road. . . . The quiet fields, ripened for the harvest.”⁹ Echoing a theme pounded in the media and in political circles throughout the course of

post-Soviet agrarian reform, Miervaldis Birze identified the countryside, with its ethnically more homogeneous population, as the wellspring of Latvian identity. Preserving Latvianness in a globalizing era, in Birze's view, would require not the pursuit of ever-greater openness and dynamism—English-language training, promotion of Internet access, and so on—but rather state support for family farms, rural schools, and Latvian culture.

As the philosopher Ella Buceniece observed, the Tisenkopfs debate represented the latest installment in a struggle, ongoing since the National Awakening of the 1850s, between competing “models of historical self-understanding: the romantic or ethnocentric and the realist-rationalist or Eurocentric”—or, in my terms, between the discourses of agrarian nationalism and liberal internationalism.¹⁰ Tisenkopfs and his peers spoke the Valdemārian language of internationalism when they invoked Latvia's urban and maritime cosmopolitan heritage and celebrated openness to new ideas and transcending borders. Birze and the ethnoculturalists, on the other hand, reproduced decades of agrarian defense of *Heimat* in their calls for protecting the traditions of agricultural labor and the cultural landscape in which those traditions are inscribed. What was most striking about the Tisenkopfs debate was precisely its faithful echo of themes and tropes of the 1860s, 1930s, and 1970s. Tisenkopfs and his peers may have been free to choose how to “color in” the “blank spot” of Latvian identity, but the range of meaningful colors came from the two different palettes—internationalist and agrarian—that had dominated the history of Latvian nationalism.

What the Tisenkopfs debate made clear, too, was the centrality of geographical imaginings—constructions of land and homeland—to the problem of defining the national self. The problem was how to define the distinctive features of not only Latvians but also the Latvian homeland. This chapter turns to battles over the fate of the agrarian ethnoscape—specifically, debates about land reform and agricultural policies—to see how discourses of internationalism and agrarianism structured Latvian visions of the post-Communist future.

By Land or by Sea: Debating Post-Soviet Rural Development

As we saw in chapter 2, the Soviet assault on the agrarian ethnoscape was successful on many levels. Farmers who survived war, deportation, and exile became *kolkhoz* employees, the countryside became less ethnically homogeneous, much of the rural mosaic landscape gave way to the flattened and drained tracts of large-scale mechanized collective farming, and half of Latvia's traditional isolated farmsteads, surrounded by decorative trees, were bulldozed. Yet paradoxically certain aspects of Soviet agricultural policy enabled a large number of Latvians to

retain an intimate relationship to the land. With enormous subsidies to the stagnant agricultural sector, the state propped up hundreds of unprofitable enterprises and protected thousands of agricultural jobs.¹¹ Wages for collective farm workers in Latvia and its Baltic neighbors were well above the Soviet average.¹² State support targeted farms in environmentally unfavorable regions, keeping farming alive in places where, under competitive market conditions, farmers would have had to pursue other livelihoods. While the rural share of the population dropped to only 30 percent, a significant decrease from the interwar period, it was nonetheless very high compared to that of most industrial nations.

Moreover, in Latvia as throughout the Soviet Union, a curious dual structure developed in agriculture. While collective farms were amalgamated to create ever-larger enterprises, at the same time a parallel sector of tiny household plots allocated to *kolkhoz* and state farm (*sovkhos*) workers flourished. These private plots accounted for an enormous share of total production in the late Soviet period and provided higher earnings than the average urban worker received.¹³ Official tolerance of this individual sector allowed a much larger proportion of Latvians to continue farming—and to find it relatively lucrative—than would have been possible in a market economy. The *viensēta* was bulldozed, in other words, but a vestige of the owner-laborer's intimate relationship with the land survived in the form of the household plot.

It is hardly surprising, then, that in the summer of 1991, over two-thirds of survey respondents predicted that agriculture would serve as the primary springboard for Latvia's economic recovery and development.¹⁴ The 1990s brought brutal economic dislocation and restructuring, however, and agriculture suffered in particular. Because of the demise of the command economy and of Soviet and Eastern bloc trade networks, production dramatically collapsed. By 1993 Latvia's gross domestic product (GDP) had shrunk to half its 1990 level, and did not begin to inch up again until 1996. The hyperinflation of 1992 was brought under control by mid-decade, but a chain of bank failures in 1995 posed a grave setback for both individual welfare and macroeconomic stabilization. Unemployment, which had begun to decline after 1995, ballooned again as a result of the August 1998 economic crisis in Russia and the global recession of that year, which exacerbated Latvia's growing trade deficit. Toward the end of the first post-Soviet decade, economists concluded that while a small minority had profited greatly from Latvia's transition to a market economy, the majority had endured a "dramatic increase in poverty [and] social inequality."¹⁵

With a series of laws enacted after 1990, the resurrected parliament launched an agrarian reform. In the spectrum of post-Communist reforms, those of Latvia

and its Baltic neighbors represented the most radical commitment to restoring the former agrarian structure. First, all three countries dismantled the collective sector more aggressively than elsewhere in the region, and Latvia was the most aggressive of all. By 1998, reconstituted collective farms accounted for only 11 percent of Latvian farmland.¹⁶ Second, all three countries elected to restore landed property rights directly to pre-Soviet landowners or their heirs, and Latvia and Estonia sought to restore to their owners full parcels of land “in the old borders,” without regard to the use rights of Soviet-era tenants or demands for distributional fairness by former collective farm employees.¹⁷ The majority of former landowners opted to reclaim their land, rather than receive monetary compensation, and many new property owners—newly transplanted city folk as well as former kolkhoz employees—chose to become farmers. In Latvia, over 64,000 private farms were established by 1995.¹⁸

Of course, the return to family farming in the Baltics can be explained in many ways. The choice of land over monetary compensation was influenced by the low market value of the latter, and the flight from city to farm was driven not only by a desire for restitution but also by “acute food shortages, unemployment, [and] economic stagnation in the cities.”¹⁹ Along with economic incentives, however, the power of agrarian nationalism clearly played an important role. An explicit aim of the Latvian reform, as stated in the 1990 land reform law, was “renewal of the traditional Latvian way of life.”²⁰ “The national-cultural image of the free hardworking peasant farmer was indeed the key motivation of the agrarian reforms in the Baltic in 1990–92,” claims Anatol Lieven.²¹ According to Tisenkopfs,

One-half of the new farmers [in Latvia] were inspired by a desire to restore the farm that their parents or grandparents once ran; one-quarter were forced into individual farming as the only possibility to maintain a livelihood after the collapse of the kolkhozes; and only a minority of eight per cent wanted to start up a farm as a business. The agrarian reform, which started as a political act, thus took on the characteristics of a historical and cultural movement.²²

In the early 1990s, the question of private landed property was “even more emotional than it was during the First Republic,” an agriculture ministry official told me. “The landowning spirit is so strong in us that it was not destroyed in fifty years [of Soviet rule].”²³

Yet most of Latvia’s new farmers lacked the necessary capital, equipment, and know-how, and their landholdings were too small or fragmented, to function effectively under market conditions. Caught in the “scissors” of declining agricultural commodity prices and rising input costs, farmers suffered sharp income losses in the second half of the decade.²⁴ Huge disparities began to develop in the

size and prosperity of farms, with a few rapidly growing large farms in the fertile central region on the one hand, and a large percentage of small farms, many reduced to subsistence production, on the other.²⁵ The Baltic Free Trade Agreement of 1997 eliminated all tariff and nontariff barriers among the three Baltic countries, but the failure to harmonize agricultural support policies and external trade policies sharply disadvantaged Latvian producers. The situation was exacerbated after 1998 when Latvia joined the World Trade Organization but failed to enact permissible protectionist measures such as an antidumping law. Unable to compete with imports, the contribution of agriculture to Latvia's trade balance plummeted from a net surplus of 52.8 million lats in 1993 to a 134.5 million-lat deficit in 1998, and agricultural production fell to 43 percent of its 1990 level.²⁶

The decline in agriculture was particularly dramatic in comparison to other sectors. The contribution to GDP of the agrarian sector (agriculture, fishing, hunting, and forestry) dwindled from 21 percent in 1990 to 4.5 percent in 1998, while that of services doubled from 32 to 66 percent.²⁷ Farm wages remained well below the national average, and rural unemployment considerably outpaced urban levels.²⁸ Latvia's postindependence governments, dominated by center-right parties, were loath to prop up the agrarian sector.²⁹ A Law on Agriculture in 1996 mandated that at least 3 percent of the annual budget be allocated for agricultural subsidies, but this slight increase was inadequate to offset the costs of restructuring and market liberalization for most farmers. In short, as Tisenkopfs observes: "Despite the fact that rural ideals, along with nationalism, greatly inspired the restoration of Latvia's independence, the countryside turned out to be the major loser in the transformation aftermath, and its development opportunities remain uncertain."³⁰

At the same time, however, the rural share of the population remained stable at roughly 30 percent throughout the decade. The proportion nominally employed in the agrarian sector still hovered at around 18 percent,³¹ although hidden unemployment levels may have been as high as 50–60 percent.³² Barring a radical reversal in the state's liberal policy orientation, real agricultural employment seemed bound to contract further in the near future, bringing Latvia's figures closer to the much lower levels in advanced industrial countries. As Latvia began integrating into European and global markets and institutions, the traditional relationship between land, labor, and Latvianness was radically destabilized. With one-third of Latvians still dwelling in the countryside, rural development represented a crucial challenge in the pursuit of overall economic and social recovery. This challenge was at the same time a question of identity: would Latvians remain Latvian if they were no longer a "nation of farmers"?

The Ulmanis Days: Back to the Future

Throughout the first post-Soviet decade, many Latvians viewed the demise of agriculture not as an ineluctable result of modernization but as a national tragedy to be averted at all costs. As in the 1920s and 1930s, the agrarian nationalists of the 1990s envisioned agriculture as the engine of national development. “The greatest wealth of the Latvian nation, the basis for its survival, development, and flourishing is the Latvian land,” declared an agricultural economist.³³ Under news headlines declaring, “The nation’s foundation is in the countryside” and “Latvia needs strong farmers,” agriculturalists, politicians, academics, and artists reproduced the trope of agricultural labor as the preserver of spiritual, moral, and physical health, of the “national mentality,” indeed, of Latvians as an “ethnos.”³⁴ Diverse commentators identified Latvia’s rural way of life as the only defense of cultural uniqueness against the forces of global and European integration. “Our fields and forests,” declared a leader of the Latvian Farmers’ Federation, will guarantee “the Latvian way of life, which through eight centuries of foreign occupation allowed us to preserve our national identity. Thus we will preserve our tough and stubborn people, who have always been shaped by the Latvian peasant *viensēta*.”³⁵ Jānis Purapuķe’s proverbial phrase, “one’s own little piece of land,” remained a universal shorthand for that purportedly essential element of the “Latvian mentality”: the yearning for private landed property.

Agrarian nationalists insisted that rural population levels must be maintained and even increased relative to the big cities, with their growing crime rates and large Russian-speaking populations. “The ideal situation would be if at least 30 percent of Latvians were rural dwellers, even though this conflicts with all economic considerations,” maintained a local government official. “Some sacrifices must be made to preserve the nation’s mentality and for the sake of our young people’s health.”³⁶ “A healthy society, a healthy state cannot develop within city walls,” concurred a leader of the Farmers’ Union. “Only if society, the state develops its rural life can it defend the nation’s spiritual potential. . . . Everyone who can find something to produce and sell must have the opportunity to do so.”³⁷ In the present era of global economic competition and integration, of course, a large, labor-intensive agricultural sector cannot be maintained without extensive state intervention, and this is precisely what agrarian nationalists demanded. Most Latvian farmers themselves, reports Tisenkopfs, were “convinced that their duty was to create a farm and then to engage (a bit) in production. The duty of the state, the majority feels, is to provide economic support for (small-scale) production.”³⁸

The notion of the countryside as the bedrock of Latvianness was sharply chal-

lenged in 1994 when the liberal Latvia's Way Party introduced an amendment allowing foreign-owned firms to purchase rural land, a right previously restricted to Latvian citizens. Agrarians countered by championing the right of Latvians to earn a living by farming. The director of the State Land Service maintained that permitting legal entities to buy land without the intention of cultivating it would exacerbate rural poverty and unemployment.³⁹ A member of parliament warned that rural land sold to foreigners by cash-strapped Latvians "would largely be used for recreation, instead of economic activity," thereby forcing former farm owners into demeaning jobs as dishwashers and the like.⁴⁰ Just as for the advocates of "Wise Use" of the American West, described by James McCarthy, "the pivotal question was not so much *whether* they could make a living at all, as *how* they would make it."⁴¹ What was at stake was not only economics but also the moral economy of the countryside. In post-Soviet Latvia, the interwar peasantist ideology had been reinforced by the Marxists' privileging of labor and material production that dominated the Soviet period, resulting in the widespread belief that all economic and moral values come from working the soil.⁴² Denouncing "Europification" as the newest form of colonization, agrarians bitterly inveighed against the prospect of the Latvian countryside being used to entertain European tourists. The "little brother with the centuries-old dream of his own piece of the earth" was pitted against the "world citizen," the hardworking farmer against "speculators" and financiers.⁴³ The liberal camp eventually prevailed, though only in late 1996, after several years of acrid polemics.

At the heart of post-Soviet agrarian nationalist discourse was a vision of the interwar First Republic, especially the Ulmanis days, as a golden age and a developmental template for Latvia's second era of economic and political reconstruction. The Ulmanis days were widely remembered as a time of national pride and prosperity, when the nation lifted itself from the devastation of the war on the backs of its hardworking family farmers. Latvia's first post-Soviet president, Guntis Ulmanis, attained his position entirely by virtue of being the nephew of the self-designated Leader (*Vadonis*), remembered primarily not as a dictator but as the benevolent guardian of the nation. In the first post-Soviet parliamentary elections in 1993, the campaign posters of the resurrected Farmers' Union Party featured the countenance of the elder Ulmanis against a background of well-tended private farm fields, above the slogan "For Latvia—national, beautiful, and strong!"⁴⁴ In December 2002, the Riga City Council approved the building of a monument to Ulmanis across the street from city hall. The winning design, selected in a competition organized by the Farmers' Union Party, portrayed the leader wading through a thigh-deep field of rye in the shape of Latvia. (Protesting the conserva-

tive tenor of the official competition, Latvian art students staged an alternative exhibit, called “Ulmanis in Our Hearts,” which featured representations of Ulmanis as “a figure in butter, a portrait on watering cans and a plastic statuette with a mobile phone on a marzipan cake.” The alternative exhibit drew outrage, including a picket by the patriotic youth organization Everything for Latvia.⁴⁵

At a 1997 conference in honor of the 120th anniversary of Ulmanis’s birth, scholars defended his agricultural support policies against liberal critics. The Ulmanis regime was lauded for devoting 17 percent of the national budget to agricultural subsidies and for promoting education in rural areas, unlike its parliamentary predecessors and unlike post-Soviet governments.⁴⁶ Conference participants sided with the agricultural economist Artūrs Boruks in eschewing the term *dirigisme* when speaking of the Ulmanis regime, preferring instead “organic planning-type system” or “regulated and state-led people’s capitalism.” According to Boruks, state intervention under Ulmanis sought to promote “capitalism and welfare not for a few large landowners, but for the whole peasantry.”⁴⁷

Similarly widespread was the notion that Soviet occupation had eroded the values and work ethic of the interwar era. In those days, according to Heinrihs Strods, “family farms were characterized by a strong work ethic, . . . self-discipline, and positive work traditions.”⁴⁸ The multimillionaire and three-time prime minister Andris Šķēle lauded the Ulmanis days as a time when “every child was responsible for his parents, parents for their children and grandparents—the whole family hierarchy was ruthlessly enforced.” In contrast to today’s rampant corruption, claimed Šķēle, “Ulmanis was frugal with state money, and he kept state funds under lock and key. Ulmanis didn’t flit about on foreign junkets, he didn’t fritter away the state, but provided for it, saved.”⁴⁹ “It will be in the countryside that the Latvian state will be reborn,” wrote a pensioner in 1997. “I remember the first period of Latvian independence. People got rich only through work, and not through any eight-hour workdays. No one complained. . . . In the first Ulmanis days, people ate in order to live, but when I watch television these days, it seems like some people live in order to eat.”⁵⁰

The “Singapore of the Baltic”

The veneration of Ulmanis and the Ulmanis days was so widespread as to become a national cliché and, as such, a prime target for attack. In place of a “far-sighted and realistic agricultural policy,” complained one critic, Latvia had only “nostalgic memories about the golden days of Ulmanis, when silver coins ceaselessly rolled into farmers’ wallets through the export of butter and bacon.”⁵¹ A philosophy student lamented: “We are still immersed in the heavy romance with the land,

with the dark depths of the past.” Another wondered how Latvians might overcome their attachment to “peasantness” (*baurība*).⁵² A sociologist expressed irritation at the “theory of two types of Latvians—the real ones living in the countryside and those other ones,” and argued that “we cannot simultaneously fear the Russians, hate Europe, and plant up all of Latvia with potatoes.”⁵³ A historian observed:

Society has to a large degree returned to the ideology of the 1930s. The schools and mass media cultivate erroneous notions of Latvians as a peasant nation, of “700 years of slavery,” of the primacy of folklore in the development of Latvian culture and so on. . . . The dominant historical myth about a peasant nation’s battle with the black knight has long since lost any connection to social reality. The fact that “Latvian” is not a synonym for “peasant” was already established by the New Latvians in 1862.⁵⁴

Some critics of the agrarian discourse self-consciously assumed the mantle of Valdemārian antiagrarian internationalism, linking Latvia’s developmental destiny to the forces of globalization and European integration. Invoking the familiar trope of the bridge between East and West, commentators, business people, and politicians pitched Latvia as “the Singapore, or Hong Kong, of the Baltic.”⁵⁵ “We are in a good position [to become] a bridge,” declared a prominent banker. “Baltic banks speak three languages fluently, and this is very important in relations with customers.”⁵⁶ The liberal parties that dominated Latvia’s post-Soviet cabinets and parliaments welcomed foreign investment and ownership, facilitated the creation of various duty-free economic zones, negotiated swift entry into the WTO, and lobbied aggressively for Latvia’s accession to the European Union. Like Valdemārs, in short, internationalists in the 1990s looked not to the land but to the sea. They saw the future in Latvia’s geography of transit, in its position as a gateway “between two divergent economic systems.”⁵⁷ In light of global and regional market trends, they viewed agriculture as far less promising than international trade, tourism, financial services, and information technologies, and they rejected the agrarian notion that “material production is the economy’s foundation and the rest is merely parasitical.”⁵⁸

Liberal internationalists firmly advocated rural economic diversification, although they did not necessarily believe it could bring prosperity for a third of Latvia’s residents. Thanks to the rural-to-urban migration of the Soviet era, the population density in Latvia’s countryside was already extremely low, creating a poor environment for development of industry, services, or even basic infrastructure.⁵⁹ Liberals envisioned the concentration of people and nonagricultural economic activities in provincial towns and saw no alternative to depopulation for

much of the rest of the countryside. According to Andris Miglavs, director of the Latvian State Institute of Agrarian Economics: “We must begin to recognize clearly that only the most successful farmers will live in farmsteads, while the rest will make their home in villages and towns.” Areas lacking “marketable natural resources” or public services faced inevitable depopulation, he maintained, and “better that it be a planned depopulation, maybe with some rational concentration of residents in villages and towns. . . . From an economic perspective, I really see no other vision at the moment.”⁶⁰ As for agricultural production, the state should concentrate its support on the limited number of already profitable farms. “If we ‘loved’ everyone who wants to pursue traditional agriculture,” noted Aigars Štokenbergs, a rural development project manager at the World Bank, “we would sooner or later sink to the poverty typical of an agrarian economy.”⁶¹

This line of reasoning was, of course, anathema to agrarian nationalists, who reviled the notion of Latvia as gatekeeper between East and West and of integration into European institutions and global trade as the lynchpin of development. “We have barely gotten out of one ‘kolkhoz,’” went the common refrain in opposition to the EU, “and we are already trying to steer ourselves into a new one.”⁶² “The Maastricht treaty hangs like a sword of Damocles above the peoples of Europe. American big agribusiness threatens to flood Europe with cheap agricultural products. One feels that the countryside and along with it the nation’s foundation will be destroyed.”⁶³ Echoing the isolationism of the 1930s, agrarians insisted that the basis of the national economy should be domestic production, not “a cargo transfer facility on the shores of the Baltic Sea. . . . Latvia must remain Latvia and nothing else, a state with Latvian, not cosmopolitan features. Latvia in her citizens’ consciousness must be a home, not a way-station, whose owner is destined merely to play in the sand along the roadside and greet the passers-through.”⁶⁴ The survival of the Latvian nation, agrarians insisted, depended on keeping rural space filled with Latvian dwellers. As Arturs Boruks put it:

Agriculture is not just one among many economic sectors. Agriculture fulfills other important, irreplaceable functions: it solves ecological problems, ensures preservation of a healthy environment. . . . But the most important, irreplaceable function is the filling up of the countryside with people—the preservation of our land for future generations, without which neither the nation nor the state can exist.⁶⁵

In the late 1990s, Latvian society was still a very long way from abandoning what Boruks’s liberal colleague Miglavs called the “myth that we must return to the interwar rural population structure, when all, or at least the overwhelming majority, of Latvia’s rural dwellers lived in *viensētas*.”⁶⁶

Indeed, while the post-Soviet agrarian reform had spurred a large-scale return to the *viensēta* in the early part of the decade, the wrenching liberalization of the ensuing years had forced many farmers to abandon their new farms, or at least to shrink their production to small subsistence plots. “Since the regaining of independence,” declared an outraged manifesto of the Latvian Rural Support Association, “political parties in Latvia, through wrongheaded and selfish activities, have allowed agricultural production to shrink by 60 percent; more than 400,000 hectares of agricultural land have gone out of production.”⁶⁷ Agrarians mourned the transformation of the post-Soviet countryside into a landscape of abandonment: a “ghost landscape,” in Edmunds Bunkše’s phrase,⁶⁸ of fields grown over with the brush bitterly referred to as Latvian cotton, dotted with rotting barns and the picked-over skeletons of collective farm buildings. Abandoned land struck directly at the heart of Latvian agrarian nationalism, for it represented the abandonment both of the productive labor seen as constituting the genuine Latvian citizen, and of the solitary farmstead that reified the laboring relationship between land and self.⁶⁹ As Anda Līce bluntly put it, “The devastation of the countryside is endangering the spiritual survival of our people.”⁷⁰ According to Miglavs, it had been a key slogan of the glasnost-era independence movement that “one of the chief harms wrought by the Soviet regime was the fact that a million hectares of land had gone out of production” due to collectivization. Ten years later, agrarian nationalists wielded the same slogan against the liberal policies of postindependence Latvian governments.

Land abandonment and rural depopulation in agriculturally marginal areas are feared in many West European countries, too, but these are only potential threats in most EU member states, with their tremendously high population densities. There, the key challenge is balancing competing demands on scarce rural land. In Latvia, by contrast, the emptying of the rural landscape was symptomatic of land surplus: outside of the fertile central regions, most agricultural land had little or no market value, and some 250,000 hectares had no owner or claimant. To keep people gainfully employed in the countryside, Latvia faced the quite different challenge of creating economic value in a devalued rural space.

As in Valdemārs’s time, in the 1990s the most prominent symbols of the post-Soviet internationalist discourse of identity, homeland, and developmental destiny were Latvia’s multicultural cities and ports. Riga had reclaimed its place among the cosmopolitan capitals of Europe, with its breathtakingly beautiful restored Jugendstil facades, luxury import boutiques, German tour buses, and

armies of cellular phone-wielding business people, foreign diplomats, and young polyglot Latvian professionals. The free port of Ventspils on the northern Kurzeme coast, home to a booming transshipment facility for oil piped in from Russia, was Latvia's most notorious cash cow throughout the 1990s.⁷¹ Aivars Lembergs, the long-serving Ventspils mayor and transit trade "oligarch," urged his countrymen "not to think that Latvia begins with a hog's nose and ends with a hog's tail."⁷² In the post-Soviet era, however, not only the cities and the ports but even the countryside—historically a haven of relative ethnic homogeneity and cultural isolation—was being reimagined in terms of a geography of transit and openness.

In 1991, a majority of Latvians, influenced by the potent national myth of the agrarian golden age of the twenties and thirties, had expected Latvia's economic development to be fueled by agriculture. It did not, perhaps, require a very great leap of faith for the well-off household plot holder to become a private family farmer, and yet the salaried kolkhoz employee was worlds away from the vicissitudes of globalization and "market discipline." In the 1990s, Latvia's liberal governments were unwilling or unable to protect farmers against those vicissitudes. As successive governments remained committed to trade liberalization and accession to the EU, it became increasingly evident that the number of Latvia's rural dwellers deriving gainful employment from agricultural production could only decline in the coming years and that abandonment of Latvia's already devalued rural land would accelerate.

In the agrarian discourse of Latvianness, as we have seen, farming, nature, and national identity are tightly interwoven: both nature and the Latvian character are "produced" through agrarian labor. The marginalization of farming threatened both sides of this equation. Post-Soviet economic liberalization was finally forcing Latvians into a fundamental renegotiation, paradoxically postponed by fifty years of Soviet rule, of the relationship between land and Latvianness. For the first time since the peasantist turn of the 1920s, the hegemony of agrarian notions of nature, homeland, and developmental destiny was being seriously threatened. Contemporary globalization seemed to be succeeding, where Sovietization had failed, in disengaging Latvianness from landed labor in a historically unprecedented way.