

‘Know your diaspora!’: knowledge production and governing capacity in the context of Latvian diaspora politics

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Who is moving and who is staying? Why are they moving or staying? Are they likely to move or to stay in the future? These questions are asked by researchers and governments alike. In fact, it is often said that one of the defining features of the modern nation-state is the government of mobility. In conditions of freedom, when individuals are not forced to move or to stay, government of mobility entails regulating movement, influencing the behaviour of potentially mobile subjects, as well as knowing what the objects of government are up to.¹ Inability to regulate movement, to influence behaviour, or to know the population to be governed conjures up the problem of what could be called ‘governing capacity’ and threatens to undermine state authority.

Outmigration that followed Latvia’s accession to the European Union in 2004 – estimated at about ten per cent of the population – presented just such a threat to the Latvian state. It exceeded the Latvian state’s capacity to govern its subjects, for the subjects had become mobile, yet the state’s capacity to govern was territorially bound. The initial reaction of the political elites – not unlike those in other states experiencing high degrees of outmigration – was to call those who left ‘traitors’ who had voluntarily removed themselves from the terrain of government of the Latvian state. However, the situation was not that simple. Outmigration gained force and became a mass social phenomenon. This outward migration questioned not only the authority of the Latvian state, but its very existence. This was due to the fact that the post-Soviet Latvian state had bound its legitimacy to the ability to safeguard the flourishing of the cultural nation of Latvians and thought of itself as a ‘national state’. Now that a

substantial part of the ‘nation’ was leaving, the very legitimacy of the ‘national state’ was called into question.

Consequently, talk of betrayal gave way to a more pragmatic orientation. Political rhetoric shifted to emphasise that migrants exercised their right to freedom of movement as European Union citizens. More importantly, these mobile citizens were no longer thought of as lost to the Latvian state. Rather, they were potential diasporic subjects – that is, members of the Latvian cultural nation that embodied state sovereignty and lent legitimacy to the state even as they resided outside the state’s physical boundaries. And thus the Latvian state embarked upon ‘diaspora work’, that is, the launching of a diaspora support programme and the institutionalisation of state–diaspora relations.

The Latvian situation is far from unique. Latvian diaspora work unfolds at a time when diaspora programmes are increasingly common tools of government (Gamlen 2014). Individuals charged with the responsibility of developing the Latvian diaspora support programme were well aware of this. During our first meeting in 2012, Kārlis, a civil servant working on diaspora affairs, showed me a pile of printouts of Irish, Lithuanian and other diaspora policy documents. He said that they were pretty good and that he could just copy them, if a programme document were all that he wanted. However, Kārlis wanted to base the Latvian diaspora support programme on sound knowledge of what was happening with the Latvians.

Soon thereafter, Kārlis and I sat on the same panel at a political discussion on the new Latvian diaspora in the United Kingdom. Kārlis’ central message was: ‘know your diaspora!’ For the still fledgling project of diaspora work that was ongoing in the corridors of ministries, embassies, church halls, informal meetings in cafes, newspaper articles, cheap airline flights and elsewhere, knowing diaspora was crucial. However, producing knowledge presented a unique challenge. There was a notable lack of information at the same time as many of Latvia’s citizens had direct experience with outmigration. They had either migrated themselves or knew someone who had. Outmigration was a massive social phenomenon that was not yet apprehended by the governing apparatus. Kārlis thus faced the challenge of having to govern in conditions where there was proliferation of experience of

migration, but little formal knowledge of it.

At this meeting, Kārlis presented some basic statistical data generated by Latvian economists who had recently turned their attention to migration, as well as results from a provisional survey conducted by Latvian geographers with the help of social media platforms. But mostly he recounted stories of his own encounters with Latvia's mobile citizens on planes, at dinner tables, and in meetings. Some of the subjects of his stories longed for what they had left behind in Latvia, others had become successful entrepreneurs and wished to donate their time and skills to Latvia, and still others did not care about teaching the Latvian language to their children. Kārlis had many such stories, each illustrating a different or recurring migration-related problem. He used these stories to carve out the problem-space that diaspora work had to address.

Kārlis was a professional engaged in knowledge practices that resembled those of ethnographic work – a phenomenon George Marcus and Douglas Holmes have termed para-ethnography (Holmes and Marcus 2006). He spent significant amounts of time with the people whose worlds he wanted to understand, he talked with them on all possible occasions, he participated in social and political events, and he sought out experts who could help him to make sense of the emerging situation even as such experts were hard to come by. It could be said that in order to understand the terrain of government within which Kārlis wanted to act, he could not but engage in para-ethnographic knowledge production, because his work required understanding of an emerging situation whose contours were not at all clear. There was no published research available on the topic. Latvia's researchers – economists, geographers, and anthropologists, such as myself – were also just beginning to turn their attention to the problem of outmigration. In a sense, we were all working to apprehend an emerging situation. We were all, in a way, co-ethnographers of an emerging problem-space.

At the same time, we were differently situated in relation to this problem-space. For me, the state's governing efforts became part of the problem-space that I continued to engage with ethnographically. For Kārlis, once the problem-space seemed more or less apprehended, it needed to be governed. Ethnographic knowledge production

was not enough for that purpose. The state needed to scale up its knowledge production efforts. It needed to produce large-scale surveys about the mobile population that could be used to govern, as well as to create the impression that the state was capable of governing – that is, that the state had not only caught up with the mobile population, but that it knew more about it than everyone else. It was at this moment that Kārlis began to emerge as a governing actor rather than someone engaged in an effort to apprehend an emerging problem-space.

Kārlis was not the only one engaged in such an effort. Most civil servants, as well as mobile citizens, were engaged in collecting and analysing data about an emerging situation in order to orient themselves within it. I was continually challenged to think about how what I did differed from what they did. If we were all engaged in ethnographic or para-ethnographic efforts, what exactly was the difference between us? I comforted myself with the thought that the difference had to do with the analytical lens that I brought to my work. But it seems to me that the most consequential difference resided in aspirations to govern. While ethnographic work was crucial for developing an understanding of an emerging situation, it was not sufficient for cultivating and demonstrating the state's capacity for governing. Having more or less apprehended the situation, Kārlis sought to scale up in order to govern. I, in turn, remained within the ethnographic terrain, which I thought was most conducive for the kind of anthropology I sought to practice – namely, one that was committed to tracing emerging forms, including those of government. This is to say that disciplinary distinctions, as well as distinctions between subjects and objects of knowledge, emerged as significant in moments when understanding needed to be turned into knowledge for the purposes of governing. It is at this moment that diaspora also emerged as a meaningful category in the context of Latvian outmigration. □

Endnotes

1. Drawing on Michel Foucault (1991), this mode of government is thought of as governmentality.

References

- Gamlen, A. (2014) 'Diaspora Institutions and Diaspora Governance', *International Migration Review* 48(1), Fall, pp. 180–217.
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