

Ina Druviete/Jānis Valdmanis

Linguistic integration of immigrants and refugees into Latvia: The *status quo* after 24.02.2022¹

Abstract

Until March 2022, the Republic of Latvia belonged to those countries with rather low immigration, most recent immigrants coming from third countries. As a prerequisite for inclusion in society, free Latvian language classes and the state language proficiency test were provided. For example, the Latvian Language Agency implemented the European Union Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund project “Acquisition of the Latvian language in order to facilitate the integration of third-country nationals into the labor market”. Since the 1990s Latvia has also run integration programmes for national minorities, so the country has a rich experience in the learning and teaching of the official language.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, the situation changed unexpectedly. There had always been a Ukrainian minority in Latvia (42,300 people or 3% of the total population). During the first few months of the war, approx. 10,000 refugees, mostly women and children, arrived in Latvia, and numbers may exceed 30,000 at present. A special law has already been passed including articles on language and education rights.

From the point of view of Latvian language policy, some specific aspects relating to general sociolinguistic theory may be discussed. First, the Ukrainian language has become a more visible participant in the Latvian language market. Second, the impact of Russian on public communication has increased as some Ukrainian refugees have Russian language skills, thus challenging the position of Latvian as the language for social inclusion. Third, Ukrainian nationals whose family language is Russian belong to the same linguistic community as members of the Russian minority in Latvia but their political and ideological views can be completely different, raising the issue of linguistic and national identity.

1. Introduction: The language situation in Latvia

Language policy is a unique and sensitive area that takes language into account as a symbol and fundamental element of national identity; it also considers that the existence, development, and long-term survival of a language are directly dependent on many factors, which, acting together, can significantly influence the intended results. The main purposes of language policy in Latvia are: 1) the maintenance, protection and development of the Latvian language; 2) the maintenance of the cultural and historic heritage of the Latvian nation; 3) the right to

¹ This research is supported by the state research programme “Letonika – Fostering a Latvian and European Society” project “Use and Development of Contemporary Latvian” (No. VPP-LETONIKA-2022/1-0001).

freely use the Latvian language in any sphere of life within the whole territory of Latvia; 4) the integration of members of ethnic minorities into Latvian society while observing their rights to use their native language or other languages; 5) the increased influence of the Latvian language in the cultural environment of Latvia to promote a more rapid integration into society (Official Language Law 1999).

The principles of Latvian language policy and their implementation have been addressed in a number of publications by the State Language Commission, the Latvian Language Institute and the Latvian Language Agency (see Latviešu valoda 2007; Valsts valodas likums 2008; Veisbergs 2013; Druviete/Veisbergs 2018). These sources also contain references to the work of Latvian and foreign authors on Latvian language policy. Sociolinguistic surveys on the language situation in Latvia have been conducted for almost thirty years (e.g. the three latest volumes: Language Situation 2012, 2017, 2022).

The language situation in Latvia during the Soviet occupation (1940-1991) might be described as follows: a reduction in the sociolinguistic functions of Latvian; the ideology of Russian as the “second mother tongue”; extensive use of Russian in administration and industry; low Latvian competence (20%) as an L2 among minorities; the Russification of non-Russian minorities; the high linguistic quality of Standard Latvian despite restrictions in its use; the psychological resistance of Latvians characterized by high loyalty to their mother tongue. When Latvian was restored as the sole official state language in 1988, the main tasks of language policy makers were clearly defined: to ensure the sustainability, linguistic quality and competitiveness of Latvian as the state language of the Republic of Latvia as well as to guarantee the development and use of the languages of historical minorities in Latvia. In 1989, the first *Language Law* was adopted. Independence was renewed on August 21, 1991, necessitating serious changes in language policy. The pre-independence *Language Law* was amended in 1992. The acting *Official Language Law* was adopted in 1999, supplemented by several regulations passed by the Cabinet of Ministers.

The *Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (Satversme)* including its preamble specifies that the decision to designate Latvian as the state language is a matter of legal and political consistency and, therefore, the state’s policy should work to ensure that Latvian serves all of the functions of an official language, including being the primary means of communication among all Latvian citizens and helping to unite the society.

The main working documents for the implementation of this Law are the *Official Language Policy Guidelines* (see Pamatnostādnes 2005, 2014, 2021). Three main groups of indicators have been established to determine the success of language policy: rising levels in Latvian language skills, the use of Latvian in sociolinguistic domains and positive language attitudes towards Latvian. The legal principles for the use of Latvian as the state language are outlined in laws like the

State Language Law (1999). The Latvian language in Latvia is not only a linguistic and legal concept but also a symbolic one that is inseparably related with the state and community and, also, with various aspects of the identity of the inhabitants of Latvia. In order to strengthen not only the instrumental but also the integrative functions of the state language, the preamble of the *Satversme*, normative acts and the *Official Language Policy Guidelines* have references to concepts like *language as value*, *language as national identity*, the *symbolic role of language* etc.

At the beginning of 2022 there were 1,875,000 inhabitants in Latvia. The ethnic composition was as follows: Latvians – 60.2%, Russians – 24.4%, Ukrainians – 3%, Belarusians – 3%, Poles – 2%, Lithuanians – 1.2%, Jews – 0.4%, Romani – 0.3%, others 5.5% (Population 2022). As for Latvian language skills, they increased among the minority population from 20% in 1989 to 63% in 1995 and to about 90% in 2020s as a combined result of teaching Latvian, carrying out language proficiency certification and controlling language use (Language Situation 2022, 61). Although competence in Latvian has improved, actual use of Latvian corresponds to this indicator mainly in domains subject to official regulation (state and municipal institutions, higher education establishments, etc.). Russian is widely used in informal communication and in the commercial sector. As the editors of the last survey Gunta Kļava and Kertu Rozenvalde state,

Native speakers of Latvian [...] express the opinion that Latvian plays an important role in terms of both an individual's identity and nationality (and also plays a key role in the language hierarchy in Latvia), but real linguistic behaviour differs from this belief: in communication there is a likely shift to a partner's native language or another intermediary language of communication. (Valodas situācija 2022, 195)

2. Migration processes since the 1940s

During the twentieth century, Latvia experienced two world wars and three occupations. Thousands of economic migrants, refugees and displaced people left Latvia in some periods and moved to Latvia in others. There were several waves of migration: 1941 – deportations of approx. 16,000 Latvians to Siberia; 1944 – emigration of 180,000 Latvians to Western countries; 1949 – deportation of 42,000 Latvians to Siberia; 1990-1995 – departure of the Soviet army and their families. There was also massive immigration to Latvia from other parts of the USSR between 1945 and 1989. As Mihails Hazans stated,

key elements which kept this migration system going included: (i) centralised decision-making on the allocation of resources, including the labour force; (ii) the Russian language as the Soviet Union's lingua franca; (iii) a higher standard of living in Latvia than almost elsewhere in the Soviet Union. (Hazans 2019, 67)

As the result, by 1989 the share of ethnic Latvians in Latvia's population fell to just above one-half.

Starting around the turn of the century, emigration of Latvians to Western countries (mostly the United Kingdom, Ireland and Germany) began, predominantly for economic reasons. The formal and informal support system in foreign countries emerging at this time was also a stimulus: people relied either on support from the rich social infrastructure created in the West or from the the post-war Latvian refugees (for Latvians) and from less formal social networks among Russian-speaking immigrants from the Soviet Union (for Russians from Latvia) (Hazans 2019, 68). The biggest post-crisis emigration wave happened in about 2010: it has been calculated that 420,000 Latvians are now living abroad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). For a country with 2 million inhabitants it is a significant proportion. In fact Latvia is experiencing the sharpest population decline in the EU because of low birth rates and emigration. This decline stands out not only against the EU but also against the rest of the world. Although over the last few years there has been a tendency for remigration, co-operation with the Latvian diaspora has become one of the most important duties of the Latvian government aimed at promoting the political and civic participation of members of the diaspora, preserving their connections with Latvia and Latvian identity, and strengthening co-operation with Latvian nationals abroad. In order to enhance diaspora policy in Latvia, the *Diaspora Law* was adopted in 2018. The law sets out the main objectives for diaspora policy: to strengthen Latvian identity and the sense of belonging to Latvia among the diaspora as an integral part of Latvian society, and to develop and implement diaspora support policy measures that not only strengthen the diaspora's ties with the Latvian economy but also provide favourable conditions for remigration. A *Plan for Work with the Diaspora for 2021-2023* (Plan 2021) has been adopted by the government summarizing tasks for all institutions and organizations related to diaspora affairs.

As one of the most important tasks is to promote the preservation of the Latvian language and culture among the members of the diaspora, the Latvian Language Agency provides support to Latvian schools abroad, ensuring that specialists are active in most Latvian schools abroad. It sends methodological and study resources, dictionaries and literature; it prepares and publishes methodological and study resources and materials; it evaluates curricula, study materials and learning processes; it also organizes meetings and seminars and provides methodological consulting (Latvian language abroad 2023).

3. Migration 2022-2023

Until March 2022, the Republic of Latvia was a country with rather a low migration rate (only 8,840 long-term immigrants to Latvia since 1992). Most recent immigrants came from third countries. From 1998 to 2021, 3,014 asylum seekers

applied for international protection in Latvia. In 2016, for example, 207 people on the EU quota scheme were transferred to Latvia. However, by autumn 2016, most of them had left because of the low financial support (€256 per month). A total of 225 persons have been granted refugee status, while 569 persons have been granted subsidiary protection status. The main countries of origin of asylum seekers in 2019 were Azerbaijan, Russia, India, Georgia and Ukraine while in 2020 they mostly came from Belarus, Russia and Syria (Statistics 2021).

Because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the situation changed unexpectedly. There had always been a Ukrainian minority in Latvia (3.0% of the total population). After 24 February 2022, approximately 40,000 refugees, mostly women and children, arrived in Latvia. More than 37,000 Ukrainian refugees have since received residence permits, some of whom have returned to the war-stricken country. Nearly 35,000 people have asked local governments for help in Latvia, with 11,535 refugees housed.

As Latvia is one of the most welcoming countries for Ukrainian refugees, besides changes to the *Law on Immigration* (2003) facilitating the accommodation and employment of Ukrainian citizens, a special *Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians* was adopted on 3 March 2022. This law outlines reception and integration support measures for persons fleeing Ukraine due to Russia's military aggression in the country.

4. Use of languages in the media, workplace and education

As far as language policy is concerned, several articles were included in the above-mentioned Law, e.g. articles on language in audiovisual media:

Section 10. Right to Distribute Free Television Programmes. (1) The National Electronic Mass Media Council is entitled, at its own discretion, to include in such foreign television programmes the sound track of the principal audio language of which is in Ukrainian for a period of up to one year in a network in which the distribution of television programmes occurs via terrestrial transmitters.

In order to ensure the status of the official state language for Latvia, the "Regulations Regarding the Extent of Knowledge of the State Language and the Procedure for Testing the State Language and the Procedure for Testing State Language Proficiency for the Performance of Professional and Official Duties" was adopted in 2009 and has been amended several times (Regulations 2009). The *Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians* provides temporary exemptions from these requirements:

Section 16. Exceptions in Relation to the Individual Requirements Laid down for the Performance of the Work Duties. (1) An employer has the right to employ a Ukrainian civilian also without proficiency in the official language insofar as it does not interfere with the performance of their work duties. (2) A medical treat-

ment institution may employ a medical practitioner who is a Ukrainian civilian if it can ensure the communication necessary for the performance of professional activities of a medical practitioner (for example, with the intermediation of an interpreter), including to provide information to patients in a comprehensible manner, and also communication with medical practitioners, medical treatment support persons, and the staff at the medical treatment institution. [...] (4) In order to register a Ukrainian civilian with the Register of Taxi Drivers maintained by the Road Transport Directorate as a person who has the right to drive a vehicle in taxi services or commercial passenger car services, the requirements for proficiency in the official language, and also the obligation to prove that a prohibition of the right to drive has not been registered in relation to the person shall not be brought forward, if the driving licence has been issued in a foreign country.

As there are at least 4,000 school-age children among the Ukrainian refugees in Latvia, there are special provisions for their involvement in Latvia's education system. Section 13 (1) *Right of Ukrainian Civilians to Education* states:

(1) A minor Ukrainian civilian, and also a Ukrainian civilian of legal age who has previously commenced and continued the acquisition of general secondary education in the 2021/2022 academic year have the right to the acquisition of general secondary education at a State or local government educational institution, according to the same procedures by which possibilities for the acquisition of education are ensured to a minor asylum seeker in accordance with that laid down in the *Asylum Law* and other laws and regulations.

The amendment adopted on 19 May 2022 indicates that “Paragraph one of this Law regarding the right of a minor Ukrainian civilian to acquire education at the pre-school education or basic education level only in the official language or in Ukrainian shall not be applied until 31 August 2022 in relation to those minor Ukrainian civilians who have commenced the acquisition of minority education programmes at the pre-school education or basic education level until the day of coming into force of these amendments”. It also means that Russian has not been promoted as the language of education for Ukrainian students. (Note that irrespective of the gradual transition into Latvian as the main language of instruction, separate “Latvian” and “Russian” schools still exist, and there have been multiple cases of Ukrainian children being mobbed in so-called “Russian schools”.) The government agreed with the Latvian Ombudsman's view that it is particularly important for children who have been exposed to military conflict to return to a stable learning process in order to recover more quickly from their traumatic experience. At the same time, the early integration of a Ukrainian minor civilian into Latvian society, including the provision of education in the official language, will have a long-term positive effect on the child in order to successfully integrate them not only among their peers but also in the education system, in public and civil activities (Refugees 2022). Many Ukrainian students still continue to learn remotely at their school in Ukraine – with the hope of returning home soon.

There are about 400 Ukrainian civilians enrolled in universities at present, studying mainly in English. They can continue their studies as exchange students receiving the same support for their studies as for students in Latvia. Likewise researchers can be employed in Latvian research institutions and receive support in existing research cooperation programmes.

5. Latvian language classes for Ukrainian refugees

As mentioned, Ukrainian refugees are exempt from Latvian language proficiency certification at present. The proposed amendments to the *Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians* make it mandatory for Ukrainian refugees who have found jobs in Latvia to attend Latvian language lessons starting with 1 January 2024. A complex system of Latvian language tuition for adults has existed for more than 30 years, for example the project *Acquisition of the Latvian language in order to facilitate the integration of third-country nationals into the labor market* (No. PMIF/6/2020/3/01) ensures that third-country nationals acquire Latvian in a modern and diverse way so they can acquire further education, communicate on a daily basis and satisfy the needs of the local labour market. The project aims to continue what previous projects started to organize Latvian language courses at all levels of proficiency achieving a total of at least 240 third-country attendees. The study process will make use of modern learning materials. Course participants will have access to free materials on the website www.valoda.lv and its subsites. Many of the materials will be adapted for remote learning. There is also a special project *Latvian language training for Ukrainian civilians* supported by funds allocated from the Latvian state budget.

6. Ukrainian in the linguistic landscape in Latvia

Although the percentage of Ukrainians in Latvia was quite high, in practice Ukrainian was not present in public space. There was a state-financed Ukrainian high school in Riga, several Ukrainian cultural heritage associations and Ukrainian NGOs. However, Ukrainian for the general public had been presented mainly as a language for cultural activities; very few Latvians had Ukrainian language skills.

Since 24 February 2022, the situation has changed. Ukrainian symbolizes freedom and independence in the view of the Ukrainians themselves, being aware of Russification processes in occupied territories, and among Latvians, too. The prestige and use of Ukrainian has increased considerably not only in Ukraine but also among Latvians. However, there have been many reports on aggressive attitudes towards and verbal attacks on Ukrainians and their supporters from the local Russian population (e.g. <https://bnn-news.com/latvian-charity-organisation-receives-angry-calls-from-residents-for-its-support-of-ukraine-233804>). Ukrainian nationals

whose family language is Russian belong to the same linguistic community as members of the Russian minority in Latvia but their political and ideological views can be completely different, raising issues of linguistic and national identity.

Since March 2022, posters, shop signs and information booklets in Ukrainian have rapidly appeared in Latvian cities; translations from Ukrainian have become very popular, many people have starting attending Ukrainian language classes. Information about available support, including Latvian language classes, has been disseminated in Ukrainian, too (see <https://valoda.lv/informacija-par-latviesu-valodas-apguvi-ukrainu-berniem-un-pieaugusajiem/>). Many Ukrainians are employed in health care or other services. At the same time, information provided by the Ukrainian State Language Protection Commissioner about restrictions on the use of Ukrainian in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine (see <https://mova-ombudsman.gov.ua/en>) is available in Latvian, too. The Latvian Language Agency has translated the information leaflets “Stop Linguicide” and posted them on the website (see <https://valoda.lv/nosargat-valodu-tas-nozime-ari-nosargat-valsti-lingvodicam-stop/>).

7. Conclusions

Ukrainian has become a more visible participant in the Latvian language market and will probably retain this position after the war has come to an end as well. At the same time, the Latvian state has to ensure the successful integration of newcomers into Latvian society against the background of Latvian language skills. This aspect may be challenging because some Ukrainian refugees use Russian as their family language or have Russian language skills. Latvia has still not overcome the consequences of Russification during the Soviet period and an increase in the use of Russian in public space is not in line with the goals of Latvian language policy. As the State Language Commission argued in 2008,

the passivity of Latvians in their choice of the language of communication, on the one hand, attests to their linguistic and ethnic tolerance and decreases the possibilities of language conflicts, but on the other hand, it is a real threat for social integration on the basis of Latvian. (Valsts valodas 2008, 252)

There have only been slight changes since then. There are still unreasonable demands for Russian language proficiency for Latvians in services and workplaces. The President of the Republic of Latvia Egils Levits describes the situation as follows:

These challenges have long prevented the Latvian language from taking its rightful place and role in all spheres of life in our country. Russia’s aggression in Ukraine has forced society to awaken from a passive tolerance of the Soviet colonial legacy, which was already bordering on cowardice. Society has become more engaged

and mobilised. The public campaign to eradicate the dishonourable Soviet colonial legacy in our free and democratic country was started by a few like-minded people online, but has now spread massively. It calls for a swift and decisive riddance of the remnants of the Soviet occupation in the information space, including the use of the Russian language in public communication with or among Latvians. (Levits 2022)

Therefore the researchers' and politicians' dilemma – how to promote Latvian language skills, the use of Latvian in all spheres of society and a positive language attitude towards Latvian while implementing the full scope of minority language rights on the one hand, and handling the linguistic self-sufficiency of Russian language speakers, immigration from Russia and the influence of the Russian media on the other hand – still remains unsolved. Policymakers have to take the new immigration situation into account in order to find new approaches to integrating newcomers into Latvian society.

References

- Druviete, I./Veisbergs, A. (2018): The Latvian language in the 21st century. In: Stradiņš, J./Hausmanis, V./Jansone, I. (eds.): *Latvia and Latvians: Collection of scholarly articles*. Vol. I. Rīga: Latvian Academy of Sciences, 244-278.
- Hazans, M. (2019): Emigration from Latvia: A brief history and driving forces in the twenty-first century. In: Kaša, R./Mieriņa, I. (eds.): *The emigrant communities of Latvia. National identity, transnational belonging, and diaspora politics*. Cham: Springer, 35-68.
- Language situation (2012) = Druviete, I. (ed.): *The language situation in Latvia: 2004-2010. A sociolinguistic study*. Rīga: Latviešu valodas aģentūra. https://valoda.lv/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ValodasSituacijaLatvijaa_eng_print.pdf (last accessed 24-10-2022).
- Language situation (2017) = Lauze, L./Kļava, G. (eds.): *The language situation in Latvia: 2010-2015. A sociolinguistic study*. Rīga: Latviešu valodas aģentūra. https://valoda.lv/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/LSL_ENG_2017_web.pdf (last accessed 24-10-2022).
- Language situation (2022) = Kļava, G./Vītola, I. (eds.): *The language situation in Latvia: 2016-2020. A sociolinguistic study*, Rīga: Latviešu valodas aģentūra. https://valoda.lv/en/wpcontent/uploads/2017/01/ValodasSituacijaLatvija_2016%E2%80%932020_A4_ENG_WEB.pdf (last accessed 10-01-2023).
- Latviešu valoda (2007) = Valsts valodas komisija (ed.): *Latviešu valoda 15 neatkarības gados: lingvistiskā situācija, attieksme, procesi, tendences*. Rīga: Zinātne.
- Law on Assistance (2022). *Law on Assistance*. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/330546-law-on-assistance-to-ukrainian-civilians> (last accessed 14-12-2022).
- Levits, E. (2022): *Speech by the President Egils Levits at the discussion dedicated to the Official Language Day at the Rīga Castle* (17.10.2022). <https://www.president.lv/en/article/speech-president-egils-levits-discussion-dedicated-official-language-day-riga-castle> (last accessed 10-01-2023).

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023): *The Latvian language abroad*. Rīga: Latviešu valodas aģentūra. <https://valoda.lv/en/latvian-abroad/> (last accessed 10-01-2023).
- Official Language Law (1999): *Official Language Law*. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/14740> (last accessed 10-01-2023).
- Population (2022): *Population by ethnicity at the beginning of year 1935-2022*. https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRE/IRE010 (last accessed 10-01-2023).
- Pamatnostādnes (2005): *Par Valsts valodas politikas pamatnostādnēm 2005.–2014.gadam*. Ministru kabineta rīkojums Nr. 137, Rīgā 2005.gada 2.martā (prot. Nr.11 16.§). <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/102911-par-valsts-valodas-politikas-pamatnostadnem-20052014gadam> (last accessed 30-10-2022).
- Pamatnostādnes (2014): *Par Valsts valodas politikas pamatnostādnēm 2015.–2020. gadam*. Ministru kabineta rīkojums Nr. 630, Rīgā 2014. gada 3. novembrī (prot. Nr. 58 47. §). <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/270016-par-valsts-valodas-politikas-pamatnostadnem-2015-2020-gadam> (last accessed 30-10-2022).
- Pamatnostādnes (2021): *Par Valsts valodas politikas pamatnostādnēm 2021.-2027. gadam*. Ministru kabineta rīkojums Nr. 601, Rīgā 2021. gada 25. augustā (prot. Nr. 57 35. §). <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/325679-par-valsts-valodas-politikas-pamatnostadnem-2021-2027-gadam> (last accessed 30-10-2022).
- Plan (2021): *Plan for Work with the Diaspora for 2021-2023*. www.mfa.gov.lv/en/diaspora-policy (last accessed 10-01-2023).
- Refugees (2022): *Refugee children will learn in Latvian*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/education/refugee-children-will-learn-in-latvian> (last accessed 20-01-2023).
- Regulations (2009): *Regulations Regarding the Extent of the Knowledge of the Official Language, the Procedures for Examining the Proficiency in the Official Language*. www.vvc.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-republikas-tiesibu-akti-anglu-valoda/cab-reg-no-733-regulations-regarding-extent-knowledge-official-language-procedures-examining-proficiency-official-language-and-state-fee-examining-amendments-04062019 (last accessed 10-01-2023).
- Statistics (2021). *Statistics: asylum seekers until 2021*. www.pmlp.gov.lv/en/statistics-asylum-seekers-until-2021 (last accessed 10-02-2023).
- Valsts valodas (2008): *Valsts valodas likums: vēsture un aktualitāte*. Valsts valodas aģentūra. Rīga: Zinātne.
- Veisbergs, A. (ed.) (2013): *Latviešu valoda*. Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.

Bibliographical information

This text was first published in the book:

Sabine Kirchmeier (ed.) (2023): Language and migration. Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2022 in Vilnius. Budapest: Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics / Nyelvtudományi Kutatóközpont. [196 pages.]

The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>