



LANGUAGE POLICY AND PROTECTION OF THE STATE LANGUAGE IN LATVIA

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After 50 years of incorporation into the USSR the independence of the Republic of Latvia (founded in 1918) was re-established in 1991. The foundation of the renewed Baltic State was the principle of the legal continuity of the state. The 1922 Constitution was re-established in 1991; since 1998 it includes the article about the Latvian language as the official state language. In 1989 the first Language Law aimed to re-establish lost sociolinguistic functions of Latvian was adopted (amendments in 1992). This pre-independence language law had been drafted by special governmental commission including linguists, governmental officials, writers, layers. Their task was not the easiest one: nobody has experience in language policy making. Only the main goal of this Law was clear: to promote the use of Latvian and to develop local language skills among the Russian-speaking population. This law de facto was supposed to establish bilingual society, as Russian would retain the functions of the official language.

Besides the historical heritage (Latvia had well-developed linguistic legislation before WWII) one of the main sources for law-making was the experience of other countries. Contrary to the widespread opinion, the Soviet sociolinguistics did not develop in complete isolation from the Western world; translations of the contributions of the most prominent sociolinguists had been published in Russian, although supplemented with compulsory criticism of bourgeois science in prefaces and footnotes. Many investigations about language policy in Western European, African, Asian or Pacific countries contained deep analysis of language situation and sociolinguistic processes and their evaluation corresponded to the universally accepted scholarly criteria. Among the countries whose language policy was well-known to Baltic specialists was Canada, Quebec in particular. The Catalan experience was lesser known until 1995 when Latvian sociolinguists visited Catalunya for the first time. The Canadian linguistic legislation became one of the cornerstones for Latvian linguistic legislation.

The first reason for this was similarities in language situation. French in Quebec as well as Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian in the former USSR were "regional majority languages - "languages of populations who, though a majority in their historic territory (where they may nevertheless be experiencing some form of assimilation), are minorities at the national level" (Maurais 1997: 135). In Quebec and Lithuania there were about 80% of majority population; in Latvia and Estonia about 50%. Policy-makers consider that in similar situations similar measures could be taken for protection of languages.

The second reason was more pragmatic. Behind the iron curtain very few pieces of linguistic legislation were available, and the Charter of the French Language was among them. There were two Laws adopted by Quebec's National Assembly available in Latvia in 1988: Bill 22 and Bill 101. They were partly translated in Latvian and studied intensively. Later, after the independence, the other information from Quebec become available.

The goal of language policy was similar to the one in Quebec: to prevent language shift and to change language hierarchy in the public life. The idea of bilingual state was completely rejected. The main



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sectors of intervention were language use in State government and administrative bodies, in meetings and office-work in particular, language use in names and in information and language use in education. The principle of territorial language rights was implemented. These first Laws did not correspond to the concept of the monolingual state, as Russian retained the functions of an official language in a number of spheres. Though the local languages had the status of the sole State language, the parallel use of Russian in the majority of the sociolinguistic function was allowed. Access to services in Russian for those who did not speak the State language were guaranteed. The main principle was the availability of language choice for lower-ranking persons, as a consequence of which state officials and holders of certain jobs which included contacts with the general public had to be bilingual.

Changes in language hierarchy. Full implementation of the 1989 Language Law was postponed in. A special decree specifying the implementation of the Language Law was issued. There was a three-year transition period during which state employees lacking Latvian language skills could acquire them. In almost all work places Latvian classes were organised free of charge during working hours. The implementation of the 1989 Language Laws was hampered by the unstable political situation during the period 1989-1991. Intensified activity in resolving issues related to the status and role of Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian took place only after the restoration of independence in August 1991. Nevertheless, the quite slow and quiet three-year transition period was very important if the society was going to adapt psychologically to the planned changes in the language hierarchy.

On August 1991 the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed sovereign state. The Language Law was simultaneously revised to strengthen the status of the state language. In 1992 additions and amendments were made to the 1989 Language Law.

The 1992 Language Law was quite similar to most language laws throughout the world. The most essential postulates were as follows:

- 1) Latvian should be the only language of government and state administration;
- 2) proficiency in the state language should be required for the holders of certain jobs and there should be a system of language proficiency certification.
- 3) the state language is given priority in higher education.
- 4) ensuring the priority of the state language in public radio and television broadcasting.
- 5) ensuring the priority of the state language in the sphere of public information.

In 1995 new Laws on State Language were adopted in Lithuania and Estonia and in 1999 in Latvia. These laws are much more liberal than 1989 and 1992 laws. The Baltic states now are members of the Council of Europe; they have applied for membership in the European Union and NATO, and legally binding European standards (Framework Convention for Protection of National Minorities 1994; European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages 1992) have been observed. However, the implementation of some Western-European standards was quite problematic in Latvia (Druviete 1999, 2000; Ozolins 1999). The language laws of the Baltic states have sometimes been criticized for deciding the role of competing languages and for too much official intervention in language use in society. In most Western European countries it is taken for granted that minorities are, or at least tend to be, bilingual in their mother tongue and the official language. It is not the case of Latvia yet.

The 1999 Law. The Law on State Language adopted on 9 December 1999 is in force now. The purposes of the present Law are: the preservation, protection and development of the Latvian language, the integration of national minorities in the society of Latvia while observing their rights to use their mother tongue or any other language.

Two intertwining processes are taking place now in Latvia: the integration of the society in Latvia (the linguistic integration against the background of the Latvian language skills) and integration of Latvia into the European Union (involving individual plurilingualism). Therefore the language planning strategy proceeds from the following principles: 1) an official language is both the symbol of the state and an instrument for integration of society. Learning and usage of Latvian is one of the main factors, which ensures the stability of a multilingual state, 2) ensuring all inhabitants of Latvia the possibility to study and to use the Latvian language in order to promote the integration of the society; 3) supporting the learning and use of the minority languages in Latvia; 4) ensuring the possibility to study foreign languages in order to stimulate readiness for communication in a foreign language and integration into



European structures.

Language skills and language attitudes. The ethnodemographic composition of Latvia is as follows: Latvians 57.6%, Russians 29.6%, Belarusians 4.1%, Ukrainians 2.7%, Poles 2.5%, Lithuanians 1.4%, Jews 0.4%, Roma 0.3%, Germans 0.2%, Livs (177 people, 8 persons declared Livonian as their first language) (2000 Census). Because of the high level of linguistic assimilation (Russification) among speakers of languages other than Latvian and Russian the notions of national (ethnic) minority and linguistic minority do not coincide in Latvia. For example, only 2.1% Belarusians, 3.7% Ukrainians, 9.5% Poles declared the respective languages as their native languages (2000 Census). The population census in 2000 shows that Latvian as native language have indicated 62% of Latvia's inhabitants, although Latvians are only 57.6% of population. Russian as native tongue have indicated 36.1% inhabitants of Latvia, although Russians are 29.6% of all inhabitants of Latvia. In Latvia representatives of minorities have more desire to identify themselves with Russian minority (Baltaiskalna 2001).

During ten years of independence there was a considerable progress in Latvian language skills among minorities. During 1989 census the Latvian language skills were declared by 18-20% of minority representatives. According to the 2000 Census 59% Russians, 55% Belarusians, 54% Ukrainians, 65% Poles declared Latvian language skills. The number of minority representatives having no Latvian language skills at all is diminishing - 78-80% in 1989, 22% in 1996, 9% in 2000 (Baltic Data House, 2000). The renewal of minority languages takes place quite slowly. E.g. there are 1095 general education schools in Latvia in the school year 2000/2001: 66.3% with Latvian, 33.3% with Russian as language of instruction. Only 0.4% of schools teach in any other language. In general, the population of Latvia is bilingual or even multilingual. In 2000 about 75% of the representatives of Latvia's minorities declared Latvian language skills. Approximately the same percentage of Latvians declared Russian language skills. Thus, about 75-80% inhabitants of Latvia are at least bilingual - in comparison to 44% in the EU Member States. Latvian is studied in all schools, and 23.65% of Latvian pupils study Russian.

The State ensures the right of every resident to master Latvian. However, high level skills of the State language is still a problem in Latvia although the general attitude is mainly positive. To the question "Must the inhabitants of Latvia know Latvian?" most of respondents gave a positive answer: 91% citizens of Latvia, 79.6% non-citizens, 87.5% men, 91.1% women (LLI, 1999). 95.8% Russian speakers with higher education, 93.2% with secondary education and 91.8% with special secondary education expressed a wish that their children could speak Latvian. However, at the same time more than 70% of minority representatives would want Russian to be proclaimed the second official language in Latvia in a hope that the Russian-speakers could remain monolingual (Baltic Data House 1998).

Sociolinguistic functions of languages. The actual hierarchy of languages in multilingual society can better be characterised by their sociolinguistic functions rather than by their legal status. At present, there is almost a balanced situation between Latvian and Russian. There are different political and economic factors in favour of the use of each language. The strongest positions Latvian has in federal and municipal governments. Latvian instead of Russian has become the state and local government working language and the language of office work. The change of visual image (signs, advertisements, information) has taken place. The positions of Russian are very strong in private enterprises, primary and secondary education, quite strong in police, public transport and health care, also in armed forces (because up to 20% soldiers have no Latvian language skills).

Remarkable are the answers given by Latvians to the question: "Do you use Latvian to non-Latvians who understand Latvian". Only 49.8% always use Latvian in everyday situations and 55.5% - in official communication (LLI 1999). On the one hand, these figures reflect high level of linguistic tolerance among Latvians, on the other hand, they certify some features of still existing minority complex and linguistic indifference which could be harmful for future prospects of Latvian. In this transitional situation psychological factors are extremely important. We must take into account both the psychological resistance of Russian-speakers who, from a position of political and economic dominance have become a minority, but also the "minority complex" of Latvians. Readjustment in public opinion concerning the language hierarchy in Latvia has taken place only gradually.

Since re-establishment of independence despite of marked decrease in financial support for research and standardisation of Latvian it is ready to fulfil the demanding new functions of the present and of the

future. The Latvian Language Commission has been established under the auspices of the State Language Centre, beside the Terminological Commission the Centre for Translation and Terminology has been founded. More than 400 EU documents have already been translated into Latvian. The linguistic quality of Latvian corresponds to the average level of most of the European languages.

Development of language situation: prognoses. Realistic evaluation of the history and present position of the Latvian language would allow to make prognosis on the future perspectives in connection with objective ethno-demographic, economic, political processes in the country, Europe and the world. The maintenance of Latvian is determined by the complex of interdependent objective and subjective factors.

Among the factors positively influencing the future prospects of Latvian the following ones can be meant:

- 1) sufficient number of L1 speakers and growing numbers of L2 speakers,
- 2) the use of Latvian in all the sociolinguistic functions especially in the Parliament, ministries and municipalities, and in all levels of education,
- 3) high quality of Standard Latvian (developed stylistic system and terminology),
- 4) present status of the sole official State language and existing legal mechanisms for language protection (Law on State Language and regulations for its implementation),
- 5) future status of one of the official languages of the EU.

However, there are factors whose influence could be detrimental for maintenance of Latvian, e.g.:

- 1) unstable economic situation and political fragmentation in the country,
- 2) decrease of the total population of Latvians due to low birth-rates,
- 3) "minority complex" among Latvians hindering the development of bilingualism among Russian-speaking community,
- 4) higher economical value of the main languages in competition - Russian and English,
- 5) the presence of huge Russian language community enjoying linguistic self-sufficiency,
- 6) tendencies of globalisation and linguistic imperialism, integration of Latvia into supra-national structures as the European Union and NATO,
- 7) implementation of some international minority rights standards, ignoring post-colonial language situation in Latvia and ensuring protection of minority languages, mainly Russian, at the expense of Latvian,
- 8) lack of strategic program for research and development of the Latvian language.

There are languages which despite of the efforts of community leaders or governments are inevitably moribund because of a set of unfavourable conditions, e.g. small number of speakers, lack of language transmission among generations and non-use in education. There are also languages whose huge number of speakers and status of an international or regional language ensure the maintenance of the respective language even when special protective measures have not been taken by the state authorities. The Latvian language cannot be classified in either group. Its future prospects are determined by well-considered language policy and active position of Latvian language community and Latvian government. The complicated geopolitical and ethnodemographical situation creates a necessity for long-term language policy which must be based on the program of the integration of the society in Latvia and comply with the criteria and conditions that provide the integration into the European Union.

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