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What do qualitative and quantitative surveys tell us about language policy?

After regained independence in 1991 one of the key questions for the Latvian Government was the development and implementation of a successful language policy. From 2,5 milion inhabitants about 500 -700 000 did not have a sufficient command of Latvian, a heritage from 50 years Soviet policy.

The language policy in Latvia after 1991 is steered by several laws: The Language Law, The Law on Education, The Labour Law, The Naturalisation Law and the regulations on Language Proficiency. The Latvian State has created a National Programme for Latvian Language Training to help the target-groups affected by the laws to be able to meet the Law requirements.

Since 1996 the National Programme for Latvian Language Training delivers a yearly quantitative survey “Language”. In general the questions have remained the same through the years, only a few amendments have been made. The survey “Language” is developed as a dynamic instrument to measure the changes of language knowledge, language attitudes, language use and language improvement.

Let us look at the results of the survey.
Table 5.1 page 25 (Level of language knowledge)

The table shows that the main changes during the 8 years the survey has been performed concern the highest and the zero level of language knowledge. 10% of the respondents have left the zero level during the years and the highest level has grown by 8 %.

Table 5.2 page 26 (knowledge of Latvian by age group)

If we look at the different age groups we see that in the group between 15-24 years those with the highest language level have grown from 8 to 25%. The age group 50-74 years shows that the zero level group has been reduced from 40 to 20 %.

Table 4. page 24(attitudes towards speaking Latvian)

In this context it might be of interest to look at the attitudes to the Latvian language. Here we see that the majority of the non-Latvian speakers have a neutral attitude to Latvian, with a slowly growing tendency for positive attitudes.

Table 2.2 page 23 (Language use, Russians) / table 2.1 page 22 (language use, Latvians)

What do the surveys tell us about the language use? The most significant changes among the Russian speaking respondents are at work from 9% in 1996 to 20% in 2002. However the percentage of those respondents whose native language is Latvian and who use *only* Latvian at work has decreased since 1996 (from 78% in 1996 to 68% in 2003). But as well as among the Latvian speakers as non-Latvian speakers the greatest changes are in the middle where the one language is used more than the other and vice versa. A qualitative approach is needed to get an answer why the one or the other language is used. Another interesting factor for qualitative methods is the work-environment, the question if the communication at work is taking place in the public or private sector and what kind of work is performed.

Another registered change is the language use among friends where the use of only Latvian has been reduced in favor to a bilingual language choice Latvian respectively Russian more than the other language. Again the quantitative surveys do not give us an answer why this is happening.

Table 3 page 24 (In which situation ...)

Since the year 2000 the questionnaire contains also the question about the situations in which the Russian speaking inhabitants use Latvian. Three situations are most frequently mentioned: (1) *if one is addressed in Latvian*, (2) *if the addressed person does not understand Russian*, (3) *in state institutions*.

Table 12, page 32 (promote Latvian language environment)

As we see from the previous table the Latvian language use by non-Latvian speakers is more or less limited on language use at the working place. How could the Latvian language use be promoted?

Respondents whose native language is Latvian consider that if *Latvians speak Latvian with the representatives of other nationalities* it is the most effective way (45%) of promoting Latvian. Latvians also stress the self-initiative of the non-Latvians. The Russian speaking respondents mention *teaching of Latvian in the preschool educational institutions and secondary general schools* (34%) and *organization of inexpensive or free courses of Latvian* (33%) as the most promoting instruments.

Table 13, page 33 (Language knowledge sufficiency)

The self-evaluation of the sufficiency of ones language knowledge is an interesting phenomenon. The tables show very little changes during the 8 years. 45% are completely or rather satisfied with their Latvian language knowledge. Analyzed by the parameter of levels of respondents' knowledge of Latvian we must conclude that the knowledge of only Russian still is sufficient in Latvia as in the group with none or very low Latvian knowledge more than 40% are satisfied.

Let us now look at the question, if people want to improve their Latvian language.

Table 14.1 and 14.2 page 34 and 35 (Improvement of Latvian knowledge)

Since 1999 the percentage of Russian speaking respondents who would like to improve their Latvian language knowledge have been decreasing. This is often regarded as a lack of good will or confidence in the sufficiency of knowing Russian and a poor Latvian. Analyzing this question by age it is obvious that the percentages of respondents who would like to improve their Latvian knowledge continues to decrease in the age groups of 15 – 34 years and 35-49 years. In comparison with 2002 these percentages have dropped about 10-11%.

At the same time we see that in these age groups, especially the age group 35-49 years, the percentage of those who admit that their Latvian knowledge is sufficient has increased (48% in 2002, 57% in 2003). Among youth the self-

evaluation of knowledge of Latvian also has increased compared to the data of the previous year. This might explain why in the younger group the changes concerning willingness to improve their language knowledge has changed: when the level of language knowledge increases, the necessity to improve the language knowledge decreases.

Table 15 page 36 (will not improve Latvian)

In the older age group (50-74 years) the situation is without changes since 2000: 57-60% of the respondents do not wish to improve their knowledge of Latvian. Old age is one of two most frequently mentioned reasons why Russian speaking respondents do not wish to improve their Latvian knowledge. The second most frequently mentioned reason is 'sufficient command of Latvian'. Again qualitative methods are necessary to answer the whys. A qualitative approach would also give an answer on the big differences between early and late year 2003. Are political issues influencing the rates?

Table 21 page 41 (main difficulties) / table 20 page 41

Which are the main obstacles which hinder the Latvian language acquisition? 43% of those respondents whose native language is not Latvian admit that they have certain difficulties to learn Latvian. Since 1996 this number has decreased about 13% and during the last three years generally has been constant. Still most frequently mentioned difficulties are 'old age', 'poor memory', 'health problems', 'lack of time'.

Compared to 2002 changes are observed concerning two factors. First, the number of respondents who consider complicated grammar as the main obstacle have decreased. Second, the proportion of respondents who perceive financial problems as the main obstacle for learning language has increased. In fact in 2003 those who do not want to pay for language courses have increased considerably (from 12% in 2002 to 27% in 2003). Besides, inexpensive or free courses is one of the most frequent demands by non-Latvians to promote the Latvian language environment.

Table 17.1 and 17.2 page 39 (how much are you ready to pay .)

In this context it is also interesting to know how much people in general are ready to spend for Latvian language courses. In the period from 1998 to 2002 the sum of money that a potential Latvian language student would be ready to pay was 12 - 14 LVL per month. The figure of 2003 shows that the number has dropped till 9 LVL that is even less than in 1996 (11 LVL). 27% of the respondents who would be ready to attend Latvian language classes admit that they want them free of charge. 76% of all respondents are not ready to pay more than 10 LVL in 2003. Follow-up questions are necessary to clear why? Is the financial situation worse or the domestic needs greater, is this a language status question or a political decision?

The results of the qualitative research "Opinions of National Minority Pupils and Their Parents on the Latvian Language" (BISS, 2003) answer these question to a certain degree. These respondents express readiness to study the language if it is free of charge. They consider that the availability of such free classes is self-evident and express incomprehension that the state does not provide them with such possibilities.

Table 30.2 page 49

How important is the Knowledge of Different Languages for Residents of Latvia?

Of all inhabitants in Latvia almost 95% consider that it is important to know Latvian, 70% consider the importance of Russian and about 75% English. About 98 % Latvians and 85% Russians regard the knowledge of Latvian as very or rather important. In comparison with that 60% Latvians and more than 80% Russians regard the knowledge of Russian as very or rather important and about 80% Latvians and more than 70% Russians regard the knowledge of English as important.

Table 32, 33 page 54

One of the instruments Latvia is using to promote the Latvian language is bilingual education in minority schools. There has lately been a hot debate about the language choice and language proportions in secondary schools. Two of the questionnaire options prevail by all respondents. One group means the reform is right another that it is not needed at all.

Table 31.1, 31.2, 31.3 and 32 and 33, page 52-54

Those respondents whose native language is not Latvian and whose families have school-age children were asked about their choice of school. There is a remarkable increase of Russian speaking children who go to Latvian schools (22% in 2002, 32% in 2003). The data shows that the most significant factor influencing the choice of school is parents' knowledge of Latvian. The higher the level of respondent's knowledge of Latvian, the larger the possibility that his/her child (children) goes to a Latvian school. The data of the last survey show that in all groups of Latvian language knowledge the percentage of those whose children attend a Latvian schools has grown.

The quantitative survey "Language" is for the State an important instrument to monitor the language policy. It shows the process and tendencies, also brakes caused by political or other means. It tells us that the overall knowledge of Latvian is increasing. Within 8 years the number of those with none knowledge of Latvian has decreased with 10% and the level of those with the highest and intermediate level has grown with 7%.

At the same time we see that real improvement of language use is only happening at work, the survey data also informs us that people want to improve their language and ask for courses free of charge. But this information is not enough to elaborate means how to raise the level. Language courses are not the only solution. For this purpose qualitative surveys are necessary. I will here introduce the results of two. One is a twice repeated survey among army recruits who do not master Latvian and the other is on opinions of the Latvian language among minority school pupils and their parents. The first survey has followed the language use and knowledge of 7 call-ups the second is a focus-group analysis.

The surveys among non-Latvian speaking army recruits show that Latvian language courses within the primary military service improves the language knowledge considerable. The surveys show also that the basic language level of the recruits entering the call-ups is growing year by year, which shows that the education services are improving. But the most amazing result of the

surveys is that the recruits use Latvian less at the end of the primary service period than in the beginning. Here ends the quantitative data and the qualitative survey starts with the whys. Here both Latvian and non-Latvian recruits were interviewed.

The answers are worth to note. Firstly, the selection of non-Latvian speaking recruits for the courses is segregating the call-up. This segregation causes also envy among the Latvian recruits, because while the Latvian speakers are ordered to clean the barracks the non-Latvian speakers attend language classes. Secondly the non-Latvian speakers complain that the Latvian speakers do not speak Latvian to them. The Latvian-speaking recruits explain that it is much easier to speak Russian with the non-Latvian speakers, because the dialogue is then faster and more precise and why harass the non-Latvian speakers to speak a bad Latvian? Even more, they say also that they want to use the possibility to train and improve their Russian.

The qualitative survey information tells us that the well meant action with language courses for army recruits actually is segregating the call-up instead of integrating.

The individual interviews of the focus-group members - parents and students - confirm many of the assumptions of the quantitative surveys but additionally explain the reactions. The information is very contradictory, but it gives you hints how to proceed and where to set priorities.

For example, the main motivation to learn Latvian is clearly instrumental: to keep the job or to get a better job, to pass the proficiency tests, to naturalize, or to help the children with the home-work and motivate them to learn Latvian. On the other hand the lack of motivation to learn Latvian is based on the self-sufficiency of the Russian language.

The learning of Latvian is by Russians regarded as “forced-upon”, which explains the paradox that on the one hand the instrumental motivation promotes the learning process but on the other hand it creates psychologically negative motivation to learn the language. This means that one of the tasks of the State policy is to create and promote a positive attitude to the Latvian language in the society in general as well as among the individual non-Latvians.

The paradox statements among non-Latvian speakers are also registered concerning language use. The Latvian language is mainly used in the formal environment –at public institutions, school, working-places. In informal environment – streets, shops, public transportation - the language use is mixed and in private life Russian is used. However the Russians themselves use Russian in informal contacts with Latvians, but they expect the Latvians to use Latvian.

In formal communication which is regulated by the Language Law Latvians use Latvian, but here the Russians expect them to speak Russian. This reflects the language use traditions. In the formal sphere the State language

policy is determining the language to be used, but this use of Latvian is not recognized by the Russian speakers.

However in the informal sphere the tradition to use Russian is continuing. Here the reasons are: most people in Latvia know Russian well, the communication is performed faster, more precise in Russian, and the Latvians use the opportunity to brush up their Russian.

This shows that to promote the Latvian language not only language courses and an effective language learning methodology is needed, but an attitude-change and positive-motivation campaign in the society, by Latvian speakers as well as non-Latvian speakers. These are expensive and from political side often regarded as useless means. The language policy-makers mostly do not want to listen to these arguments, for them an instrumental motivation is sufficient.

Concerning the discussion about the bilingual education in minority schools the parents on the one hand quote the State policy official statements – that it is needed to promote Latvian, to promote the integration in Latvia, to give all inhabitants the same starting positions and access to working-places - on the other hand the parents show a completely different understanding of the policy, that the bilingual education is developed to discriminate the minorities or that these means are implemented to solve the Latvian language teaching problems in minority schools.

Even if the students have a more positive attitude to bilingual education than their parents the interviews show that there is a lack of common understanding about what bilingual education is and how it is implemented. This confusion is even enhanced by the press. The Russian press is boosting the reform opponents and the Latvian press is only publishing fragments of information.

The interviews with parents show another paradox. They accept the bilingual education, but not in the classes where their own kids are, which leads to the assumption that the parents for their own kids want a general education in Russian as before. The interviews show also that the reform opponent reasons are deeper. It is difficult for them to accept that the status of the Russian language is changing in the society, which is even more emphasized by the bilingual education policy.

The parents declare that they have the right to choose the language of education, to choose Russian. Again the qualitative survey uncovers details which are very important for policy-makers. If they would listen carefully, and analyze these signals, means could be developed and activities undertaken to introduce the different reforms more smoothly.

For peaceful, sustainable language diversity a careful, sensitive and very flexible language policy and implementation process is necessary. Latvian is not a dying language, not even an endangered – yet. But if we do not protect

and promote it today it will be put on the language documentation project list tomorrow and on the language revitalization project list the day after.