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Relevance of economic factor in language policy in major cities of Latvia

What I would like to discuss is implementation of language policy in major cities of Latvia and relevance of economic factor on it.

An encouraging starting point for the discussion would be the question – can you imagine some comparatively large cities (with regard to population) in Western Europe, say, in France or in Scandinavia – Norway, Sweden or anywhere else that have nearly or more than half of inhabitants as representatives of minorities and immigrants and, moreover, who cannot communicate in the state language?

Inhabitants of Latvia can. Because in major Latvia's cities the make up of inhabitants is following – see the map on the next page.

In 2000 according to the Population Census all over Latvia the Latvians, i. e. basic nation constitutes 57,7 % and minorities together with the so-called minorities (i. e. residing in Latvia representatives of peoples who immigrated during the period of the Soviet occupation and have now redefined themselves as a minority) 42,3 % of the whole population (It must be noted, however, that in the population of Latvia, Russians are the second largest group, i. e. 29,6 %, then follow Belarussians 4,1 %, Ukrainians 2,7 %, Poles 2,5 %, Lithuanians 1,4 %, Jews 0,4 %, Gipsies 0,3 % and other 1,3 %) ¹. And this is what I am going to talk about, because of at least two reasons.

First, these days it is self-evident that multilingualism is an integral part of the present and future development of Europe and,

second, a state language is the cornerstone of society's integration in order not to rebuild the Tower of Babel.

Latvia is still undergoing the transition period and has the so-called transition type of society. It manifests itself as following.

There are marked links between economic and political processes.

Economy is strongly sensitive to the changes of external circumstances as it can be regarded as highly dependent on external market orders.

The privatization process proceeds sluggishly. That has developed the feeling of instability in people because, those employed, are uncertain about the future of the enterprises they work for.

There is a comparatively high level of relative unemployment. Officially unemployment rate is estimated at 9 %, but actually it is much higher. In order to be able to fill vacancies, job seekers often have to have a different profession or higher qualifications.

Characteristics mentioned above make the economic environment more or less unstable.

In this unstable economic environment, Latvian – the state language – is functioning in a highly complicated situation because of two interconnected reasons.

First, Latvian is functioning between two economically powerful rival languages – Russian and English.

Second, it is a fact that in the state on the whole 81,7 % of the population know the state language, but it is necessary to note that in major cities the percentage of Latvian speaking population is much lower by, at least some 10 % less. All over the state ethnic Latvians, of course, have the highest skills level in the state language – 98 %. Lithuanians have the next highest indicators of skills in Latvian – 85,8 % followed by Estonians – 76,7 %, Gipsies – 66,4 %, Poles – 61,8 %, Germans – 61,1 %. On the contrary, knowledge of Latvian among other peoples is considerably lower: 52,3 % of Russians and a little less than half of Belarussians, Ukrainians, Jews, Armenians, Moldavians, Georgians.

At the same time 84 % of all population can communicate in Russian. It is not necessary to add that in large cities the percentage is even a little higher. Analysing the sociolinguistic survey results one can conclude that considerable amount of minority and so-called minority representatives do not know the state language.

The other minority languages are used much less and in different sociolinguistic functions.

After 1990 during the process of the renewal of an independent country the importance of English in Latvia, on the one hand, has even strengthened the positions of Latvian, counterbalancing Russian in regional contacts and introducing the concept of multilingualism in everyday life. On the other hand, acquiring of English was and is still considered to be more important than learning of Latvian, thus being detrimental to acquisition of the state language skills among the population.

At present in Latvia nearly 15 % of population know English, namely, 17,5 % of Latvians, 10,6 % Russians and 15,4 % representatives of other minorities. Knowledge of English in major cities is 20-25 % of the population. (By the way, according to the population census data, one of the most widespread languages of Europe – English, German or French – is known by almost every fourth inhabitant of Latvia who has indicated any skills of foreign languages.)

Thus Latvia is a multilingual country and with regard to multilingual countries common is implementation of such a language policy model that more or less follows one of the alternative directions. The language policy is either aimed at the free market or it favours state intervention in the sociolinguistic functions of the language usage.



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In the situation the new State Language Law, passed in 1999 after a long-lasting procedure of conforming the law to the rigid requirements of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Cabinet of Ministers regulations results in *even greater* impact of the economic factor on the Latvian language *than ever* during the previous 10 years. This is the consequence of *differing* requirements for *state* and *private* enterprise employees.

When implementing the requirements it is impossible not to see that the existing disproportion in the usage of the language depending on the ownership form is growing, and thus it further promotes the segregation of enterprises on the ethnic and language basis. More and more firms, shops, bank branches and consumer service centers emerge where people are employed according to the nationality principle – namely Latvians together with minority representatives who know Latvian and, on the other hand, those of only Russian speaking – monolingues.

It should be pointed out that after the collapse of the Soviet regime, the political power greatly transformed into the economic one, because former soviet officials owned huge financial and other resources.

Such a situation promotes the upkeep of two highly different information areas in domestic media, as information in Russian press is often totally differently presented⁴ and mostly oriented to Russia and actually as if forms a "small Russia" in Latvia.

Thus, the society's integration process on the state language basis is prevented and hindered and the situation favours the self-sufficiency of the Russian language. However, integrated society is the basis and guarantee of stability and security. Therefore, the main goal of our language policy is integration of all inhabitants in the context of the official state language while protecting the languages of Latvia's minorities. Competence in Latvian is essential so that each resident of Latvia can become integrated into the life of society and is not hindered by lack of proficiency in Latvian.

To be fair, it should be added that all OSCE recommendations, namely, requirements during the harmonization process of the new State Language Law were aimed at the liberalization of the language area in the direction of the free market⁵.

The other integration process – Latvia's integration into enlarged European Union is the way of standardization and uniformity, i. e. the candidate countries, including Latvia, adjust and bring their legislation in conformity with the legal standards of member states.

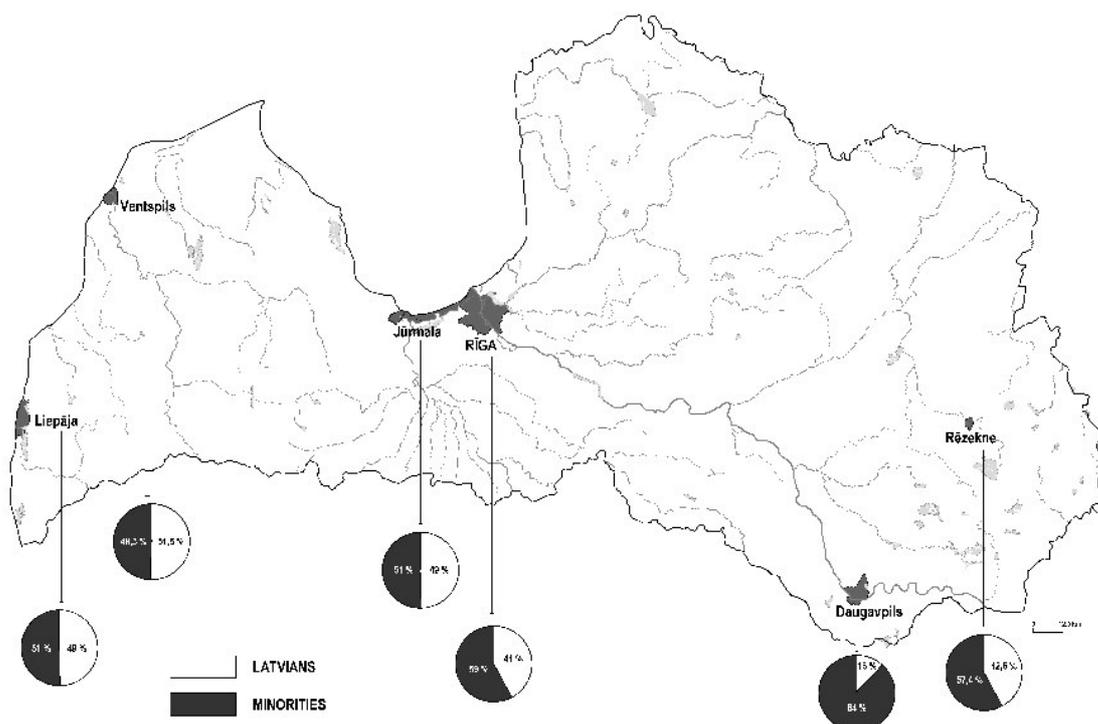
In this connection, I would like to point to in some respect paradox that standardization and uniformity process in such a complex area as functioning of languages in society could lead to **antipodal results**, i. e. much higher inequality in real life. Such is an outcome in Latvia.

Analysis of actual sociolinguistic situation clearly shows that under the conditions of the market economy only sound language legislation can save the Latvian language in its rivalry with Russian and English.

Also extension of the usage of Latvian is closely related to the language teaching policy (on all levels including higher education) embracing the state language, foreign languages and minority languages. Ability to improve the existing education system will be a major factor in the language maintenance.

Still, I would like to finish on an optimistic note by quoting the words from prof. P. H. Nelde's paper in 1999: "Economic factors, such as globalisation, promoting the major languages, are inconceivable without the strong tendencies towards regionalisation that provide small and

medium-sized languages in all spheres of a multilingual environment with new chances of survival."⁶



Literature:

¹ Latvijas 2000. gada Tautas skaitīšanas rezultāti / Results of the 2000 Population and Housing Census in Latvia. Rīga: LR Centrālā statistikas pārvalde, 2002, p. 13–14.

² Cf.: I. Druvieta, D. Baltaiskalna, V. Ernstsone, V. Poriņa. Latvijas valodas politikas analīze: Ekonomiskie aspekti. Rīga: LU LaVI, 2001, 33. lpp.

³ Li Wei. Towards a critical evaluation of language maintenance and language shift. // Sociolinguistica, 14/2000, p. 145.

⁴ D. Baltaiskalna. Latvijas iedzīvotāju lingvistiskā attieksme. Promocijas darbs filoloģijas doktora grāda iegūšanai. Rīga: LU LaVI, 2001, 145.–154. lpp.

⁵ For example, one of that kind of documents can be mentioned the Note submitted to Latvia by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities on 5 October, 1999 – Note on Selected Issues Concerning the Draft Latvian Law on Language. Office of the OSCE HCNM, 05.10.99.



⁶ P. H. Nelde. Perspectives for a European Language Policy. // Selected Papers from AILA'99 Tokyo. 12th World Congress of Applied Linguistics. Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 2000, p. 177.