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The role of national language policy institutions in the implementation of the law on the Official State Language in Latvia

Abstract (Latvian): Valsts valodas politikas institūciju loma Latvijas Valsts valodas likuma īstenošanā

2018. gada 18. novembrī apritēs simt gadu kopš Latvijas Republikas dibināšanas, un šajā gadā īpaši tiek izvērtēta valsts vēsture un valsts simbolu loma. Latviešu valoda ir galvenais, kaut ne vienīgais, Latvijas nacionālās identitātes elements, tāpēc, 1991. gadā atjaunojot neatkarību pēc padomju okupācijas, latviešu valodas statusa nostiprināšanai un valodas attīstīšanai tika pievērsta īpaša uzmanība. Valsts valodas statuss latviešu valodai tika atjaunots jau 1988. gadā, paredzot arī īpašu pasākumu kompleksu latviešu valodas apguvei un valodas funkciju atjaunošanai pēc intensīvas rusifikācijas un asimetriskā bilingvisma perioda. 1992. gadā, kad tika veikti grozījumi 1989. gada Valodu likumā, tika likts pamats izvērstajai valsts valodas politikas institūciju sistēmai, pamatojoties uz vispusīgu Latvijas valodas situācijas analīzi, ņemot vērā Latvijas Republikas pieredzi no 1918. gada līdz 1940. gadam un apzinot citu valstu valodas politiku. Pašlaik spēkā ir 1999. gadā pieņemtais *Valsts valodas likums*, kura izpildi konkretizē vairāki Ministru Kabineta noteikumi, kā arī valdības apstiprinātas *Valsts valodas politikas programmas* (2010-2014, 2015-2020). Raksturīga Latvijas valodas politikas īpatnība no neatkarības atjaunošanas līdz pat mūsu dienām ir profesionālu sociolingvistu iesaiste lingvistiskajā likumdošanā un cieša saistība starp valodas politikas teoriju un praksi. Rakstā sniegts pārskats par nozīmīgākajām oficiālajām valodas politikas institūcijām – Valsts valodas komisiju, Valsts valodas centru, Latviešu valodas aģentūru – to specifiskajām funkcijām un darbības koordināciju, lai nodrošinātu latviešu valodas konkurētspēju kompleksajā un mainīgajā Latvijas valodas situācijā.

Abstract (English)

2018, the Republic of Latvia's 100th anniversary, is also a year for analysing and evaluating its history and the significance of its national and historical symbols, in particular the Latvian language. Since Latvian was restored as the sole official state language during the “awakening” period (1988-1991), the main tasks of language policy makers – mostly professional linguists and sociolinguists – have been defined. The sustainability, linguistic quality and competitiveness of the Latvian language as the state language of the Republic of Latvia and as an official language of the European Union in the language market in Latvia and the world, together with measures to preserve, develop and use the languages of minorities in Latvia, have to be implemented in a complex and competitive language context. This article deals with the language situation and language policy in Latvia, focusing on the main official language policy institutions – the State Language Commission, the State Language Centre and the Latvian Language Agency.

1. Introduction

On November 19 2018 the Republic of Latvia celebrates its 100th anniversary, and this is a milestone year for the analysis and evaluation of its history and the significance of its national identity and historical symbols. The Latvian language is undeniably an important element of national identity (see Ehala 2018, 7-10); not the only one, but the most significant one. U. Ozolins has stated that “there are few countries in the world in which language policy has been more central to issues of national life and politics than in the Baltic States” (Ozolins 1999, 6). Like the other Baltic States, Latvia embodies the “language as heart and core” approach both in its official language policy and in public opinion. There are obvious historical, geopolitical, and psychological reasons for this, and these attitudes cannot be changed voluntarily in a short period of time. When looking at contemporary language policy it is necessary to understand the history in order for a fair assessment to be made of the language situation in those countries that have undergone a fundamental return to values and orientations previously denied (see Hogan-Brun et al. 2009, 10).

There is extensive literature on the language situation and language policy in Latvia in English,¹ so only a few background facts are offered here. The Latvian language belongs to the Baltic group of the Indo-European family of languages. The other Baltic language is Lithuanian, while the third Baltic language – Old Prussian – became extinct at the end of the 17th century. The first written texts appeared in the 16th century. The literacy rate among the Latvian population was high, and standardised Latvian became widespread. By the end of the 19th century Latvians were consolidated as a nation, and strong feelings of national awakening emerged, although the Latvian culture and nation developed against the background of a rivalry between German and Russian influence. As a result of a favourable historical situation, the independent Republic of Latvia came into being on 18 November 1918 and the legal status of Latvian became one of the most important issues of domestic policy. Several laws concerning the use of languages were passed, e.g. *The Regulations of State Language Proficiency* (1921) and *The Law on State Language* (1935). At the same time the minority language policy was recognised as good by the League of Nations. The Latvian language operated across all the sociolinguistic functions, and cultural autonomy was granted to minorities. This promising situation was ended by the 1940 incorporation of Latvia into the USSR. During the occupation, massive ethnodemographic changes took place; the number of Eastern Slavic people increased fourfold, and asymmetrical Russian-Latvian bilingualism developed as a result of Soviet language policy. The Latvian language lost more and more functions. Therefore the status of Latvian as the sole official state language was restored as a sign of national resistance

¹ See Baltiņš, Druviete/ Veisbergs (2008); Druviete (2012); Lauze (2017); Riekstiņš (2012).

even before independence, and in 1989 the first *Language Law* was adopted. Independence was regained in 1991, bringing significant changes in language policy. The pre-independence Language Law was amended in 1992. The current *Law on State Language* was adopted in 1999, supplemented by several Regulations by the Cabinet of Ministers. The main working document for the implementation of this Law is *Guidelines of State Language Policy* (2010-2014, 2015-2020). Latvia has been a member state of the EU and NATO since 2004 and a member state of the OECD since 2016. Its current population (2017) is 1,950,116, of which Latvians make up 62%, Russians 25.4%, Belarusians 3.3%, Ukrainians 2.2%, Poles 2.1%, Lithuanians 1.2% and others 3.8%. Latvian is one of 200-250 languages out of around 7,000 worldwide which is spoken by more than a million people, so it cannot be called a minor language. However, Latvian is in competition with strong languages in its language market, namely Russian and English, two international languages with high economic value. Therefore the main tasks of language policy makers – to ensure the sustainability, linguistic quality and competitiveness of the Latvian language as the state language of the Republic of Latvia and an official language of the European Union in the language market in Latvia and the world, as well as to guarantee the opportunity to preserve, develop and use the languages of Latvia's minorities – have to be implemented in a complex and competitive language situation.

2. Independence regained

The language situation in Latvia before independence could be summed up as follows: the shrinking of the sociolinguistic functions of Latvian; the ideology of Russian as the “second mother tongue”; the extensive use of Russian in administration and business; low competence in Latvian as a second language (20%) among minorities; the Russification of non-Russian minorities; and psychological resistance among Latvians, characterised by high mother tongue loyalty. The ambiguous nature of Soviet language policy (supported corpus planning vs. restricted status planning) resulted in a high linguistic quality of Standard Latvian being maintained, despite the restrictions on its use. In order to reverse this language shift, Latvian was proclaimed the sole official state language in 1988, acknowledging Latvian self-determination and the continuation of the Republic of Latvia which had been established in 1918. Latvia is the only territory where the Latvian language can survive, and Latvia is the only country which can take responsibility for the protection and development of the Latvian language. The fact that Latvia is a unitary country – not a federal one like Belgium, or one with special historic and linguistic regulations like Finland or Luxembourg – is also a factor, meaning that territorial differences in language legislation throughout the country have been avoided (Druviete 2007).

In March 1992 the *Republic of Latvia Language Law* was adopted. Article 21 states:

The observance of the Language Law is supervised by the Commission of Languages of the Republic of Latvia Supreme Council Presidium, the State Language Centre of the Council of Ministers, the State Language Inspection, and by local governments.

In May of the same year an *Official State Language Proficiency Certification Regulation* was adopted, followed in July by the *Regulations of the Republic of Latvia Official State Language Inspection Board* and some other subordinate legal acts.² The first specialised language policy institution was also founded in 1992 – the State Language Centre, under the Ministry of Justice. Its first director was Dr Dzintra Hirša, a linguist and active promoter of Latvian language rights. The Centre administered language proficiency testing and the activities of the State Language Inspectorate, organised a language consultancy service and supervised language teaching organisations. In 1995 the National Agency for Latvian Language Training was established to ensure the teaching of Latvian as a second language, preparing study materials and organising language courses. Since 1996 more than 100,000 people have studied Latvian using this programme, supported by the Phare and United Nations Development programme. As a result of these joint activities of teaching Latvian, carrying out language proficiency certification and controlling language use, Latvian language skills among the minority population increased from 18% in 1989 to 63% in 1995 and 92% in 2017.

The entry of Latvia into the European economic and political sphere required the translation of many international documents into Latvian, as well as the translation of Latvian laws into EU languages. Therefore a Translation and Terminology Centre was founded in 1996. Between 1996 and 2006 the Centre translated 215,000 pages of EU legal documents, 23,000 pages of NATO documents, and 18,000 legal documents from Latvian, as well as creating a terminology database with more than 300,000 entries.

3. Present institutional structures and their activities

In 1999, the current *Law on State Language* was passed and in 2005 the *Official State Language Policy Programme* was adopted. The objectives of the programme included the elaboration of a defined state language policy and the formation of a clear mechanism for its implementation. Capacity building for official language policy institutions and promoting their cooperation resulted in some changes in the system of language policy institutions. Now there is a well-defined structure of state-founded language policy institutions in Latvia.

² See *Official State Language in Latvia* (1992).

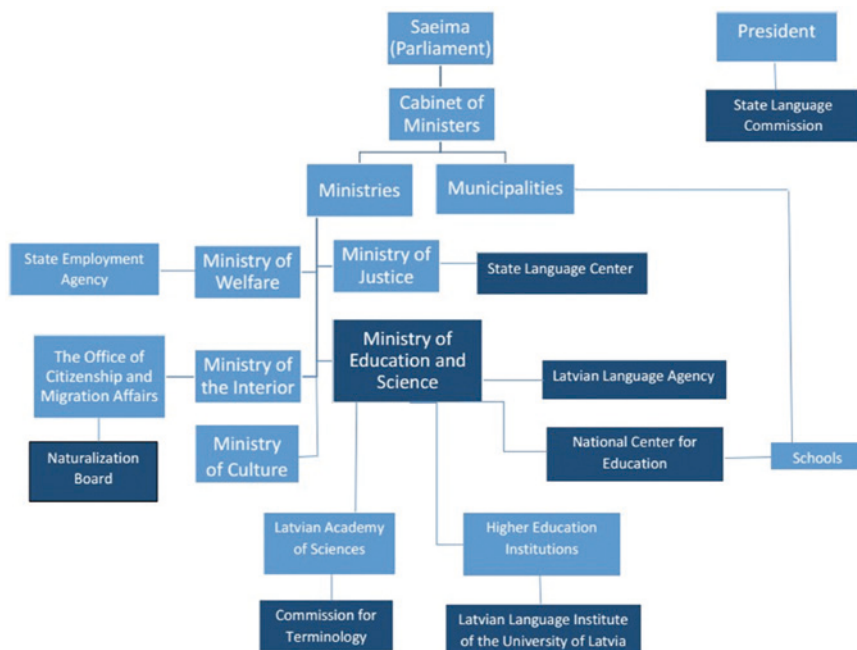


Fig. 1: Language policy institutions in Latvia

According to the letter and spirit of Latvian language policy, all governmental and municipal institutions, as well as non-governmental organisations and society at large, have to participate in implementing the language policy programme, which has been regularly monitored and updated. The necessary research into the Latvian language has been carried out by scientific institutions such as the University of Latvia's Latvian Language Institute and the respective chairs at higher education establishments. This process has been managed by the Language Policy Department at the Ministry of Education and Science under its director Dr. Vineta Ernstson, a sociolinguist. The main national language policy institutions are the State Language Commission, the State Language Centre and the Latvian Language Agency.

4. The State Language Commission under the auspices of the President of Latvia

The State Language Commission was established in 2002 following the initiative of the then president of Latvia, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, who signed a joint order with the Prime Minister. Its aim was to study the situation of Latvian as the state language and to draft recommendations on how to strengthen its status and

develop it further. Its first chair was the famous poetess Māra Zālīte. In 2004, the President and the Prime Minister appointed Dr Andrejs Veisbergs, a professor and EU certified interpreter, as the Chair of the Commission under the terms of this order.



Fig. 2: President of Latvia Raimonds Vējonis and the members of the State Language Commission in 2016

The primary goal of the State Language Commission is to identify strategic directions for language policy by all-encompassing, situational analysis-based research. The Commission also supervises the implementation of the State Language Policy Programme, and is involved in the drafting of relevant legislation. The Commission's members include experts in various areas of linguistics, culture, science, and education.³

5. The State Language Centre

The State Language Centre was founded in 1992 and has undergone several institutional changes. In 2000, the important function of State language proficiency certification was transferred to the Ministry of Education and Science; in 2009 the former Translation and Terminology Centre was incorporated into it. The director of the State Language Centre is physician and linguist Dr Māris Baltiņš.

The main task of the Centre is to supervise compliance with laws and regulations governing the use of the official language, and to translate the laws and regulations of the Republic of Latvia into the languages of the EU Member States.⁴

³ See <https://www.president.lv/en/activities/commissions-and-councils/state-language-commission>.

⁴ See <http://vvc.gov.lv>.

The State Language Centre consists of several departments. The Language Control Department consists of two branches – the Riga branch and the Regional branch – and has the following functions: 1) to exercise control over compliance with the laws and regulations on the use of the official language; 2) to take measures to protect the rights and interests of the users of the official language in cases of violation of the Official Language Law and other laws and regulations; 3) to examine cases of administrative violations and to impose administrative fines according to the procedure set out in the laws and regulations.

The Terminology and Legal Translation Department maintains a terminology database and prepares methodological guidelines for legal translation.

The Centre supervises the Latvian Language Expert Commission. It codifies the norms of the standard language and provides opinions on various language issues. The Latvian Language Expert Commission has two sub-commissions: one for Place-names and one for the Latgalian Written Language. The Calendar Names Expert Commission deals with personal names and their inclusion into the calendar.

6. The Latvian Language Agency

The mission of the Latvian Language Agency (LLA) is to promote and strengthen the status and sustainable development of the Latvian language as the state language of the Republic of Latvia and an official language of the European Union. The Latvian Language Agency is a direct administrative body supervised by the Minister of Education and Science. The director of the Agency since its establishment in 2003 has been Professor Dr Jānis Valdmanis, a specialist in general linguistics and sociolinguistics.⁵

Within this overall aim there are three areas or objectives, namely: 1) to analyse the situation of the Latvian language and the dynamics of sociolinguistic processes; 2) to increase the competitiveness of the Latvian language within Latvia and worldwide; 3) to provide support for the Latvian language within Latvia and abroad.

Regular investigation of the language situation is the only way to evaluate the results of language policy and plan its future activity. The research and monitoring of the language situation which is carried out by the Latvian Language Agency serves as a basis to define as precisely as possible the most urgent tasks in the implementation of language policy to be implemented in the short and longer term.

Studies of the language situation on a five yearly cycle show the progress made in the implementation of language policy, as well as the main difficulties regarding implementation and the promotion of the competitiveness of the Latvian language as the official State language. The following topics are covered: language

⁵ See <http://www.valoda.lv/en/>.

policy in Latvia and the Latvian language in the EU; language skills, language usage and the linguistic environment in Latvia; the use of the official language in major public sociolinguistic areas (central and local government administration, education, mass media, public services etc.); linguistic attitudes and the linguistic behaviour of society; and the Latvian language and globalisation.

The results of this research are published to make them widely available. In addition, every year a book or a piece of research on a sociolinguistic or language policy subject is translated into Latvian to educate society, to popularise the latest ideas and practices in this field, and inform the public at large. To ensure the highest possible availability of information for everyone who is interested and involved in the implementation of language policy, major studies are published electronically on the LLA website (www.valoda.lv) in Latvian and English (Latvian version – <http://www.valoda.lv/petijumi/sociolingvistika/>, English version – <http://www.valoda.lv/en/research/study-of-the-linguistic-situation/>).



Fig. 3: Research on language situation and translations of scholarly literature by LLA

The role of the Latvian Language Agency includes the promotion and development of Standard Latvian: developing study materials, dictionaries, academic literature, methodological resources etc.; organising and supporting the development and publication of scholarly and educational literature, informational and educational resources, popular science publications, online resources; and providing consultancy services related to the usage of Latvian etc.

To ensure the development of Standard Latvian, attention is focused on the following: the development and publishing of scientific and popular publications; support for the development of various dictionaries; and the development of online resources for various linguistic issues (informative, educational materials etc.). Among these publications are an annual collection of popular scientific articles: “Language practice: observations and recommendations. No. 11” (2016); “From *Abava* to *Zilupe*. The origin of Latvian geographical names. A short dictionary” by L. Balode and O. Bušs (2015); “Standard language and its norms: language use and traditions in Europe” (2014); “Trade wind for the human tribe. Language in society” by M. Baltiņš and I. Druviete (2017).



Fig. 4: Some scientific and popular-science publications of LLA

In order to enhance language quality in society, the Agency provides consultancy related to the use of Latvian. The majority of this consultancy work deals with the correct spelling of foreign proper names in Latvian, corresponding to Standard Latvian; personal name identification; and questions related to orthography, literary pronunciation (orthoepy), vocabulary, grammar, language culture and literary style. In addition the linguists at LLA provide linguistic analysis and expertise, i.e. detailed linguistic explanation and interpretation of a word, sentence or parts of text and how to understand and perceive it in a given context. Language consultancy is widely used by individuals, lawyers, the media (radio, TV, magazines, newspapers) and national and local government authorities (including law enforcement).

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Oral and electronic consultations	15,643	16,611	19,203	20,265	22,869	25,412
Certificates	1,112	1,115	995	1,063	870	844
Linguistic examinations and expertise	37	34	18	20	9	9

Fig. 5: Activities by Language Consultation Service

In addition, LLA organises various events and activities in order to involve the wider public in the implementation of language policy. A strict guiding principle of LLA is that without the active interest of society at large and its involvement and collaboration, language policy cannot be successful. There are a number of events traditionally organised by LLA and well known throughout the country; for example the European Day of Languages, which LLA has been organising since 2006. In recent years, this day has been celebrated through a two-week programme of events devoted to language. It includes competitions, quizzes, book presentations, seminars, conferences, and educational events for pupils, students, teachers and members of the public throughout the country and also in the Latvian diaspora abroad.

One of the key functions of LLA in promoting social integration is to ensure a favourable environment for language learning. The acquisition of the Latvian language is supported whether as a mother tongue, a second language or a foreign language. Great attention is therefore paid to the methodological skills and professional development of teachers of Latvian as a second language (LAT2).

Support is systemic, covering the whole field including teachers, school children, students and adults. The basic principles of language education are: language for the specific purposes of each individual; the learner at the centre; language for action and for life, not only for examinations; respect for cultural diversity and multilingualism, tolerance, dialogue, inclusion and participation. LLA's work in language acquisition is based on the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Levels A1–C2".

Support for teaching and learning Latvian is aimed at the widest possible audience. There are courses tailored to the needs of specific professional groups (administrative personnel in schools, teachers, employees in local government and medicine, police officers, firefighters, railway workers, soldiers etc.). Between 1997 and 2007 the LLA trained 70,000 people in these groups. There are also combined Latvian language and methodology courses to meet the professional needs of teachers in ethnic minority schools (the LLA has trained 8,200 such teachers since 2004), and for the parents of pupils. Recently courses have been provided for refugees, third country nationals etc.

In order to facilitate remigration, particular attention is paid to Latvians and their children who are living abroad. LLA provides support to Latvian schools abroad by ensuring the presence of specialists; sending methodological and study resources, dictionaries and literature; preparing and publishing methodological and study resources and materials; evaluating the curriculum, study materials and the learning process; organising meetings and seminars and providing methodological consultancy; and encouraging Latvian students and teachers in diaspora.

Support is also provided to higher educational establishments that engage in researching, studying and teaching the Latvian language. The Latvian Language Agency cooperates with universities abroad and supports the organisation of the

study of Latvian as a foreign language. So far the LLA has cooperated with 27 universities abroad, primarily in Europe; but there is also cooperation with educational institutions in the USA and China. The LLA provides methodological, organisational, informational, and financial support to universities abroad to strengthen the work of the Latvian faculty at foreign universities.

A specific and very broad area of support is the development of teaching materials, textbooks, E-learning resources, mobile applications, informative materials etc. by the Latvian Language Agency. A special website has been created “Māci un mācies latviešu valodu” (“Teach and Learn Latvian”) to ensure the availability of language acquisition resources, offering open educational resources for Latvian language acquisition (<http://maciunmacies.valoda.lv/>).

7. Conclusions

The implementation of Latvian language policy has three main aspects: legal, pedagogical, and linguistic. It is vital to have a coordinated approach across all three aspects. Language policy is a special area, which “takes into account its [language’s] meaning as a national symbol and a fundamental element of national identity and also considers that the existence, development, and long-term survival of a language are directly dependent on its speakers as well as factors, which, acting together, can significantly influence intended results of a policy” (Guidelines for State Language Policy 2015-2020). Latvian policy-makers have to find an answer to the big question of how to promote Latvian language skills, use and positive language attitudes in the context of implementing the full range of minority language rights, the linguistic self-sufficiency of Russian language speakers, the immigration situation and Russia’s media environment. Popular support is necessary, but the main responsibility lies with official language policy institutions. In 2014 a Preamble was added to the Latvian Constitution which mentions the Latvian language three times (Druviete/Ozolins 2016, 139-140). One of the authors of the Preamble, lawyer Egils Levits, asserted the central role of the state in defending cultural uniqueness: “A state is not neutral towards its national culture, but has to justify its existence, and care for the Latvian language and cultural development. This certainly mandates the state’s minimum responsibility (for example, a school system, the Latvian language, use of the state language in public space, support for Latvian culture, and that in all information media, etc.). However, in what way and in what measure (above this minimum responsibility) the state undertakes this, is a concrete political question” (Levits 2013, 11 [translation by U. Ozolins]). The official state language policy institutions have to do a lot above their “minimal responsibilities” in order to ensure the maintenance and development of Latvian in a complex and competitive language situation.

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