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Linguistic integration of immigrants and asylum seekers in Latvia: status quo and prognosed challenges

Until March, 2022, Republic of Latvia (1.9 million inhabitants in 2022) belonged to the countries with rather low migration (8840 long-term immigrants, 11990 emigrants). Most of recent immigrants came from the third countries. As the prerequisite for inclusion in the society free Latvian language classes and the state language proficiency test have been provided, e.g. 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 1990’s Latvia has carried out the integration programmes for national minorities, so the country has rich experience in the official language learning and teaching.

Because of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, the situation changed unexpectedly. There was Ukrainian minority in Latvia (42 300 people or 3.5% out of total population). During first month of the war appr. 10 000 refugees, mostly women and children, arrived in Latvia, and the prognosed numbers may exceed 30 000. A special law has already been adopted including articles on language and education rights.

From point of view of Latvian language policy some specific aspects contributing to the development general sociolinguistic theory may be discussed. First, the positions of the Ukrainian language as more visible participant in Latvian language market. Second, impact on Russian language self-sufficiency, as part of Ukrainian refugees have Russian language skills. Third, Ukrainian nationals whose family language is Russian belong to the same linguistic community as members of Russian minority in Latvia, but their political and ideological views can be completely different, raising the issue on linguistic and national identity.