

THE LATVIAN LANGUAGE, LANGUAGES IN LATVIA



LATVIA



Republic of Latvia was founded in 1918. After incorporation in the Soviet Union (1940–1991) independence was renewed in 1991. Latvia is a democratic parliamentary republic.

The territory of the spread of the Latvian language today almost fully corresponds to the territory of the state of Latvia.

Territory – 64 600 km²
Population – 2 329 000

Latvia is traditionally divided into four regions: Kurzeme, Vidzeme, Latgale, Zemgale. The capital of Latvia is Riga, with its 740 000 inhabitants.

There are about 1.5 million native speakers of Latvian. Of these 1.38 million reside in Latvia, the rest are scattered in the US, Russia, Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, as well as in Brazil, Lithuania, Sweden, Estonia and in smaller numbers elsewhere. As a second language Latvian is also spoken by at least 0.5 million non-Latvian residents of Latvia, as well as by several tens of thousands in the neighbouring countries (especially Lithuania) and abroad.



There are more than 6700 languages in the world. Half of mankind speaks about 15 of them. The other half speaks the other languages. Only 200 languages, among them Latvian, have more than a million speakers. Thus among the thousands of languages Latvian is among the rather few that could realistically survive in the future. How long is it going to be? This will be decided by the humanity's ability to protect language diversity in the conditions of globalization as well as by the determination of Latvians themselves.

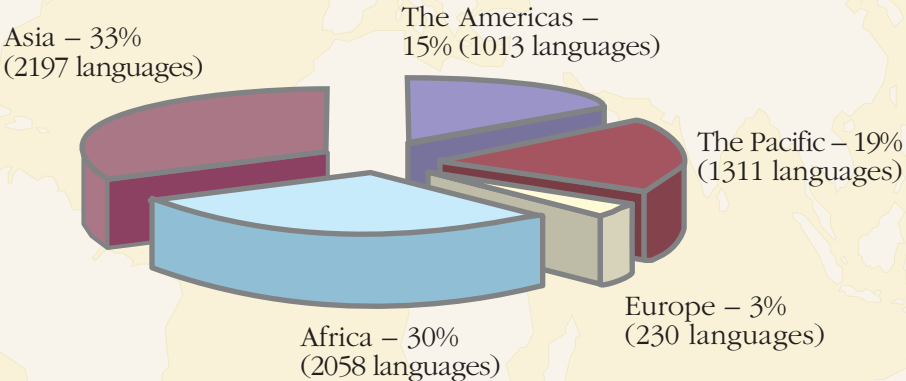
Each state is responsible for all the languages, its population speaks, by its policies of language preservation and development. Also Latvian language policy aims at guaranteeing protection for all the languages spoken in Latvia, taking particular care of two languages that originate here – Latvian and Liiv.

Latvian belongs to the Indo-European family of languages. Together with Lithuanian it forms the Baltic language

group, which is different both from the languages of the Slavonic and Germanic groups. Latvian and Lithuanian separated in the 5–6th century A.D. Latvian, like Lithuanian preserves many elements of Indo-European proto-dialects both in word-stock and grammar. Through centuries of development Latvian has become a rich and developed language that can reflect various walks of life.

Though Latvian and Lithuanian are related, their speakers today are not able to understand the other language. The degree of similarity of the languages would be close to that of Spanish and Italian or Russian and Polish. The other neighbour of Latvian – Estonian is completely different – it belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family. Some features in the Latvian language have been borrowed from the Liiv language (related to Estonian), e.g., stress on the first syllable of the word. Traces of Liiv can be followed also in Latvian word stock.

Geographic distribution of languages






Source: www.sil.org/ethnologue (2002).

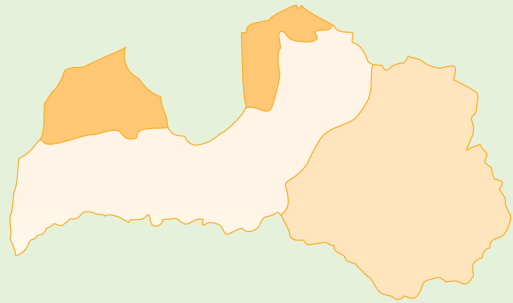
Baltic tribes – Kurši, Zemgaļi, Letgaļi and Sēļi – as well as Liivs who have jointly formed the Latvian people, settled in the territory of present day Latvia at least 5000 years ago. Thus Baltic peoples are among the few European ones who have lived for so long in the same territory. The formation of the common Latvian language began during the 10th to 12th centuries through tribal consoli-

ation. Today traces of tribal dialects can be still found in three main dialects (Central, Tamian or Liiv and High Latvian) as well as more than 500 vernaculars.

Typologically Latvian is an inflectional language. Latvian nouns have 7 cases, verbs have a particularly complex system of inflections. Latvian stresses the first syllable of the word.

Latvian Dialects

-  Tamian or Liiv dialect
-  Central dialect
-  High Latvian



Samples of dialects:

I went herding, I made the shirt, taking the measure by the oak

Ganos gāju, kreklu šuvu, pie ozola mēru ņēmu – Central dialect.

Ganes gāj, krekal šuj, pe ozal mēr jēm – Tamian or Liiv dialect.

Gonūs goju, kraklu šyvu, pī ūzula māru jiemu – High Latvian.

/Source: Balode, Holvoet 1999/.



The first written texts in Latvian appeared in the 16th century. Up to the beginning of the 20th century Gothic letters were used in spelling. In 1908 the new, Latin, orthography was instituted, with the addition of diacritics for the specific sounds of

Latvian. Latvian has thus the phonomorphological spelling system (Latvian graphemes correspond almost perfectly to the phonemes) which is considered to be one of the most perfect spelling systems.



The alphabet of modern literary
Latvian consists of 33 letters.



Latvian word stock reflects language contacts. Many words have been borrowed from Liiv, about 3000 loans come from German. During the last decades Latvian has been seriously affected by Russian and English. Yet the developed word-formation system of the Latvian language has made it possible to coin thousands of new words based on Latvian stems. Terminology today makes full use of this opportunity.



Number of speakers of some of the biggest languages and Latvian and Liiv

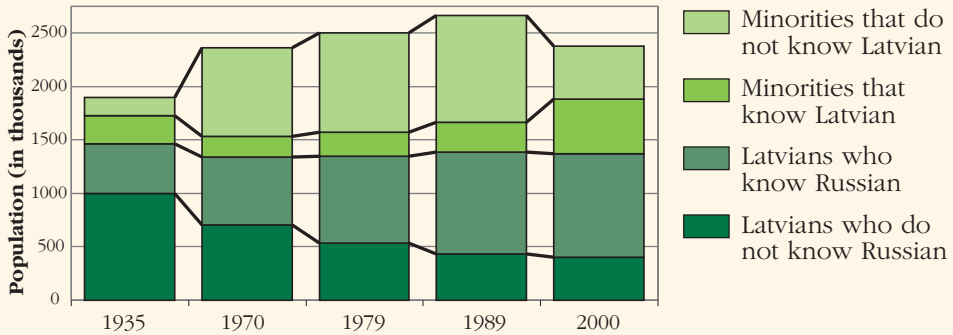
Language	Speakers
Chinese (Mandarin)	885 000 000
English	322 000 000
Spanish	266 000 000
Arabic	181 000 000
Russian	170 000 000
Japanese	125 000 000
German	98 000 000
French	72 000 000
Latvian	2 000 000
Liiv	20

58% of Latvia's population consider Latvian their native language. This includes apart from almost all Latvians (96%) also 31 000 Russians, 14 000 Lithuanians, 12 000 Poles, 6 000 Belorussians, 2 000 Ukrainians, and others, altogether 72 000. These people use Latvian in all walks of life. Latvian is most widespread as a native language in Kurzeme rural

districts (Talsi region – 95%, Kuldīga region – 94%), as well as in Vidzeme (Madona region – 90%, Limbaži region – 89%). The smallest proportion on native Latvian speakers is in Latgale (Daugavpils – 12%, Krāslava region and Rēzekne – 39%). In Riga there are only 40% native Latvian speakers.



The Linguistic Environment of Latvian (1935–2000)

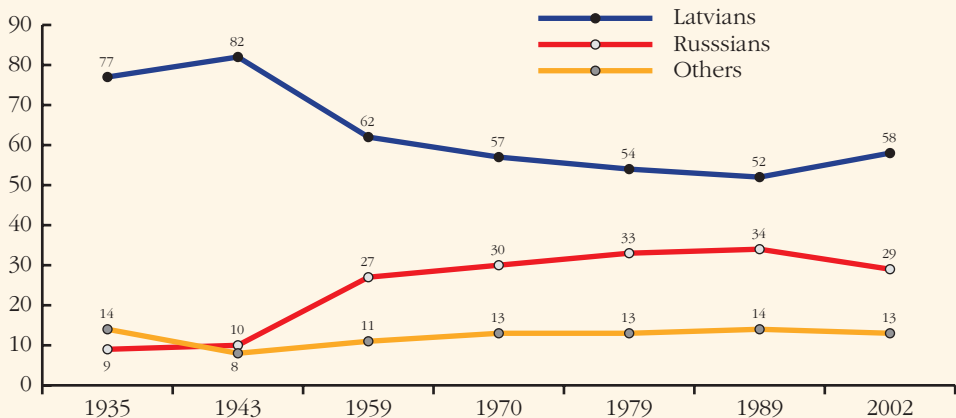


The Latvian language today functions in all walks of life. Its use has been renewed in the state administration, armed forces, law enforcement agencies. Latvian is the language of education for 70% of students at school and this proportion tends to grow. Latvian is the language of state higher education, most of the theses are presented in Latvian. There are more than 200 newspapers published in Latvian with an annual circulation of 110 million copies as well as about 300 journals and magazines. About

2500 books are published every year with the total number of copies exceeding 6 million.

The 20th century brought considerable changes in the number of population. 1939 saw repatriation of 60 000 Germans. From 1941 to 1949 about 110 000 Latvians were deported to Siberia and the Far North. In 1944 about 120 000 Latvians went into exile to the west. During the soviet years a large number of Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians came to live in Latvia.

Changes in the ethnic composition of Latvia from 1935 to 2002 (%)



Ethnodemographic change of Latvian population (%)

Nationality/Year	1935	1959	1989	2002
Latvians	77.0	62.0	52.0	58.2
Russians	8.8	26.6	34.0	29.2
Belorussians	1.4	2.9	4.5	4.0
Ukrainians	0.1	1.4	3.4	2.6
Poles	2.5	2.9	2.3	2.5
Lithuanians	1.2	1.5	1.3	1.4
Jews	4.9	1.7	0.9	0.4
Roma	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4
Estonians	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.1
Germans	3.3	0.1	0.1	0.1
Others	0.2	0.5	1.1	1.1

A peculiarity of Latvia is the difference between the documentary nationality of the population and their native language. For several minorities Rus-

sian is the native language. Though after 1991 minority schools and cultural associations have come into being, language revival is slow.



Minority Languages in Latvia

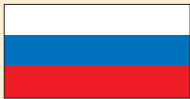
Latvian community is bound by the Latvian language as the official language of the state. The law guarantees the rights of all nationalities to

use and develop their language. The state finances primary education in eight languages and there are about 200 national cultural associations.

Native and second language speakers (in thousands), Year 2000

Language	Native	%	Second	Together	%
Latvian	1383.1	58.2%	495.6	1878.7	79.0%
Russian	891.5	37.5%	1038.7	1930.2	81.2%
English	0.2	0.0%	339.9	340.1	14.3%
German	0.6	0.0%	179.4	180.0	7.6%
Polish	12.0	0.5%	28.0	40.0	1.7%
Belorussian	18.3	0.8%	17.2	35.5	1.5%
Lithuanian	13.2	0.6%	17.0	30.2	1.3%
Ukrainian	17.0	0.7%	8.0	25.0	1.1%
French	0.1	0.0%	9.8	9.9	0.4%
Romany	5.6	0.2%	2.0	7.6	0.3%
Estonian	0.7	0.0%	2.0	2.7	0.1%
Rumanian	1.0	0.0%	0.5	1.5	0.1%
Armenian	0.9	0.0%	0.4	1.3	0.1%
Tartar	0.9	0.0%	0.4	1.3	0.1%
Jewish (Yiddish)	0.8	0.0%	0.3	1.1	0.0%
Azerbaijani	0.7	0.0%	0.3	1.0	0.0%
Liiv	0.0	0.0%	0.02	0.02	0.0%

** approximate evaluation in italics*



Russian is the largest minority language in Latvia. It is known by about the same number as Latvian – 81%. Russian is considered as their native language by 665 000 Russians today, as well as 227 000 people of other nationalities (71 000 Belorussians, 48 000 Latvians, 43 000 Ukrainians

and 34 000 Poles). Russian as a second language is known by 921 000 Latvians and 118 000 representatives of other minorities. Russian is the language of tuition for 30% of all schoolchildren, more than 300 schools in practically all regions and all bigger towns offer it. Apart from the publications brought from Russia 70 local newspapers with the annual circulation of 70 million are on offer. Several TV channels and radio stations broadcast in Russian.



Polish was important and widespread in the Eastern part of Latvia, yet today its role has diminished. Of the 60 000 Latvian Poles only 11 500 recognise it as their native language, about 10 000 more can use it. Apart from these about 20 000 Latvians, Russian, Belorussians and

Ukrainians, especially in Latgale, know Polish. In Daugavpils and nearby areas the number of Polish speakers exceeds 10% of the population. Thus the total number of Polish users is about 40 000, half of which are senior citizens. One can speak of a Polish school network in Latvia – there are 6 Polish schools in five different towns, attended altogether by about a thousand of children. Services take place in Polish in several Catholic churches.



Belorussian is known by 36 000 Latvian residents, mostly Belorussians (18 000 native speakers), and some Russians, Poles and Latvians. More

than one third of the speakers of Belorussian are senior citizens, and the language is rarely used in the family. Though in the 20ies of the 20th century there were about 10 Belorussian schools, today only one small Belorussian school exists in Riga with about 100 children.



Lithuanian is known by about 30 000 Latvian residents, most of which are Lithuanians, the rest Latvians in some way connected with Lithuania.

Lithuanian proficiency is rife along the long border with Lithuania where it often exceeds 10%. In some border areas of Daugavpils and Jēkabpils regions use of Lithuanian was in the past as usual as that of Latvian. There is a Lithuanian school in Riga with about 200 children, some Lithuanian forms recently existed also in Liepāja.



Ukrainian is known by about 25 000 Latvian residents – mainly Ukrainians, who have come to Latvia a few decades ago. About half of them live in

Riga, others reside in the bigger towns and rather few in the rural districts. There is a Ukrainian secondary school in Riga with about 300 children. About one fourth of the Ukrainian speakers are of the pension age, yet it is the native language for more than a thousand children and young people.



Estonian is much less heard in Latvia today than in the past. Only 700 Estonians consider it as their native tongue and as many know it. The general number of the Estonian speakers does not exceed 3 000, including about one thousand Lat-

vians. In century old maps of the Baltic territory the area around Ainaži and some border villages are marked as Estonian speaking, as at least half of the local population spoke Estonian. Middle of the 20th century saw the end of isolated pockets of Estonian in Ludza district. There is an Estonian school with 150 children in Riga, though few of them use Estonian also in the family.



Jewish (Yiddish) was frequently heard in Latvian towns, especially in Latgale, however today the number

of speakers has dropped sharply. The last census shows only 800 Jews as native speakers, most of them senior citizens, a few hundreds more could understand the language. There are two Jewish schools teaching in Hebrew.

Romany in Latvia has a particular dialect. An ABC and various books have been published in it. Of the 8 000 Romany speakers practically all are Romanies. There exist several Romany song groups and Romany

ethnic forms in schools of Ventspils, Sabile and elsewhere. Romany is used practically in all families and compared to other minorities Romany users are the youngest – half of them are under thirty.

Other minority languages. Like elsewhere in Europe there are representatives of other nationalities (under one hundred altogether) living in Latvia. The most widespread family languages are Rumanian, Tartar, Armenian, Azerbaijani – each spoken by about 1000 people. Georgian has 300 speakers, Chuvash – 200, and there are more than 1000 speakers

for Hungarian, Mordovian, Finnish, Bulgarian, Osetin and Lesgin each. There are from 50 to 100 native speakers of Udmurt, Karelian, Mari, Uzbek, Komi, Bashkir, Kazah and Chechen. A few dozen speakers represent Korean, Gagauz, Czech, Tajik, Avar, Yakut, Chinese, Turkmen, Kumik, Ingush and Mongolian.



Liiv has a particular status in Latvia – Liivs are Latvia's only autochthonous minority with the basic nation's status prescribed by legislation. Liiv belongs to the Baltic Finnish language group of the Finno-Ugric family and it has retained many ancient traits. Though it is related to other Baltic Finnish languages, neither Estonian nor Finns can understand Liiv. In the 30ies of the 20th century Liiv was still spoken by about 1000 people in the fishing

villages of Northern Kurzeme. Today there are only 5 native speakers left who remember the language from their childhood, though it was not used in everyday life. Though about 170 people in Latvia consider themselves Liivs only about of dozen of them understand the language. There are about two dozen enthusiasts (mainly researchers) of the language who have learnt it in the world, predominantly in Estonia and Finland.

As Liiv can be considered to be one of the rarest languages in Europe and the world, Latvia has the honour and duty to promote its dissemination and study.

Text sample in Liiv:

Liiv:

Pūgō, tūļō, aja laijō,
Aja mīnda Kuramāl.
Kurmānikad minnōn tījtist
Eņtš tidarōd jovajist.
Tījtist, tījtist, bet iz āndat,
Nutist mīnda sūr juojizōks.

Latvian:

Pūt, vējiņi, dzen laiviņu,
Aizdzen mani Kurzemē.
Kurzemniece man solīja
Sav' meitiņu malējiņ'.Solīt sola, bet nedeva,
Teic man lielu dzērājiņ'.

English:

Blow thee wind, drive my boat,
Drive me to Kurzeme.
A woman from Kurzeme promised me
Her daughter as a bride.
She promised, but she backed out,
Calling me a drunkard.



Foreign languages in Latvia



English is gradually becoming the most important foreign language in Latvia. About 340 000 or every sev-

enth Latvian resident knows English. 2/3 of all students in schools learn English as the main foreign language. Also about several thousands of the foreign business people and diplomats speak mainly English. A newspaper "The Baltic Times" is published in English.



German lost its role in the last century. A hundred years ago an educated Rigan could not be imagined without the knowledge of German. Today German is the language predominantly of the older generation.

Until the war German was an important language of the minority. German proficiency is pointed out by 180 000 Latvian inhabitants, $\frac{3}{4}$ of them are Latvians, as well as about 1 500 local Germans, considerably fewer than before the war. Yet every fifth student at school learns German, mainly starting with form VI or in secondary school, and it can be learnt in about a half of all schools.



French is the next most important foreign language, though the number of the speakers does not exceed 10 000. French is studied by more than 4 000 students at school and can be acquired in at least 50 schools.

Other languages. Other languages would be known by fewer people. Their numbers would fluctuate from a few hundred to a dozen people per language, in some cases single ones. All in all one could find some-

one for at least a hundred languages. Swedish is taught in some Latvian schools (around 600 children), Spanish (around 400), Danish, Norwegian, Finnish, Japanese and Latin (about a hundred children per language).

Language policy in Latvia

Multilingualism, global information exchange systems, tendencies of economic integration in the modern world create an ever stronger competition among languages and even threat of extinction for many languages with a relatively large number of speakers. In such conditions languages that can follow development of modern technologies, capable of expressing nuances of thoughts and feelings have a better chance of survival.

Each language is an invaluable cultural heritage of humanity and basis of ethnic identity. The Latvian language is the official/state language of the Republic of Latvia and the language of integration of society. For this reason the Latvian state has a particular responsibility to ensure development of Latvian. It is the duty of this state as Latvia is the only state in the world that can take responsibility for preservation of the Latvian language.

The first “Law on the State Language” after renewal of independence was adopted in 1999. At present the “Official language law” is in effect.

State Language Commission

In 2002 the President of the State initiated formation of the State Language Commission. Its goal is to assess the state language situation in Latvia and produce suggestions for strengthening and improving the position of Latvian, ensuring its sustainable development.

“Official language law” (1999) provides:

Article 24. (1) It is the duty of State and local government institutions to ensure the provision of material resources for research, cultivation and development of the Latvian language. (2) The State shall ensure the development of an official language policy, incorporating in it research, protection and teaching of the Latvian language, promoting enlargement of the role of the Latvian language in the national economy, and cultivating individual and public understanding of the language as a national value.



Factors for Latvian stability, sustainability



At the end of 2002 Latvia received an invitation to join the European Union. The Latvian language thus will become the official language of

the enlarged EU. Every citizen will have the right to address European institutions in Latvian and also receive an answer in Latvian.

Promoting factors	Endangering factors
Sole status of state (official) language in an Independent state	High economic value of competing languages
Official language law and its regulations	Psychological heritage of the past
Large language community, a growing number of users of Latvian as a second language	Presence of a large linguistically self-sufficient group of speakers
Use in all sociolinguistic functions	Globalization, state integration in supernational structures
High linguistic quality of the Latvian language	Unstable economic situation, insufficient financing of language policy
Future Status of the EU official language	Absence of a strategic Latvian language research and development programme

There are languages in the world that despite efforts of their speakers and states will not be there in the next century. There are also languages the future of which will be ensured by the great number of the

speakers and their high economic value. Latvian is between these groups. Its future will be determined by the attitude of the Latvian population and their effort.



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