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The Latvian language: Official language of the Republic of Latvia and official language of the European Union

Latviešu valoda: Latvijas Republikas valsts valoda un Eiropas Savienības oficiālā valoda

Kopš 2007. gada 1. janvāra Eiropas Savienībā ir 27 valstis un 23 oficiālās valodas. Jaunu – Eiropas Savienības oficiālās valodas – statusu blakus vācu, franču, angļu, nīderlandiešu, spāņu, itāļu, grieķu, portugāļu, zviedru, somu, dāņu valodai ieguvusi poļu, čehu, ungāru, slovāku, slovēņu, maltiešu, lietuviešu, igauņu un latviešu valoda. No 2007. gada oficiālo valodu saimei piepulcējusies arī īru, bulgāru un rumāņu valoda. Gan politiskajā, gan zinātniskajā arēnā notiek plašas diskusijas par to, kā šāds pasaules vēsturē unikāls sociolingvistisks eksperiments ietekmēs Eiropas Savienības funkcionēšanu. Daudz mazāk tiek skarts pretējais aspekts – kā ES oficiālās valodas statuss ietekmēs konkrētas valodas situāciju – īpaši jaunajās dalībvalstīs, tātad arī Latvijā.

Jau Romas līgumā tika noteikts ES valodu vienlīdzības princips. Pašlaik visām oficiālajām valodām ir vienlīdzīga tiesības. Tomēr reālās valodu pozīcijas nosaka vairāki faktori: 1) runātāju skaits (arī tie, kam tā ir otrā valoda vai svešvaloda), 2) ekonomikas attīstības līmenis, 3) preču un pakalpojumu tirgus attiecīgajā valodā, 4) Valodas reģionālais statuss, lietojuma un apguves tradīcijas kaimiņvalstīs, 4) valodas izkoptība (standartizācija, terminoloģija, programmatūras).

Filozofiskās vadlīnijas Eiropas Savienības valodas politikā attieksmē pret daudzvalodību un valodu saglabāšanas iespējām ir skaidras: valodas ir vērtība, Eiropas bagātība, nacionālās un arī eiropeiskās identitātes pamats. Vienlaikus gan tiek atzīts, ka valodu dažādība rada lielas problēmas gan ekonomiskā, gan politiskā ziņā. Eiropas Savienības valodas politikas koncepcijai vēl nav pielikts punkts. Joprojām risināšanas stadijā atrodas gan problēmu komplekss, kas saistīts ar valodu juridisko un faktisko statusu Eiropas Savienības institūcijās, gan ar oficiālo valodu konkurētspēju Eiropas Savienības dalībvalstīs. Īpaša uzmanība jāpievērš t.s. nelielo oficiālo valodu aizsardzībai (kā slovaku, lietuviešu, latviešu, igauņu u. tml. valodām), jo tieši šo grupu pietiekami neaizsargā ne tirgus mehānismi, ne starptautiskie tiesību akti. Apdraudējums kādai no šī tipa valodām būtu jāuztver kā apdraudējums visai nelielo valodu grupai.

“The members of EFNIL are united in their conviction that the languages they are concerned with are integral components of European linguistic diversity and cultural wealth”, declared the General Assembly of EFNIL (*EFNIL Brussels Declaration on Language Learning* 2005: 33). Respect for the diversity of the Union's languages is a founding principle of the European Union since the Treaties of Rome. The European motto “United in diversity” includes a strategic approach which has to be incorporated to detail in legislative acts and programmes. The protection and preservation of the diversity of languages was first mentioned as a conceptual goal in the *EU Fundamental Rights Charter. Guide for the Development of Language Education policies in Europe* (2002), *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006* (2003), *A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism* (COM (2005) 596 final), *Final Report of High Level Group on Multilingualism* (2007) envisage a lot of principal developments in the field, and appointment of Commissioner for Multilingualism sets the signal for development of a coherent and comprehensive language policy in

the European Union. However, the mechanisms for full-blooded protection of languages under processes of European integration and multilingualism need further elaboration in order to reflect economic and ethnodemographic diversity of the member-states.

According to one of the possible classifications the languages spoken in the EU could be divided as follows:

- 1) Official and working languages (23 since 2007, including former “treaty language”, Irish).
- 2) Language with special status in the programmes (Luxembourgish).
- 3) Regional and minority languages:
 - 45 “lesser used languages” in old member states,
 - ?? in new member states;
- 4) Non-territorial languages (Yiddish, Romani).
- 5) Diaspora languages of refugees and labor migrants.

This classification reflects the official or formal status of languages paying no attention to their sociolinguistic features. The actual positions of languages depend on several factors, for instance:

- 1) Quantity of speakers (including L2 speakers).
- 2) Development of economy in the country.
- 3) Market for goods and services in the language (economic value).
- 4) Traditions of use and learning in neighboring and other countries.
- 5) Linguistic development (standardization, terminology, software etc.).

A lot of attention has been paid to implementation of the *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (1992), to activities of the *Bureau for Lesser Used Languages* and to protection of languages having no official status in the respective member state in general. The protection of minority language rights has been supervised by many international human rights bodies and widely discussed in academia. *Final Report of High Level Group on Multilingualism* (2007) states that “revitalization, maintenance, further development, and long-term survival of Europe's regional and minority languages should continue to be a matter of European concern”. Specific attention and protection deserves the Liv language – common treasure for Baltic and Finno-Ugric peoples.

However, the official languages also have a unique and irreplaceable role in the European language landscape. Official language play a great role for integration of multilingual societies, and official language skills guarantee social inclusion. Therefore language policy documents for the European Union should also address the official languages and not only minority and regional languages.

In order to demonstrate the impact of coordination (or lack of coordination) of EU and national language policy the Latvian case has been chosen.

Republic of Latvia was founded in 18 November 1918. After incorporation in the Soviet Union (1940-1991) independence was renewed in 21 August 1991. The Republic of Latvia is a parliamentary democracy. In February 1999 Latvia joined the World Trade Organization, in March 2004 NATO and as from the 1st of May 2004 it is a full member of the European Union.

In 2007 Latvia has approx. 2,290,700 inhabitants. The following table lists the ethnic composition of Latvia's population. Table 1 is based on round off data taken from the 1989 census and a projection of 2006 from the Civil Data Register.

	1989		2006	
Latvians	52.2%	1,396,100	59.0%	1,351,489
Russians	34%	902,300	28.5%	652,204
Belarussians	4.4%	117,200	3.8%	86,594
Ukrainians	3.4%	89,300	2.5%	58,175
Poles	2.2%	59,700	2.4%	55,682
Germans	0.1%	2,900	0.2%	3,799
Lithuanians	1.3%	34,100	1.4%	31,307
Jews	0.6%	16,300	0.4%	9,529
Roma	0.3%	7,200	0.4%	8,498
Other	1.2%	31,900	1.4%	33,488

Table 1: Ethnic composition of Latvia (1989 and 2006)

Latvians still cover only 58% of the total population and there still is a high proportion of Russians in Latvia mainly residing in the 7 biggest cities in which they constitute the majority of the population.

Two intertwining processes are taking place now: the integration of the society in Latvia (the linguistic integration against the background of the Latvian language skills) and integration of Latvia into the European Union (involving individual plurilingualism). Therefore the language planning strategy proceeds from the following principles:

- 1) An official language is both the symbol of the state and an instrument for integration of society. Learning and usage of Latvian is one of the main factors, which ensures the stability of a multilingual state.
- 2) Ensuring all inhabitants of Latvia the possibility to study and to use the Latvian language in order to promote the integration of the society.
- 3) Supporting the learning and use of the minority languages in Latvia.
- 4) Ensuring the possibility to study foreign languages in order to stimulate readiness for communication in a foreign language and integration into European structures.

The most distinctive feature of language situation is a great discrepancy among language skills, language attitudes and language use. The actual hierarchy of languages in multilingual society can better be characterised by their sociolinguistic functions rather

than by their legal status. At present, there is almost a balanced situation between Latvian and Russian. There are different political and economic factors in favour of the use of each language. The strongest positions Latvian has in federal and municipal governments. Latvian instead of Russian has become the state and local government working language and the language of office work. The change of visual image (signs, advertisements, information) has taken place. Linguistic landscaping – language use in its written form (visible language) in the public sphere – has changed.

Realistic evaluation of the history and present position of the Latvian language would allow to make prognosis on the future perspectives in connection with objective ethno-demographic, economic, political processes in the country, Europe and the world. The maintenance of Latvian is determined by the complex of interdependent objective and subjective factors.

Among the factors positively influencing the maintenance of Latvian the following ones can be meant:

- 1) Sufficient number of L1 speakers and growing numbers of L2 speakers.
- 2) The use of Latvian in all the sociolinguistic functions especially in the Parliament, ministries and municipalities, and in all levels of education.
- 3) High quality of Standard Latvian (developed stylistic system and terminology).
- 4) Present status of the sole official State language and existing legal mechanisms for language protection (Law on State Language and regulations for its implementation).
- 5) Status of one of the official languages of the EU.

However, there are factors whose influence could be detrimental for maintenance of Latvian linguistic identity, e.g.:

- 1) Unstable economic situation and political fragmentation in the country.
- 2) Decrease of the total population of Latvians due to low birth-rates.
- 3) “Minority complex” among Latvians hindering the development of bilingualism among Russian-speaking community.
- 4) Higher economical value of the main languages in competition – Russian and English.
- 5) The presence of huge Russian language community enjoying linguistic self-sufficiency.
- 6) Tendencies of globalisation and linguistic imperialism, integration of Latvia into supra-national structures as the European Union and NATO.
- 7) Implementation of some international minority rights standards, ignoring post-colonial language situation in Latvia and ensuring protection of minority languages, mainly Russian, at the expense of Latvian.
- 8) Insufficient financing for the strategic programme for research and development of the Latvian language.
- 9) Uncertainty about the future working and official language regime in the EU institutions.

The language, or the linguistic identity, occupies a special place in the complex structure of multiple identities. Europe has built its cultural identity on two instruments: Latin and the Christian religion. Is English as *lingua franca* becoming a new linguistic identity element? During the second half of the 20th century, two contradictory tendencies are taking place. One was the intensification of the globalization of all aspects of human life and the other was the continuing affirmation of special human identities. These developments are clearly visible in two major areas: 1) the development of ethnic and national identities, and 2) the evolution of identities based on particular ideologies and religions. There is a great number of factors which can endanger language as a backbone of identity: supranational corporations, free flow of goods, services and working-force, migration, international mass media etc. There is one more identity which is not mentioned very often among other identities – the identity of economic well-being. It has a direct impact on the language. People who identify themselves with a language not having high economic value are forced to use a language with higher economic value, at least in some spheres. However, the trends of globalisation and linguistic imperialism are bringing forth a counter phenomenon. The number of organizations and movements protecting the local identity is growing dramatically despite the logics of the market. In this confusion of global networks and local identities language plays a critical role. Language is the last bastion of resistance and self-control, not just a tool of entrepreneurship. The preservation of the linguistic identity of a particular territory is the only way how to ensure the protection of linguistic diversity in the world.

It means that it is appropriate to raise the issue about future prospects of all EU languages, including the “official” ones. Will the respective communities be able to continue to use their language in the most significant sociolinguistic functions and to transmit it to the next generation under new circumstances? What is the role of the national governments, EU institutions and market forces in language maintenance or shift?

There is a difference between “old” and “new” member states' languages, too. Most of the “new member” states' languages have considerably less speakers than “old member” states' languages. The power of the most-spoken languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Italian) in the EU has been strengthened by great numbers of speakers worldwide and by developed traditions of teaching and learning as L2. Only Polish, Czech and Hungarian are more or less quantitatively competitive as concerns L1 speakers. None of newcomers' languages have developed traditions of teaching as a foreign language abroad (see Eurobarometer surveys). The fact that only five “big” languages have been chosen for creation of a *European Survey on Language Competence* as a means to collect the data necessary to construct a European level indicator would more and more deepen the gap among the “widely-taught” and “lesser-taught” EU official languages (*Framework for the European Survey on Language Competences*. COM (2007) 184 final).

We also have to pay attention to the fact that the percentage of minorities varies considerably among EU member states (e.g. till 5% in Austria, Denmark, Greece, Por-

tugal, Poland, more than 40% in Estonia and Latvia). Not all the inhabitants of the respective state are native or even second-language speakers of the official language (as in Latvia and Estonia).

Serious problems for some new member states' languages were caused by inappropriate application of Western European minority language rights standards to post-imperial language situations in Eastern Europe.

Education plays a pivotal role for development of individual and societal multilingualism. Early language learning and context and language integrated learning (according Latvia's terminology – bilingual education) are being used across Europe and provide greater opportunities within the school curriculum for exposure to other languages. Most of the EU states are unanimous that students should master at least two foreign languages and should be linguistically able to enter labour market or continue education in other states, too. The task of educational systems is not only to teach languages, but also to debunk common myths (excessive costs of EU language services, the benefits of one or few EU languages, harmful effect of bilingualism etc.).

There is a tendency to identify bi-or multilingual tertiary education with English-medium education. The risks to develop so-called subtractive bilingualism (acquisition of the second language at the cost of their mother tongue or the official language) are becoming higher and associates with English-medium education mostly. In the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and even Germany more and more graduates are fluent in English failing at the same time to function as professionals in the official language. The European Commission has been forced to admit that “it needs to be recognized that the trend in non-English-speaking countries towards teaching through the medium in English, instead of through the national or regional language, may have unforeseen consequences for the vitality of those languages” (*A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism*. COM (2005) 596 final: 6).

These unforeseen consequences may appear in various dimensions. If the language poorly functions in certain sociolinguistic domain (in this case – in higher education) this domain loss has a direct impact to several other domains (e.g. science) and quality of the respective language in general (e.g. terminology processes, academic writing, scientific popular literature et al.). Taking into account the hierarchically subordinated education system (pre-school, basic, secondary, vocational, higher, lifelong education) linguistic transformation in one phase inevitably would be followed by changes in language teaching and learning ideologies and practices throughout the system. Therefore sociolinguists being aware of the detrimental effects of subtractive bilingualism in higher education urge governments to take appropriate steps in order to protect full-blooded functioning of the official languages in all phases of systems of education.

Although language policy is in the first place the competence on the national policy levels here is an urgent need for more definite language policy in the European Union taking into account sociolinguistic realities: different economic (market) value of the official languages, historically established unofficial linguistic hierarchies. competition among “big” languages and different position of languages among identity elements. It

is possible that official state languages in sovereign states having status of the EU official languages may lose their positions under the harsh language competition in the Union. Taking into account all these aspects we could state that **small official languages of the EU form a special group not sufficiently protected neither by market forces (as so-called international languages), nor by international declarations, charters or conventions (as minority languages)**. It is also necessary to develop the principle of mutual responsibility: any restriction of the rights, for instance, of Latvian, would mean the precedent for restriction of Finnish, Lithuanian, Slovene and other smaller official languages.