

# Ethnicity and language tensions in Latvia

Carol Schmid

Received: 10 October 2006 / Accepted: 5 August 2007 / Published online: 10 October 2007  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

**Abstract** This article discusses important domestic and international consequences of language policy in Latvia. The first section briefly discusses the changing demographic situation in Latvia from 1940 to the present. The second section analyzes the debates related to the citizenship law and language law played by the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), the European Union (EU), and the Council of Europe (CoE). The third section traces the debate on language legislation, with particular emphasis on the role of the school law that required that students at minority (mostly Russian-speaking) secondary schools change to a substantially Latvian language format in 2004. Finally, I will evaluate and discuss recent attitudes on language, education and culture of the Latvian and Russian language communities.

**Keywords** Citizenship · Civic values · Education reform · Language · Language conflict · Language legislation · Language policy · Latvia · Political values · Russian speakers · Latvian speakers

## Introduction

One of the greatest challenges for Latvian language policy since independence in 1991 is to overcome the demographic legacy of the Soviet occupation (Galbreath 2006). European institutions, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE) have had a significant influence over amendments to the minority language policy. This article discusses important domestic and international consequences of language policy in Latvia. The first section briefly discusses the changing demographic situation in

---

C. Schmid (✉)  
Guilford Technical Community College, Jamestown, NC 27282, USA  
e-mail: clschmid@gtcc.edu

Latvia from 1940 to the present. The second section analyzes the debates related to the citizenship law and language law played by the OSCE, EU, and CoE. The third section traces the debate on language legislation, with particular emphasis on the role of the school law that required that students at minority (mostly Russian-speaking) secondary schools change to a substantially Latvian language format in 2004. Finally, I will evaluate and discuss recent attitudes on language, education and culture of the Latvian and Russian language communities.

## Social demographic overview

The Soviet era left a strong Russian imprint on Latvian society. The proportion of Russians in Latvia increased from 10% in 1940 to 33.8% in 1989 (Muiznieks and Kehris 2003). This ethno-demographic metamorphosis contributed to the decline in the Latvian share of its population from 75.5% in 1935 (Aasland and Flotten 2001) to 59% in at the beginning of 2007. At the beginning of 2007 over one third of the resident population was *Russian-speakers* (see Table 1). Russian-speakers include people from the former Soviet republics other than Russia, stemming from Soviet migration policy (Bjorklund 2006). The term Russian-speakers is used in this article to refer to ethnic Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians and others of Russian mother tongue. *Russians*, on the other hand refers to ethnic Russians who settled or were born in Latvia.

Citizenship is unevenly distributed among Latvia's resident ethnic groups. In order to vote and hold many public offices, one must be a citizen. By 2006 ethnic Latvians constituted nearly 73% of the citizen population, although their share of

**Table 1** Resident population and citizenship status in Latvia (data for January 1, 2007)

	Citizens of Latvia	Percent citizens	Resident population	Percent of total population
Latvians	1,345,363	99.8	1,348,344	59.0
Russians	362,902	56.1	646,567	28.3
Belarusians	30,694	35.9	85,434	3.7
Ukrainians	16,575	28.7	57,794	2.5
Poles	40,807	74.4	54,831	2.4
Lithuanians	18,195	58.6	31,034	1.4
Jews	6,540	63.3	10,336	0.5
Roma	7,956	93.0	8,559	0.4
Germans	2,216	52.4	4,226	0.2
Tartar	762	26.3	2,898	0.1
Armenians	1,006	37.2	2,707	0.1
Estonians	1,514	69.4	2,508	0.1
Others	16,086	54.2	29,633	1.3
Total	1,850,616	81.0	2,284,871	100.0

Source: "Integration policy in Latvia a multi-faceted approach," Ministry of foreign affairs of the republic of Latvia. <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/4641/4642/4649>

the resident population was about 59% (Integration Policy in Latvia 2007). Over 40% of the large Russian population is not citizens (44%) (see Table 1). Belarusian and Ukrainians have lower percentages of citizens in Latvia. However, because Russians constitute 28% of the population, friction between Latvians and Russians is more evident than among other groups. For this reason, the article will concentrate on Russian–Latvian relations. The civil rights of the large Russian minority are matters of dispute and strong differences of opinion particularly toward government policy. Latvia was exposed to a massive flow of immigrants.

Ethnic Russians are concentrated in the major urban centers. They encompass a disproportionate percentage of residents in the seven largest cities. Russians make up around 43% of the population in Riga, the capital, approximately 55% in Daugavpils, about 32% in Jelgava, around 37% in Jūrmala, approximately 35% in Liepāja, 50% in Rezekne and about 32% in Ventspils (Euromosaic study 2006). The countryside is largely inhabited by Latvians. The higher proportion of city dwellers among non-ethnic Latvians is not a new phenomenon. The cities of the eastern Baltic have always been multiethnic. The present minority problem is, however, of different proportions. More than 50 years of Soviet occupation, policies of linguistic Russification, and the precarious demographic situation have exacerbated the debate over citizenship, language policy, education policy, and national identity.

Latvian society is characterized by a fairly large degree of intermarriage. In 2000, 24% of ethnic Russian citizens had ethnic Latvian spouses. In contrast 11% of ethnic Latvians had Russian spouses. However, despite the significant degree of intermixing (in the work environment 90% of non-citizens and 96% of citizens have Latvian colleagues) the language of inter-ethnic communication in most cases is still Russian (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences 2001). In order to promote its language and identity, the Latvian government restricted citizenship and fostered a language policy to promote the interests of ethnic Latvians. The major arena of conflict has been between the Latvian government and the organized Russian interest groups rather than the masses of the two communities.

## Language policy

In order to understand language relations in Latvia it is necessary to appreciate the legacy of Soviet language policy. More than 50 years of Soviet occupation, policies of linguistic Russification and the precarious demographic situation has intensified the debate over language relations. Allard's (1984) theory states that a minority is determined by the feelings of language speakers as having a subordinate status to those of another language. If this theory is employed, Latvian speakers were certainly a language minority during the half-century of Soviet domination. They continuously lost status though growing migration and official language policy, though nominally they were a majority language in Latvia (see Schmid et al. 2004). Ozolins (1999: 10) observed that the influx of monolingual Russian speakers who expected to work and be served in Russian created a situation in which locals were

obliged to learn Russian. As a result ethnic Latvians became bilingual, while most Russian speakers continued to be monolingual.

There were some mitigating factors that helped the survival of the Latvian language. Due to the later incorporation in the USSR and the development of the language, Latvia, and the other Baltic states escaped the imposition of Cyrillic, like Kazakh, Kirgiz, Azerbaijan, and Moldavian, which had to drop the Arabic and Roman alphabets (Veisbergs 1993). Since 1945 there were parallel education institutions. Russian-speaking language schools were separated from others and children in Russian-language schools were educated according to the 10-year Russian model. To a large extent, the outcome of Soviet nationality policy was the establishment of the two-school sub-system.

Compulsory education was available at all levels in the Latvian language. However, general education was more and more Russified, with the number of Russian classes exceeding Latvian for Latvian pupils. Latvian-speaking children had Russian four times a week and had to stay in school one year longer. Russian-speaking children had classes in Latvian once or twice a week (Passport to Social Cohesion 2001).<sup>1</sup> Priedite (2005: 409–410) argues “The choice of school categorized students and divided the society. Children who attended a Russian school (in Latvia) had more chances of success. If, on the other hand, parents chose a Latvian school, they and their offspring were labeled as ‘narrow nationalists’.”

A second factor discussed relating to the survival of Latvian by Veisbergs (1993) relates to concentration of the Latvian population. Most ethnic Latvians stayed in the traditional territory of Latvia. Lack of voluntary geographic mobility from Latvia meant that the language situation stabilized after 1970 with slower loss of the Latvian population (1970, 56.8%, 1979, 53.7%, 1989, 52%, 2007, 59%). Finally, and perhaps the most difficult factor, to define according to Veisbergs (1993), was the strong moral belief in the supremacy of the Latvian language and culture over the Soviet Russian culture and language.

Language friction is related to the asymmetrical bilingualism that existed in Latvia under Soviet domination. According to the 1989 Soviet census, 68% of all Latvians claimed a command of Russian, while only 22% of all Russians had knowledge of Latvian (Jubulis 2001). Language was high on the pro-independence program of the Popular Front, an anti-communist and pro-independence coalition. In 1989 the Soviet Latvian parliament adopted a Language Law making Latvian the State official language. The law envisaged a 3-year transition period during which the non-Latvian population working in the state sector had to learn some Latvian language (Veisbergs 1993). The 1989 Law on Language was essentially kept in tact when the Latvian Republic was re-established in 1991. It received scant attention from the EU and international community that was consumed with the citizenship issue until October 1997.

According to Druviete (2002a, b), the goal of the language policy was to prevent language shift and to change language hierarchy in public life. From the beginning the idea of a bilingual state was completely rejected. Among Baltic language

<sup>1</sup> Veisbergs puts the language requirements even higher. Russian instruction schools had 18 classes of Latvian a month, while Latvian schools had 44 classes of Russian a month.

specialists Quebec language legislation was well known, as early as 1988.<sup>2</sup> Bill 22 and the Charter of the French Language (commonly referred to as Bill 101) became the cornerstone of Latvian linguistic legislation (Druviete 2002a, b; Schmid et al. 2004). The main sectors of language intervention were language use in State government and administrative bodies, in meetings and office-work, in use in names and in information and language use in education (Druviete 2002a). It is interesting that the Quebec legislation was charged with some of the same debate and hostility that has been apparent in the Latvian legislation.<sup>3</sup>

Grin (1993) found many similarities between the 1989 language laws in Estonia and Latvia with Quebec's Bill 101 (the Charter of the French) in the three territories. In all three cases the ethnic majority (Latvian, Estonian and French) was attempting to limit the influence of a majority language (Russian in Latvia and Estonia and English in Quebec). The language laws were put in place to check the influence of a language that was a majority language in a larger federation. Although there are many similarities between the demolinguistic situations of the two languages, one major difference was the fact that all Canadians born on Canada soil became citizens—the principle of *ius soli*—so that, the citizenship issue was removed from acrimonious debate (Schmid et al. 2004).

The Latvian language law that was eventually passed in December 1999 followed the same pressure as the citizenship law from the European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe (CoE) before a reasonable compromise was reached. European Commission recommendations, which were based on the Europe Agreement, were designed to make certain that Latvia employed a balanced approach to language proficiency requirements, particularly in the private sphere (Van Elswege 2004). In October of 1997, a new draft that expanded government regulation of language use in the private sector was passed in a first reading in the Saeima (the Latvian parliament). In 1998 a highly critical report on the draft law came out from the European Commission (EC) and other affiliated organizations. During March 1998 representatives from the EC, OSCE and the Council of Europe issued another very disparaging report on the draft law observing that it did not take sufficient account of the distinction between public and private spheres and was in risk of contravening internal legal standards of human rights, particularly freedom of expression. In February 1999, the new Saeima after taking office conducted a second reading of the same law. There was again criticism from international organizations. In April 1999 Van der Stoep, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities wrote a

<sup>2</sup> Ina Druviete, one of the architects of the language legislation told me that the texts were available in French in 1988 and translated into Latvian by Professor Bankavs. With Estonian colleagues, contact was established with the Office de la langue française. Jacques Maurais, from the Office de la langue française attended a large international conference "Language Policy in the Baltic States" in Riga in 1992 (private communication, April 26, 2003). Maurais also edited a special issue of on the language situation of the three states. Jacques Maurais, (ed.). 1998. "Les Politiques Linguistiques des Pays Baltes" *Terminogramme*. Special issue, July.

<sup>3</sup> Concern for the future of the French language began to be expressed in Quebec during the 1960s after the birth rate declined during the Quiet Revolution. Immigrants tended to adopt English rather than French and to send their children to English schools. Some demographers predicted that Montreal ran the risk of becoming a mainly English-speaking city.

letter pointing out that Latvia would have potential problems in terms of accession to the EU, particularly relating to the functioning of the single market (Muiznieks and Kehris 2003).

Vaira Vike-Freiberga was elected Latvian president on July 8, 1999. On the same day parliament voted for the contested language law. Under continued pressure from the EU and OSCE in her first official act as head of state she vetoed the controversial language law and sent it back to parliament for reconsideration. She observed the last minute changes to the text-raised questions about how far the new law would satisfy EU requirements (European Report 1999). Drawing on over four decades of living in Canada, including the turbulent time of Bill 101 in Quebec, she drew an analogy with the Canadian situation. "It's much like law 101 in Quebec...When you have a language law meant to promote the survival of the language, you have to be very careful . . . so you don't interfere with civil liberties" (Stevenson 1999: 1). The legislation was modeled in part on Quebec's Bill 101, including the sign law that was challenged in Canadian courts. Finally on December 9, a slim minority of 52 deputies passed a final version of the State Language Law (1999). In order to avoid further confrontation the new law left a number of important provisions to be decided by the executive. The law sanctioned government regulation of language use in the private sphere only if there was a "legitimate government interest" (Article 2 §2).

Although the new language law was ruled to be essentially in conformity with EU regulations, problems still existed. Most of these have to do with the implementation of the law and the problems of distinguishing between what is a legitimate government interest in imposing the Latvian language in various spheres of private life. The OSCE argued for a narrow interpretation and limited intrusion in the private sector to regulate language use. Latvian officials, on the other hand tended to adopt a broader interpretation of the law (Muiznieks and Kehris 2003).

One recent example included a bill to require candidates to state their level of Latvian-language proficiency on a written form as a way of informing voters about the candidate's abilities to represent constituents. The bill had the effect of limiting a disproportionate number of non-Latvian mother tongue potential representatives (primarily Russian-speakers). The constitution states that Latvian citizenship and a minimum age of 21 are the only requirements to run for office. Under heavy pressure the Saeima voted overwhelmingly in favor of dropping the disputed language provision in May 2002 (City Paper 2002; European Report 2002). In October 2006, the Limited Election Observation Mission of the OSCE and the Limited Short Term Election Commission of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly concluded that voting materials were not produced in Russian despite the large Russian-speaking population. The report also noted the presence of a large number of non-citizens who do not have voting rights (Integration Monitor 2006).

Until June 6, 2003 there were language restrictions in broadcasting. The Radio and Television Law (1995) Article 19.5 restricted the use of languages other than Latvian in commercial broadcasts to a maximum of 25% of broadcasting time. The Latvian Constitutional Court ruled that the law violated freedom of speech and struck down these clauses to the law aimed at restricting broadcasts in Russian by a 5–2 vote in 2003. The chief judge remarked "It is clearly a violation of freedom of

speech and freedom of information and would not hold up under international law” (Baltic Times 2003: 4).

Privacy concerns are a second area that blurs the distinction of ‘private life and freedom of expression.’ Article 19 of the State Language Law (1999) requires that “Personal names shall be reproduced in accordance with the Latvian language traditions and shall be transliterated according to the accepted norms of the literary language” (State Language Law, Article 19 § 2 & 3). The Latvian Constitutional Court rejected two modifications of the spelling of names in Latvian.<sup>4</sup> The Mentzen court held

...that the threat to functioning of the Latvian language as a unified system if the spelling of foreign personal names in the documents only in their original form was allowed, is much greater than the discomfort a person may experience in the case of the surname in the passport is reproduced according to the traditions of the Latvian language. Under the above circumstances functioning of the Latvian language as a unified system is a social necessity in Latvia and not a voluntary caprice of the state power (*Mentzen v. Latvia*, 2001: 17).

These two cases, *Kuharec v. Latvia* and *Mentzen v. Latvia* (European Commission Human Rights Court 2002) were appealed to the European Commission Human Rights court. The Human Rights Court rejected the two cases on February 7, 2005. The Court recognized that each country has the right to enact regulations on the use of its official language in personal identity documents and other official documents (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2005).

Despite its difficult historical and political heritage, Latvia was able to escape violent ethnic conflicts and under pressure from the EU, OSCE, and CoE fashion a language law that met the requirements of the international community, if somewhat grudgingly. Post-independence language policy can only be understood in response to the weighing of two significant factors—the presence of large groups of Russian speakers on one hand, and Latvia’s aspiration for membership in the European Union and on the other (Järve 2002).

Latvian legislation on citizenship and language legislation and implementation went through three major transitions between 1990 and 2003. The first stage dealt with citizenship, specifically with who would be included or excluded in the renewed state. Brubaker (1992) observed that interwar statehood, and subsequent refusal to recognize Latvia’s incorporation into the Soviet Union has conditioned the politics of citizenship. The founders of Latvia argued that legally speaking Latvia was not a new state and, therefore, citizenship could be strictly restricted to interwar citizens and their descendants. This essential law was only broadened under pressure from the EU and the OSCE. Despite liberalizing of the citizenship law, only about 81% of permanent residents were Latvian citizens by August 2006.

There have been some positive developments with respect to naturalization. By the end of May 2007, a total of 124, 153 persons have been naturalized, since the adoption of the citizenship law took effect in February 1, 1995. This included

<sup>4</sup> Since July 2001 Latvian residents are able to appeal constitutional issues to the Constitutional Court.



13,273 children (Naturalization Board 2007). In a referendum on 3 October 1998, a majority of the Latvian electorate approved liberalization of the citizenship law. The 1998 “Amendments to the Law on Citizenship” granted recognition of children, who were born in Latvia after August 21, 1991 if their permanent place of residence was Latvia, they had not been sentenced for more than 5 years for a crime, and they were stateless persons (Citizenship Law, 1999 sec. 3 §1.1–3).

The second transition related to the passage and implementation of the language law. Like the citizenship law it was contested and changed only under pressure from external EU and European organizations. Many of the problems of the language law revolved around the distinction between public and private spheres of life and freedom of expression. The main areas of language intervention concerned language use in State government and administrative bodies, meetings and publications, and signage in buildings.

The third transition is related to major minority institutions, primarily the change to majority Latvian language in Russian secondary schools. The schools are one of the last major institutions dominated by Russian speakers. The ongoing controversy is not only about language, but also about power relations in Latvian society. Debates over language policy are often grounded in identity and control issues rather than pedagogy (Schmid 2001). Issues touching on personal and group security, identity, and recognition, and especially control over the political process are often the masked sources of conflict. Latvia is not alone in dealing with these issues.

## Education and language conflict

The most contentious issue concerning the rights of minorities at the beginning of the 21st century has to do with schooling in one’s mother tongue. The EU monitoring report on protection of minorities in Latvia echoed this opinion observing “Education reform is one of the most controversial issues in the context of integration as well as in the area of minority rights” (Minority Protection in Latvia 2002: 326).

Bilingualism has made some inroads in Latvia. In the 2005/2006 academic year there were 976 general education schools in Latvia—74% taught in Latvian, 16% in Russian, and almost 10% in both Latvian and Russian (Minority Education in Latvia 2007). Only 0.4% used other languages. In general the population is bilingual or multilingual. In 2000 about 75% of minority residents in Latvia had some Latvian language skills. Approximately the same percentages of Latvians were fluent in Russian. About 75–80% of the population in Latvia is at least bilingual in comparison to 44% in the European Union member states (Druviete 2002a). The percentage of non-Latvians who do not know Latvian at all decreased from 22% in 1996 to 12% at the beginning of 2004. About 40% of the non-Latvian respondents in 2003–2004 had the lowest level of reported knowledge of the Latvian language (Zepa and Klave 2004). The limited degree of fluency of Russian-speakers in Latvian remains a problem for many Latvians.

Latvian language legislation attempts to consolidate Latvian as the state language. The 1998 Education Law (1998) envisioned a substantial shift of Latvian language



instruction in state-funded secondary and vocational schools by 2004, starting with the 10th grade. The rapid transition without substantial consultation with minorities caused concern and protest (Minority Protection in Latvia 2001; Wilson 2002). Zepa et al. (2004: 7–8) identified at least a dozen major protests against the amendment to the education law in Latvia between January and May 2004. The Russian-opposition, People's Harmony Party and the Latvian Association for the Support for Russian Language Schools played an important role in planning the protests.

In May 2003, the Saeima (parliament) adopted the education program developed by the Education Ministry, which stipulated that 60% of the secondary school program should be taught in Latvian and 40% in the minority language (Hogan-Brun 2006). On February 5, 2004 the education law was adopted by the parliament on the third and final reading, while protests were held outside of Parliament and the Riga castle (home of the president of Latvia). On February 13, President Vaira Vike-Freiberga signed the amendment into law (Zepa et al. 2004). However, the policy was not clarified soon enough to pacify the large minority language community. For many minority language individuals it appeared to be a 'top down' policy.

Prior to the passage of the amendment, President Vike-Freiberga attempted to decrease tensions in the two communities by reiterating the purpose of the reform program as one to guarantee "each and every child, regardless of nationality," (the ability to be able to) "freely speak Latvian after graduating from school. Therefore, everyone would have an equal opportunity to make their career both in the state and private sector" (LETA 2003).

In contrast to the secondary school program, the bilingual education plan for primary school students has faced little public criticism. This program entailed a gradual transition to Latvian.<sup>5</sup> The secondary school program has generated significant opposition from the Russian-speaking community. The lack of clarity, slowness of the Ministry of Education and Science to react to concerns of the Russian-speaking community, perceived threat of assimilation and loss of power make the secondary school issue an intractable issue (Human Rights in Latvia 2002). The segregation of information spaces in Latvia, particularly the mass media, has also provided different understandings of the purpose and implementation of the school language law (Hogan-Brun 2006).

### **Attitudes toward language, education and lifestyles of ethnic Latvians and Russians**

In this section, I will examine attitudinal differences toward language, education, and lifestyles of the Latvian and Russian population in Latvia. Spolsky (2004)

---

<sup>5</sup> There are four models of bilingual education curricula for primary schools that differ in terms of the proportion of classes to be taught in Russian or other national languages and/or Latvian. National minority schools opt for one of these four curricula or prepare their own. The Education Law stipulated that a bilingual curriculum had to be implemented from in all primary schools starting with the 2002/2003 academic year (Minority Education in Latvia 2007).

argues that identifying the salient values and beliefs is important in understanding the complex language situation of a society.

The questions in Table 2 are taken from three major studies carried out by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (Zepa and Klave 2004; Zepa et al. 2005, 2006). Questions 1–2 are taken from the 2003 to 2004 Language survey. Approximately 2000 respondents were queried on language usage and language fluency in October–November 2003. Questions 3–6 are from a study entitled “Ethnopolitical tension in Latvia.” The sample was made up of 1,000 respondents—500 Latvians and 500 non-Latvians. The survey was conducted in March and April 2004. Question 7 and 8 are from the third survey, “Integration Practice and Perspectives” which took place between March and April 2006 and questioned approximately 1,000 respondents. All three surveys queried Latvian residents aged 15–75 and used a multi-stage random sampling method to insure a representative sample of ethnic Latvians and Russians in addition to ‘other’ nationalities. Together the other nationalities make up 12% of Latvian residents (see Table 1). Questions 1 and 6 on Table 2 compare Latvians and others (Russian and others are taken together). All other questions used in Table 2 compare ethnic Latvians and ethnic Russians. Tension is highest between these two groups.

Table 2 analyzes attitudes toward language, education, and acculturation. Question 1 reports on language knowledge of the Latvian and Russian populations in Latvia. Self-reported language skills illustrate a significant gulf between language knowledge and desired command of Latvian, Russian, and English. Latvians are significantly more likely to be fluent in Russian at the intermediate level or above than Russians in Latvia. This asymmetrical bilingualism has been a longstanding concern for Latvians. Almost twice as many Latvians have an intermediate or fluent knowledge of Russian (83%) as Russians and others have the same knowledge of the Latvian language (43%). The ‘other’ category is primarily made up of immigrants from the former Soviet Republics who shared a common language, Russian (Priedite 2005).

Question 2 taps another aspect of language. The question looks at the importance of having a good command of Latvian, Russian and English. Ethnic Latvians overwhelmingly think it is important to have a good command of Latvian. Despite the fact that many are fluent in Russian, English is seen as a very important language to learn. This is likely related to the salience of English in business and popular culture, particularly since Latvia joined the EU in 2004. In contrast only 86% of Russians respond that it is important to have a good command of Russian. It is not clear why there is not a higher percentage of Russians indicating the importance of their language. It is possible that the Russian group assumes that one will have a good command of Russian.

One also sees a gap between the importance Russians in Latvia place on having a good command of Latvian and the actual reality. While 86% think it is important to know Latvian, this is less likely to be the case than Latvians knowing Russian, as we have seen in the previous question. Latvians seem to distance themselves from the Russian language. Only 61% say it is important to have a good command of Russian. The English language is becoming a salient language to know for both groups. The desire to have a good command of English is only slightly lower for

**Table 2** Views on language, education and lifestyles of Latvian and Russian populations in Latvia

	Latvians (%)	<i>n</i>	Russians (%)	<i>n</i>
1. Have a intermediate knowledge or fluency in the language <sup>a</sup>		1162		842
a. Latvian	–		43*	
b. Russian	83		–	
2. Important that one has a good command of <sup>a</sup>		1175		642
a. Latvian	98		86	
b. Russian	61		83	
c. English	81		73	
3. Attitude toward introducing Russian as a second language <sup>b</sup>		510		369
a. Positive	19		87	
b. Negative	77		8	
c. Hard to say, no answer	5		5	
4. Views about education reforms in minority schools <sup>b</sup>		510		369
a. Positive	77		26	
b. Negative	18		70	
c. Hard to say, no answer	6		3	
5. Differences in lifestyles <sup>b</sup>		510		369
a. Rather or very great	36		23	
b. No difference or not very great	61		74	
c. Hard to say, no answer	3		3	
6. People of different traditions and habits cannot really be true residents of Latvia, even if they have lived here for many years <sup>b</sup>		510		508
a. Agree	42		15*	
b. Disagree	54		81*	
c. Hard to say, no answer	4		4*	
7. Latvian language and culture in Latvia is endangered <sup>c</sup>		652		262
a. Threatened	44		17	
b. Not threatened	53		78	
c. Hard to say, no answer	4		5	
8. Russian language and culture in Latvia is endangered <sup>c</sup>		652		262
a. Threatened	16		45	
b. Not threatened	75		51	
c. Hard to say, no answer	9		5	

\* Includes Russian and other groups

<sup>a</sup> Zepa and Klave, Language 2003–2004. Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2004

<sup>b</sup> Zepa et al., “Ethnopolitical tension in Latvia.” Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2005

<sup>c</sup> Zepa et al., “Integration practice and perspective.” Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2006

Russians (73%) than for ethnic Latvians (81%). Question 3 is another way of showing the saliency of language in Latvia. While Russians are strongly for introducing Russian as a second language (87%), Latvians are firmly against it (77%).

In an earlier study Karklins and Zepa (1993) found that state and ethnic identity is more pronounced among Latvians than it is among Russians and other ethnic minorities. Table 2 also highlights this conclusion. Bjorklund (2006) obtained a similar result in a comparative study of Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. She found that Latvians had the strongest support of the three countries for the mother tongue criterion of national affiliation. Only 8% of Latvians in the sample considered that residency makes one a Latvian; as opposed to 27% of Russian-speakers. A similar pattern emerged in answer to a question on the sufficiency of being born in Latvia: 33% of Latvians, as opposed to 51% of Russians, think being born in Latvia is a sufficient criterion.

The different attitudes toward language and understanding of the nation have influenced other institutions. Secondary education has been the most recent area of conflict between the two language groups. While Latvians tend to see the education reform of 2004 positively (77%), the Russian population views them equally negatively (70%). Widely different opinions help to explain the protests that occurred immediately prior to and after the 60/40 amendment was adopted for the last three years of secondary school that was discussed in the previously section.

Both Latvian and non-Latvian social scientists have warned against emphasizing the permanent dominance of a nationality conflict in Latvia (Tabuns et al. 2001; Smith et al. 1998). Despite the conflict over language, Latvia (and Estonia) has a “much greater degree of social stability than is the case in some other post-Soviet states...” Tabuns et al. (2001: 117). Question 5 in part confirms this statement. A majority of both language groups believe the differences in lifestyles are not very great. Russians see greater similarity in life styles between the two groups (74%), however, a majority of Latvians (61%) also say lifestyles are not very great or there are no differences. An earlier study by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences in 2000 also confirms these findings. Both Latvians and Russians have a strong attachment to their town or city and Latvia and although they are less attached to Europe, their feelings are very similar (34% of Latvians and 35% of Russians say they are very or fairly attached to Europe). This is also true for citizens and non-citizen residents (in 2000, 88% of citizens and 81% of non-citizens residents felt a close or very close attachment to Latvia) (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences 2001).

Question 6 is consistent with other answers showing less openness of the Latvian population. A significantly higher percentage of Russians and other nationalities (81%) than Latvians (54%) reject the statement that ‘people of different traditions and habits can be true residents of Latvia’. Zepa and colleagues conclude that Latvians tend toward self-isolation and to be more cautious than non-Latvians. Self-isolation can be seen as a desire to avoid conflict (Zepa et al. 2005: 44–48). “Among Latvians, the sense of endangerment is also enhanced by psychological insecurities, a lack of self-esteem, and a shortage of self-confidence. These are factors which have remained in place since Soviet times” (Zepa et al. 2005: 48).

Latvia is characterized by a reciprocal feeling of threat among the two major ethno-linguistic groups. About 44% of Latvians feel that the survival of the Latvian language and culture in Latvia is under threat. A similar percentage (45%) of Russians believed that the survival of Russian language and culture in Latvia is endangered. Latvians and Russians each believe that the same threat is not apparent in the opposite language and culture. About 75% of Latvians do not think the Russian language or culture is threatened, for Russians the response was 78% with respect to the Latvian language and culture.

At the beginning of the 21st century language tensions in Latvia are related to very different attitudes toward language and education reforms. As ethnic Latvians have begun to speak Latvian much more widely in interpersonal contacts, and more aggressively insist that non-Latvians learn the Latvian language, there appears evidence of retrenchment and hardening of the language situation.

## Summary and conclusion

In a little more than a decade and a half Latvia legislated and amended laws on citizenship and language. The European Community, the Organization for Security and Cooperation, and the Council of Europe have exerted pressure to democratize these laws. In each case legislators, often grudgingly, complied. The transition, in contrast to many ex-Soviet territories has been peaceful and without incident. In this respect Latvia and the other Baltic states provide excellent models in the transition to democracy. The unflinching desire to join Western Europe by all factions in Latvia undoubtedly helped to make this possible. In the words of Milward, "Europe has rescued the nation states, or the nation states have rescued themselves by agreeing to some measure of supernational integration" (quoted in Kohli 2000: 126–127).

Under pressure from the OSCE, EU, and CoE the President vetoed an initial version of the language law in July 1999. Parliament revised and brought the language law into harmony with international norms governing freedom of expression and sanctity of private life. The State Language Law was passed on December 9, 1999. However, many of the crucial issues of language life were excluded from the law and left for decision to the Cabinet of Ministers (Järve 2002). A bill to require candidates to state their level of Latvian-language proficiency was one recent attempt of limiting a disproportionate number of non-Latvian representatives. This intrusion into the private sphere, particularly since the constitution only required Latvian citizenship and a minimum age of 21, was strongly contested by European and international bodies. In May 2002 the requirement was dropped. Positive progress has also been made in the June 2003 decision by the Latvian Constitutional Court, which repealed clauses in the Radio and Television Law restricting broadcasts in languages other than Latvian.

Unlike the initial citizenship and language laws, the OSCE Commissioner on National Minorities has affirmed that the 60/40 solution is in line with minority rights standards (Minority Education in Latvia 2007). Therefore it is unlikely that external pressure will change this policy. Several demonstrations, often led by the

Headquarters for the Defense of Russian-Language Schools have challenged the new imposition of the 60/40 formula in Russian secondary schools.

There are both reasons for concern and optimism in this latest transition of public policy. A positive step was taken when Latvia ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 2005. There are reservations to the Latvian Framework that stipulate that only the Latvian language may be used for street signs and in the communications of local government authorities. The document only applies to citizen national minorities (not resident non-citizens). These requirements are in keeping with European standards (Council of Europe 2005). Another positive sign is the higher levels of bilingualism among younger generation of Russian speakers (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences 2002). While asymmetrical bilingualism still exists, the younger generation is more likely to speak Latvian than older generations (Zepa et al. 2004). Both Latvians and Russians agree that their lifestyles are similar. Furthermore, the Russian population believes that it is important to have a good command of Latvian.

On the other hand, there is an unmistakable split in the language groups with respect to the importance of language issues. This split is apparent in attitudes toward the education reform, introducing Russian as a second language and the degree to which the two ethno-linguistic groups believe their language and culture are endangered. Many Latvians feel a sense of isolation and as a threatened group within their own country. Part of this isolation and sense of threat is related to historical factors, asymmetrical bilingualism, and the relative strength of Russian in comparison to Latvian.

Fishman aptly summarizes the dilemma faced by Latvian policy makers with respect to promoting ethnolinguistic democracy. “Just where and when the limits of democratic rights should be drawn, be they linguistic or more general, can well be viewed as a dilemma within the democratic ethos itself.... Languages are not merely innocent means of communication. They stand for or symbolize peoples...whether, where, when and how to draw the line...between ethnolinguistic democracy, on the one hand, and ethnolinguistic equality, on the other, is often a matter fraught with tension, guilt and outright conflict as well” (Fishman 1995: 51).

As a keystone in a larger Europe, Latvia could establish an important precedent for integrating the Russian-speaking minority and have an importance disproportionate to its size. The prospects and problems of European integration and recent changes in political and economic alignments lend particular urgency to the ways in which citizenship, language, and identity are negotiated in the public sphere.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to thank Brigita Zepa for comments on an earlier version of this paper and the Fulbright organization for financial support during Spring semester 2003. I would also like to thank my graduate students in the Sociology of Language class at the University of Latvian, Riga class for helping me to understand ethnic and language relations in Latvia.

## References

- Aasland, A., & Flotten, T. (2001). Ethnicity and social exclusion in Estonia and Latvia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53, 1023–1050.

- Allard, E. (1984). What constitutes a language minority? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 5, 195–205.
- Baltic Institute of Social Sciences. (2001). On the way to a civic society—2000. Survey of Latvian inhabitants. In conjunction with the Naturalization Board of the Republic of Latvia. Riga.
- Baltic Institute of Social Sciences. (2002). Analysis of the implementation of bilingual education. Riga.
- Baltic Times. (2003). Broadcast language law repealed. June 12.
- Bjorklund, F. (2006). The East European ‘ethnic nation’—myth or reality? *European Journal of Political Research*, 45, 93–121.
- Brubaker, W. R. (1992). Citizenship struggles in Soviet successor states. *International Migration Review*, 26, 269–291.
- City Paper. (2002). Latvia’s Saeima legislature voted overwhelmingly in favor of dropping a disputed language provision. Riga: Baltic News Service. May 9. Accessed June 29, 2007 [http://www.balticsww.com/wkcrier/1130\\_0531\\_02.htm](http://www.balticsww.com/wkcrier/1130_0531_02.htm)
- Council of Europe. (2005). Latvia ratifies the framework convention for the protection of national minorities. June 6. Accessed June 28, 2007. [http://www.coe.int/t/e/human\\_rights/Minorities/1\\_GENERAL\\_PRESENTATION/1\\_News/News\(2005\)023%20Latvia\\_ratifies.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/Minorities/1_GENERAL_PRESENTATION/1_News/News(2005)023%20Latvia_ratifies.asp)
- Druviete, I. (2002a). The future of the Latvian language in the enlarged European Union. Language, literature and translation—manipulations (special issue). *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1, 34–46.
- Druviete, I. (2002b). Language policy and the protection of the state language in Latvia. World Congress on Language Policy. Barcelona, April 16–20. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://www.linguapax.org/congres/taller/taller3/Druviete.html>
- Education Law of 1998. (1998). Accessed October 5, 2006. [http://www.minelres.lv/NationalLegislation/Latvia/Latvia\\_Education\\_English.htm](http://www.minelres.lv/NationalLegislation/Latvia/Latvia_Education_English.htm)
- Euromosaic study. (2006). Russian in Latvia. European Commission. Accessed June 19, 2007. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/languages/langmin/euromosaic/lat3\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/languages/langmin/euromosaic/lat3_en.html)
- European Commission Human Rights Court. (2002). Kuharec v. Latvia, No 71557/01 and Mentzen v. Latvia, No 71074/01. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://www.echr.coe.int/Eng/InformationNotes/INFONOTENo45.htm>
- European Report. (1999). EU/Latvia: Questions raised as government changes. July 10.
- European Report. (2002). EU/Latvia: commission welcome change. May 15: 524.
- Fishman, J. A. (1995). On the limits of ethnolinguistic democracy. In: T. Skutnabb-Kangas (Ed.), *Linguistic human rights*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Galbreath, D. (2006). European integration through democratic conditionality: Latvia in the context of minority rights. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 14, 69–87.
- Grin, F. (1993). The relevance of thresholds in language maintenance and shift: A theoretical examination. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 14, 375–395.
- Hogan-Brun, G. (2006). At the interface of language ideology and practice: The public discourse surrounding the 2004 education reform in Latvia. *Language Policy*, 5, 313–333.
- Human Rights in Latvia in 2002. (2003). Latvian center for Human Rights and ethnic studies. March. Riga, Latvia. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?f=332>
- Integration Monitor. (2006). Integration and minority information service. Latvian Center for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies. October 10. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://www.humanrights.org.lv/html/monitor/28918.html>
- Integration Policy in Latvia A Multi-Faceted Approach. (2007). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/4641/4642/4649>
- Järve, P. (2002). Two waves of language laws in the Baltic States: Changes of rationale? *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 33, 78–110.
- Jubulis, M. A. (2001). *Nationalism and democratic transition: The politics of citizenship and language in post-Soviet Latvia*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Karklins, R., & Zepa, B. (1993). Religious-centered multiethnic societies. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40, 33–46.
- Kohli, M. (2000). The battleground’s of European identity. *European Societies*, 2, 113–137.
- LETA. (2003). Education reform will be good for Russian-speaking students—president. May 5. Latvian National News Agency. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://www.leta.lv/eng/index.php>
- Maurais, J. (1998). Les politiques Linguistiques des Pays Baltes. Terminogramme. Special Issue, July.
- Mentzen v. Latvia. (2001). Case No. 2001-04-0103. Riga, December 21.



- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia. (2005). Latvia wins the cases of *Mencena v. Latvia* and *Kuhareca v. Latvia* at the European Court of Human Rights. Embassy of the Republic of Latvia. February 8. Accessed June 23, 2007. <http://www.Mfa.gov.lv/en/Copenhagen/news/latvian-news/template/?pg=5465>
- Minority Education in Latvia. (2007). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/4641/4642/4643>
- Minority Protection in Latvia. (2001). An assessment of the national program, The integration of society in Latvia. Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Minority Protection. Open Society Institute. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?f=304>
- Minority Protection in Latvia. (2002). An assessment of the national program, The integration of society in Latvia. Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Minority Protection. Open Society Institute. Accessed June 29, 2007. [http://ftp.osi.hu/euaccession/2002\\_m\\_latvia.pdf](http://ftp.osi.hu/euaccession/2002_m_latvia.pdf)
- Muiznieks, N., & Brands Kehris, I. (2003). The European Union, democratization and minorities in Latvia. In: P. J. Kubicek (Ed.), *The European Union and democratization* (pp. 30–50). London: Routledge.
- Naturalization Board. (2007). Facts and statistics on residents. Accessed June 28, 2007 [http://www.np.gov.lv/index.php/en=faki\\_en&saite=residents.en](http://www.np.gov.lv/index.php/en=faki_en&saite=residents.en)
- Ozolins, U. (1999). Between Russian and European hegemony: current language policy in the Baltic States. *Current Issues in Language and Society*, 6, 6–47.
- Passport to Social Cohesion and Economic Prosperity 2000. (2001). Riga: Soros Foundation. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?f=466>
- Priedite, A. (2005). Surveying language attitudes and practices in Latvia. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 26, 409–424.
- Radio and Television Law. (1995). Accessed June 29, 2007. [http://www.policy.hu/myagmar/Latvia\\_Radio\\_and\\_TV\\_Law.PDF](http://www.policy.hu/myagmar/Latvia_Radio_and_TV_Law.PDF)
- Schmid, C. L. (2001). *The politics of language: Conflict, identity and cultural pluralism in comparative perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schmid, C., Zepa, B., & Snipe, A. (2004) Language policy and ethnic tensions in Quebec and Latvia. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 45, 231–252.
- Smith, G., Law, V., Wilson, A., Bohr, A., & Allworth, E. (1998). *Nation-building in the post-Soviet borderlands: The politics of national identities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spolsky, B. (2004). *Language policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- State Language Law. (1999). Accessed June 29, 2007. [http://www.minelres.lv/NationalLegislation/Latvia/Latvia\\_Language\\_English.htm](http://www.minelres.lv/NationalLegislation/Latvia/Latvia_Language_English.htm)
- Stevenson, M. (1999). New Latvian President vetoes bill based on Quebec language law. *National post*, July 26. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://womenshistory.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.vigile.net%2F997-2%2Fflatvian.html>
- Tabuns, A., Tabuna, A., & Brooks, J. (2001). National identity. In: A. Tabuns (Ed.), *National, state and regime Identity in Latvia*. Riga: Baltic Study Center.
- Van Elsuwege, P. (2004). Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia: Problems of integration at the threshold of the European Union. *European Center for Minority Issues*. ECMI Working Paper 20. April. Accessed June 29, 2007. [http://www.ecmi.de/download/working\\_paper\\_20.pdf](http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_20.pdf)
- Veisbergs, A. (1993). The Latvian language—Struggle for survival. *Humanities and social sciences Latvia*. Accessed June 29, 2007. <http://ai1.mii.lu.lv/valoda/veisb.htm>
- Wilson, D. (2002). Minority rights in education: Lessons for the European Union from Estonia, Latvia, Romania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Right-to-Education. Accessed June 29, 2007. [http://www.right-to-education.org/content/lessons/roul\\_wv.pdf](http://www.right-to-education.org/content/lessons/roul_wv.pdf)
- Zepa, B., & Klave, E. (2004). *Language 2003–2004. State program for Latvian language training in Latvia (LVAVP)*. Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences.
- Zepa, B., Klave, E., Jeruma, L., & Krisane, J. (2004). *Integration of minority youth in the society of Latvia in the content of the education reform*. Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences.
- Zepa, B., Supule, I., Klave, E., Krastina, L., Krisane, J., & Tomsone, I. (2005). *Ethnopolitical tension in Latvia: Looking for the conflict solution*. Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences.
- Zepa, B., Supule, I., Krastina, L., Kesane, I., Grivins, M., Bebrisa, I., & Ievina, I. (2006). Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences.

### Author Biography

**Carol Schmid** is Professor of Sociology at Guilford Technical Community College. Her areas of research and teaching are in the sociology of language, race and ethnic relations, the sociology of education, and nationalism and national identity. In 2003 she was a Fulbright Senior Scholar at the University of Latvia in Riga.