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## **Latgalian in Latvia: How a minority language community gains voice during societal negotiations about the status of two major languages**

**Abstract** This paper discusses how the regional language of Latgalian in Latvia has benefited from societal discourse on the antagonism between speakers of Latvian and Russian in Latvia. Triggered by the 2012 referendum on Russian as a possible second state language of Latvia, Latvian politics (exemplified by politicians' statements since 2012 as well as by 2014 election manifestoes) as well as society at large (displayed by e.g. increased attention in the educational sector and the media) have started to devote considerably more attention to the region of Latgale, including its cultural and linguistic heritage. The paper thereby argues that speakers of Latgalian have gained a noteworthy increase in voice, even though the future of the variety is still considered to be uncertain.

**Keywords:** Latgalian; Latvia; Latvian; Russian; regional languages; language policy; referendum; linguistic minorities; ethnolinguistic vitality

### **1. Introduction**

This paper discusses recent changes in the societal status of Latgalian, a regional language mostly spoken in the highly multilingual region of Latgale in Eastern Latvia. It shows how speakers of Latgalian have since 2012 experienced a remarkable increase in voice, triggered by a considerable change of attitudes and policies in Latvian society and by the Latvian state. At the same time it argues that the Latgalian example shows that, under specific conditions, a minority language may benefit from conflict between more dominant languages in society, in this case the on-going antagonism between Latvian and Russian in post-Soviet Latvia.

Central to this chapter is the theoretical notion of voice, a concept originally deriving from Bakhtin's work, which has repeatedly been employed and recontextualized in minority language and revitalization contexts. Hornberger, in a paper on Māori, Guaraní and Quechua, defines voice as "the speaking consciousness,

articulated as social practice, in dialogue with others and in situated contexts” (Hornberger 2006: 284). Among the themes inherent in voice are the “active stances persons take toward others and the dialects, languages, genres, and other cultural forms they produce” (*ibid.*, relating to Holland & Lave 2001: 10–14). In this sense, we understand voice of the speakers of Latgalian as social practices which enable the members of this linguistic community to articulate their Latgalianness, to bring it to the foreground as one of the most important elements of Latgalian identity, and to be able to participate in society through the means of the Latgalian language.

At the same time, this chapter relates to theory on language maintenance as well as to our previous work on the status of Latgalian in society (e.g. Lazdiņa & Marten, 2012; Lazdiņa 2013) in which we discussed Latgalian in the context of theoretical literature on the status of minority languages according to their use in functionally defined domains. Classifications of the endangerment of languages applied in this context include the famous GIDS (Fishman 2001) and EGIDS (Lewis *et al.* 2014) scales, the UNESCO report on ethnolinguistic vitality (Moseley 2010), or works by e.g. Edwards (2010) which allow not only to gain an overview of the presence of a variety in society, but also make assumptions on a possible future of the variety (we will get back to the classification of Latgalian in these models in section 3).

With regard to language maintenance, the chapter is also influenced by language policy theory such as by Spolsky (2004, 2009). As our analysis shows, also in the case of Latgalian the three components of language policy according to Spolsky interact: values and attitudes towards languages (language beliefs in Spolsky’s terminology), language use in practice, and active language management are in continuous interplay in influencing societal developments with regard to the status of Latgalian as a long-marginalized regional language. In this, the notions of top-down vs. bottom-up policies (i.e. policies initiated by the state or other influential players in society vs. grass-root movements and other reactions by the language users) are of particular relevance. As Cassels Johnson (2013: 95) notes, language policy (changes) are most likely to take effect where initiatives from a macro perspective and from local policy actors (as well as from intermediate levels) interact, and that, in the light of this interaction, the labelling of policy measures as bottom-up or top-down is usually rather relative.

The background on languages in Latvia as well as on Latgalian is based on our own research throughout the past years as well as publically available data such as census data and referendum results. The analysis of debates in society and of changes in attitudes towards Latgalian is based on discourse approaches, in particular Spitzmüller and Warnke’s DIMEAN model (Spitzmüller & Warnke, 2011). In this model, in addition to the perspective on voice referred to above, the analysis

of ideologies and of discourse positions as they reflect the social stratification of power are of particular relevance for this chapter. Methodologically, the chapter analyzes topics and major lines of argumentation of texts, thereby providing insight into the macro structure of the debates around Latgalian.

## 2. Languages in Latvia

Before turning to most recent developments regarding the role of Latgalian in society, we will first give an overview of the current situation of languages in Latvia and provide relevant background information on Latgalian in order to familiarize an English-speaking readership with this regional language. The only official language ("state language" in the terminology of the Latvian state) of Latvia is Latvian. Together with Lithuanian, Latgalian and a number of non-standardized varieties (frequently considered dialects), Latvian belongs to the Baltic branch of the Indo-European languages. The strongest minority language of Latvia is Russian: whereas a small Russian-speaking population has inhabited the area of present-day Latvia throughout several centuries, the vast majority of Russophones moved to Latvia during the times of the occupation and annexation of the country by the Soviet Union in 1944–1991. Societal debates on languages mostly focus on the role of Russian vs. Latvian, with societal division continuing to be dominated by this antagonism. Since the re-establishment of independence of Latvia in 1991, it has been the main language policy aim of the Latvian state to reverse language shift from Soviet-times dominance of Russian to re-establish Latvian as the main language of society and the language of interethnic communication. However, Russian continues to play an important role in society as a native language of about one third of the population and as a wide-spread second language. In terms of language policy, the Latvian-Russian divide has taken up most attention of language debates in society during the past decades, very much to the detriment of initiatives towards other languages: the 2007 and 2008 "Language" Reports by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, for instance, discuss only skills in and attitudes towards Latvian and Russian (Zepa *et al.* 2007; Zepa *et al.* 2008). Also a recent collection of chapters on languages in Latvia in the period between 2004 and 2010 (Druvieta 2012) focuses on the situation of Latvian and Russian and, although it includes chapters on the development of the micro-speech community of the Liv language (Ernštreits 2012) as well as on Latgalian (Vulāne 2012), there is no analysis of the situations of Polish, Ukrainian or other minority languages (cf. also Lazdiņa & Marten 2012 on the tradition of ignoring Latgalian in language policy discourse in Latvia). With regard to Latgalian this has triggered negative attitudes when it was argued, for instance, that the existence of Latgalian in a frequently diglossic relationship

with Standard Latvian in Latgale creates problems for the acquisition of Latvian as a second language by individuals with other home languages (Druviete 2001).

Other minority languages such as Polish, Lithuanian or Ukrainian, enjoy some support but play hardly any role in society. As a lingua franca, English has been on the rise in recent years, but also Russian continues to play an important role as a language of communication with other countries of the former Soviet realm (cf. Marten *et al.* 2012), whereas German has largely lost its importance which it had before the first independence of Latvia in 1918 and the relocation of most ethnic Germans to Germany in 1939. As a language of interethnic communication within Latvia, Russian is still of high importance among the population which grew up during Soviet times, whereas in the younger generation communication is more balanced between Latvian and Russian (cf. e.g. Zepa *et al.* 2008: 7, who report that the percentage of native speakers of Latvian who claimed good knowledge of Russian declined from 84% to 69% between 1996 and 2008, a decline which is mostly related to lower skills in Russian in the younger generations; similarly Ernst-sone *et al.* 2012: 39 report that in 2009, 92% of the population of Latvia had skills in Latvian in contrast to 98% with knowledge of Russian; in the older generations native speakers of Latvian claim generally good skills in Russian, whereas the average level of skills in Russian decreases in the generation below 25 years). The Latvian Census of 2011 revealed that 62% of the Latvian population use Latvian (which in the understanding of the census includes Latgalian) as their dominant home language, whereas Russian was dominant for 37%. 8.8% of the population (165,000 individuals) of Latvia reported that they use Latgalian on an everyday basis, in the region of Latgale 35.5% answered that they used Latgalian regularly (LR Centrālā statistikas pārvalde 2012).

Figure 1: Map of Latvia indicating the approximate area of Latgale as a cultural region



### 3. Latgalian: Background and status

Latgalian is a Baltic variety closely related to Latvian. The Latvian State officially recognizes Latgalian as a “historical variant of Latvian”. From a perspective of European languages it may be classified as a regional language (cf. Wicherkiewicz 2014) and relates to Latvian in similar ways as e.g. Kashubian to Polish (cf. Smentek & Stanulewicz this volume), Scots to Scottish English, Low German to Standard High German or Võru to Estonian. However, the status of Latgalian has long been a matter of discussion. Whereas many speakers of Latgalian consider it to be a language in its own right, the attitude by many Latvian philologists and by institutions of the central state in Riga has been that it is a dialect of Latvian. In linguistic terms, Latgalian features both a number of structural features (Abstand) and a separate historical development including its own tradition of a written standard (Ausbau) which allow for a classification as a language in its own right. The debate on the perception of Latgalian has been fought somewhat fiercely in academic and political circles throughout the past decades, but the more recent perception suggested by the ISO classification as one of two written varieties alongside Standard Latvian under the umbrella of the Latvian language (similar to e.g. Bokmål and Nynorsk in Norway) seems to be a feasible compromise. Questions which have become more salient in recent times are often connected to what this implies for official support of Latgalian and its acceptance in politics and society.

In cultural and historic terms, Latgalian is connected to the region of Latgale, the Eastern-most of the four Latvian regions, which borders Russia and Belarus in the East and South-East, and according to some views extends towards the border with Lithuania in the South (cf. Figure 1). Latgale was politically separated from the Low (Standard) Latvian-speaking regions from 1629 until 1918, for most of this time until Latvian independence in 1918 it was part of a separate administrative region in the Czarist Empire. This explains the separate development of a written standard in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a tradition taken up again since the 1990s.

After a short period of official support during the first times of Latvian independence after 1918 with functions in the educational system in Latgale and rights to self-determination regarding aspects of language, religion, church, school and economy (Bukšs 1967), the use of Latgalian was discouraged during the authoritarian Ulmanis regime since 1934 and eventually publically forbidden during the Soviet occupation of Latvia since 1940, where it essentially only survived as an oral language in private domains and in the Catholic church, and where it was associated with rural backwardness (on the detrimental effects of Soviet language policies on small languages, cf. Marten *et al.* 2015). Because of its border location, Latgale not only had the highest level of pre-Soviet multilingualism in Latvia,

but it also experienced an additional high influx of speakers of Russian during Soviet times, which further reduced the importance of Latgalian (and Latvian) in the region.

One of the strongholds where Latgalian could also be used during the Soviet occupation of Latvia was the Catholic church. Also today, Catholicism is one of the strongest additional markers of cultural identity among speakers of Latgalian, in contrast to the dominant Lutheran denomination among Latvians of other regions and overwhelmingly Orthodox (or, as a result of Soviet ideologies, atheist) Russophones (for a general investigation of the link between religious and linguistic identities in Latgale cf. Lazdiņa *et al.* 2011). According to the large-scale survey “Languages in Eastern Latvia” with more than 9,000 respondents (Šuplinska & Lazdiņa 2009), Latgalian is the strongest language among inhabitants in Latgale with regard to prayer and communication with priests (cf. Table 1).

Table 1: *Language use in religious contexts among inhabitants of Latgale (Šuplinska & Lazdiņa 2009)*

	<b>I pray at home in... (more than one answer possible)</b>	<b>I speak with the priest in... (total percentages less than 100 because of respondents who did not mark any answer)</b>
Latvian	36.0%	30.2%
Russian	29.2%	25.7%
<b>Latgalian</b>	<b>40.7%</b>	<b>30.3%</b>
Belarusian	2.7%	0.1%
Polish	3.1%	1.2%

More important within the context of language policies and revitalization, however, are practices of language use and the link between linguistic and ethnic identities. As Table 2 shows, the region of Latgale is highly multilingual also at the present day. Societal bilingualism with regard to Latvian and Russian is quite balanced, with knowledge of both languages claimed by more than 90% of the respondents, but also remarkable skills of Latgalian are recorded. Here, it is important to note that the content of questions 1 and 2 is almost identical, but that the minor difference in wording provides surprisingly distinct results. Question 2 “Do you know... (language)” triggers more affirmative answers: even if language skills are poor, respondents tend to give an affirmative answer because the question asks for any knowledge at all, even if it is very limited. Therefore, the scores for question 2 are higher than for question 1 for all languages. 62.1% of all respondents claimed knowledge of Latgalian when answering question 1 (“Which of these languages

do you know?”), in contrast to 69.5% who answered the question “Do you know Latgalian?” in the affirmative – a difference of more than 7 percentage points. Additional questions aimed at a more precise understanding of Latgalian skills revealed that understanding and speaking skills (58.2% and 49.6% respectively) are much higher than reading and writing skills (32.9% and 19.6% respectively, Šuplinska & Lazdiņa 2009).

Table 2: Knowledge of languages and ethnic identity in Latgale (Šuplinska & Lazdiņa, 2009)

	<b>Question 1: Which of these languages do you know?</b>	<b>Question 2: Do you know...?</b>	<b>Question 3: I regard myself as a speaker of... (only one answer possible)</b>	<b>Question 4: I speak most easily (only one answer possible)</b>	<b>Question 5: I regard myself as ... (only one answer possible)</b>
Latvian	90.9%	96.9%	41.3%	39.3%	40.7%
Russian	93.5%	98.3%	33.4%	35.0%	25.9%
<b>Latgalian</b>	<b>62.1%</b>	<b>69.5%</b>	<b>25.0%</b>	<b>25.4%</b>	<b>27.0%</b>
Belarusian	7.2%	8.0%	0.1%	0.1%	3.5%
Polish	5.2%	7.0%	0.2%	0.2%	1.5%

Question 3 (“I regard myself as a speaker of...”) helps to understand the correlation between (passive or active) knowledge of Latgalian and its use on an everyday basis. One fourth of the respondents (25.0%) answered that it was strongest for them to identify as speakers of Latgalian, a much lower proportion than the approximately two thirds of the respondents who claimed knowledge of Latgalian in general. However, because of the wide-spread individual multilingualism, there is a similar difference between questions 1 and 2 on the one hand and question 3 on the other for Latvian and Russian. In our context, it is therefore of highest interest that the proportion of speakers who answered “I am a speaker of Latgalian” was very similar to the proportion of respondents who supported the statement “I speak most easily Latgalian” (25.4%). In question 5, where again only one option could be chosen, 27.0% answered “I regard myself as a Latgalian”. Assuming that the respondents who marked Latgalian in questions 3, 4 and 5 are more or less the same individuals, these answers therefore allow us to conclude that about a quarter of the respondents have a very strong, if not dominant, Latgalian identity, and that this identity is closely related to regular and proficient use of the Latgalian language. At the same time, the difference between the quarter of the respondents with a strong Latgalian identity and the proportion of respondents with any knowledge of Latgalian (62.1% resp. 69.5% according to questions 1 and 2) indicates that not only dedicated Latgalians have a knowledge of the Latgalian language, but rather

points to the ethnic and linguistic multi-identities of many inhabitants of Latgale. In a similar way, the survey data highlight the difference between being a Rusophone (“being a speaker of” / “easiest language” marked by 33.4% / 35.0%) and having a dominant Russian identity (25.9%). In summary, this indicates that there is, in addition to Latvian and Russian identities, also a sizeable proportion of the population with a strong regional identity in Latgale, in line with regional identities in other parts of Europe, and that the population of Latgale thereby displays a high level of mixed individual identities.

In political terms, Latgalian continued to be largely ignored by the state also after the re-establishment of Latvian independence in 1991. Since regional autonomy or any other type of decentralization is unknown in the structures of present-day Latvia, Latgale exists mostly as a cultural and historic region with unclear borders, in particular with regard to being one of three founding regions which united to create the Latvian state in 1918, but not as a political or administrative unit. On an official level, Latgale is one of the regions of centralized regional planning and a separate constituency in national elections, and it is advertised as a separate region by e.g. the national tourism board (cf. Marten 2015 for a discussion of possible impacts of decentralization on linguistic minorities in general and on Latgale in particular). As a result of historic separation and of present-day centralism, Latgale continues to be the economically weakest region of Latvia. For the Latgalian language, these centralized structures imply that it continues to be largely restricted to private domains, with an almost complete lack in official functions. UNESCO therefore classifies Latgalian as “vulnerable” (Moseley 2010), and also a quantitative study of major ethnic groups in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (Ehala & Zabrodskaja 2013a; 2013b) reveals that Latgalians in Latvia (together with e.g. speakers of Polish in Lithuania) are among the speech communities in the region with the lowest level of vitality, “because the community is small, scattered around the country and completely bilingual” (Ehala & Zabrodskaja 2013a: 20), and because of a relatively low level of perceived inter-ethnic distance between Latvians and Latgalians (Ehala & Zabrodskaja 2013b: 40–41). The domains in which Latgalian is relatively strong are the home domain, culture and heritage, media and arts, and church. In this, oral presence of Latgalian is much stronger than written, in particular in more formal domains where some oral ad hoc-use of Latgalian is possible, but where written use of Latgalian has been essentially non-existent (cf. Lazdiņa & Marten, 2012; Lazdiņa 2013 for a more detailed overview of functions). Any type of political activism in favour of Latgalian, which has resulted in e.g. a modest presence of Latgalian in education and the media, has taken place in spite of the unfavourable attitudes by the Latvian state. Although persons who regularly use Latgalian overwhelmingly take

the Latvian side in the Russian-Latvian divide (cf. Ehala & Zabrodskaja, 2013a; 2013b on the ethnic proximity of Latgalians and Latvians), Latgalian activism has often been perceived as a potential threat to national unity (cf. e.g. Marten 2012: 24–25 on online comments on Latgalian which marked demands to increase its status as separatist): as one of the most recent incidents, it may be named that the designer of the recently created Latgalian flag expresses the need to clarify that the existence of the flag does not imply separatist tendencies, a view on the role of Latgalians within the Latvian state which is summarized in the expression “united but not identical” (Rumaks 2015). The perception of possible Latgalian separatism was supported by the fact that Latgalian has occasionally been instrumentalized by (Russian-speaking) separatists such as the political party “Par dzimto valodu” (“For the native language”), but these enjoy little support in general and almost no support among speakers of Latgalian (cf. Lazdiņa 2013: 400 on the low election results of the party in the 2013 municipal elections). In the light of such attitudes to Latgalian, it was seen as a major success when activism resulted in a question on Latgalian being included in the 2011 Latvian national census.

In summary, it can therefore be claimed that there has been a considerable lack of voice of speakers of Latgalian at almost any time of history, hardly any empowerment of the linguistic community to take the fate of its language into its own hands, and generally very little presence of Latgalian issues in society. It was in this light that we wrote in 2011 a paper entitled “Latgalian: A continuing struggle for political recognition”, which at the time described the societal status of Latgalian and the prevailing attitudes and perceptions among politicians and activists on both sides (Lazdiņa & Marten, 2012). In this paper we concluded that “there is a certain level of endangerment resulting in large part from the attitude of state authorities for much of the twentieth century” and that “one fundamental aspect of this debate [on Latgalian] is whether the Latvian state is able to clarify its own policy towards Latgalian” (ibid. 83).

#### **4. Developments since 2012**

With the history of the marginalization of Latgalian in mind, it was seen with great surprise that political developments since early 2012 have enabled a serious change in the situation of Latgalian. The decisive event which triggered a remarkable acceleration of political changes with regard to Latgalian was the referendum on the status of Russian which took place in Latvia on 18 February 2012. Based on activities by Russian-speaking initiatives, the referendum was an attempt to change the Latvian constitution in order to establish Russian as a second official state language alongside Latvian. The initiative received support

by political parties mainly supported by ethnic Russians. Supporters of the constitutional change argued mostly along the lines of minority rights debates. For many Latvians, however, the debate brought traumatizing Soviet-times experiences to the surface; it was perceived to be opening up wounds that had slowly been healing during the previous years.

Also among young ethnic Latvians, a more pragmatic (i.e. less ideological) attitude towards the Russian language could be perceived, in particular with regard to better job opportunities offered by a solid knowledge of both languages (plus English). For instance, according to the 2008 "Language" report (Zepa *et al.* 2008), the number of ethnic Latvians in Latvia who consider that it is important for all inhabitants of Latvia to know Russian has gradually increased (74% in 2008 compared to 68% in 2004). Similarly, Ernstsone *et al.* (2012: 60) argue that schools and universities have lately focused on the acquisition of a good command in three languages – i.e. Latvian, Russian and English – in order to prepare the young generation for the labour market. In addition, there is a tendency on the labour market to demand Russian skills, especially in the private sector and including enterprises which have no obvious connection with companies from Russia (Ernstsone *et al.* 2012: 64).

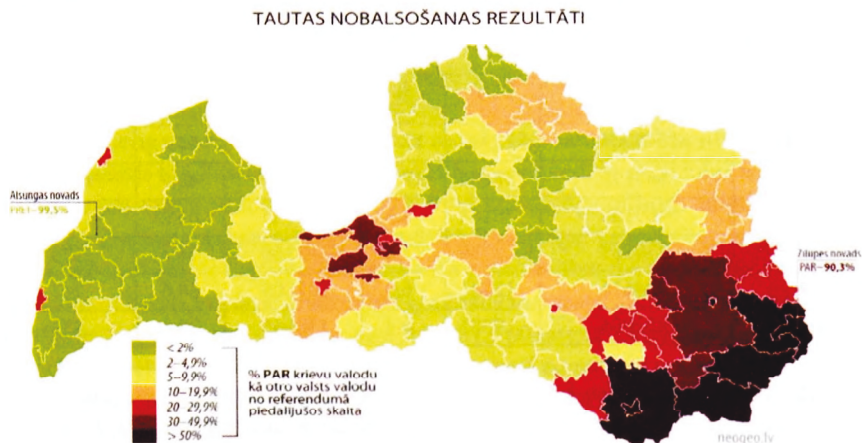
The results of the referendum showed a vote largely along ethnic Latvian-Russian lines. 24.9% (273,347 votes) of all voters voted in favour of Russian as a second State language, 74.8% (821,722 votes) rejected the proposal. The high turnout (in Latvian standards) of 71.12% indicated how important the topic was perceived in society. Table 3 displays the results of the referendum in all of Latvia and according to the 5 constituencies. The numbers are provided as proportions of the entire electorate – according to the Latvian constitution, the referendum would only have been successful if a majority of all inhabitants of Latvia with voting rights (i.e. not only a majority of those who participated in the referendum) had voted in favour. In summary, 17.7% of the entire electorate voted in favour of the proposal, whereas a majority of 53.2% rejected the constitutional change. Less than 10% of the electorate supported Russian as a second official language in the three regions of Vidzeme (Livonia), Kurzeme (Curonia) and Zemgale, and 27.6% in Riga. The result in Latgale, however, differed considerably: a majority of those who participated in the referendum voted in favour of the change (33.4% as opposed to 26.4% against, 0.2% of the votes were not valid, 40.0% did not participate).

Table 3: Results of the 2012 state language referendum in Latvia according to constituencies (CVK 2012)

	Number of inhabitants with voting right	RESULTS				
		FOR	%	AGAINST	%	Not valid
<b>LATVIA</b>	1545004	273347	17.7	821722	53.2	3524
Riga	463197	127784	27.6	225437	48.7	1443
Vidzeme	409168	35164	8.6	262643	64.2	706
Latgale	235969	78736	33.4	62369	26.4	575
Kurzeme	204616	12282	6.0	132708	64.6	247
Zemgale	232054	19381	8.4	138565	59.7	553

The discrepancy between some areas in Latgale and the overall result in Latvia becomes even more apparent when looking at the following map (cf. Figure 2) which displays the results of each county (novads). At the border of Latvia with Russia, in the county of Zilupe, 90.3% of the voters voted in favour of Russian (note that this map, in contrast to Table 3, shows results of the actual vote, i.e. according to those who participated in the referendum, not based on the entire electorate), and also in other counties along the border to Russia and Belarus, more than 50% of the voters were in favour of the change. The map also indicates that other regions which voted relatively pro-Russian are located mostly in other parts of Latgale and in the greater Riga area. The results from Latgale are of particular interest when considering that, according to the survey on languages in Latgale referred to above, only about one third of the population consider themselves to have a dominant Russian identity and claim Russian to be their most important language. This implies that not only people with a clear Russian ethnicity and Russian as their first language voted in favour of two state languages.

Figure 2: Results of the 2012 referendum by county (neogeo 2012)



## 5. The referendum in Latgale: Impacts on Latgalian

In the light of the results of the referendum, let us now turn to the main question of this paper – how the referendum influenced the discourse and subsequently also policies with regard to Latgalian. The following analysis is based on public statements on Latgalian by key players in politics (individual politicians and political party programmes), on the coverage of the referendum and the question of Latgalian in the major media in Latvia as well as on reactions on suggestions to improve the status of Latgalian among the general public, e.g. in online fora. The data corpus has been collected through a careful and systematic observation of Latvian media since the referendum. This does not imply that voices hostile to Latgalian would have ceased to exist – yet, the regular presence of Latgalian issues in majority contexts is in itself a remarkable change in discourse patterns. From the texts used for our analysis, the main topics, important suggestions and major lines of argumentation have been extracted in line with the DIMEAN model's levels of ideologies, discourse positions and text topics.

The results from Latgale immediately raised initiatives among local politicians and municipal councils in Latgale to demand status of Russian as a second local or regional official language in those counties where a majority had voted in favour of the constitutional change (DELFI 2012). In mainstream media and among (ethnic Latvian) politicians in Riga, on the other hand, discussions stressed the historical difference between the role of Latgalian and the role of Russian in Latvia – only Latgalian was seen as a potential regional language. Latgalian thereby for the first

time since the 1930s experienced moderate positive attention by state officials and the government. At the same time, in discussions in the media and in social networks (Latvian) Latgalians stressed their loyalty to Latvia and to the Latvian language. Based on the interpretation that the Latgalian vote was at least partly a protest vote against Riga rather than a vote in favour of Russian, the government tried to understand how to accommodate the concerns of Latgalians and to react to the perception among many voters in Latgale that their region was neglected by state policies. This applied to the demands of speakers of Latgalian, but the government also understood that the interests of Russophones in Latgale needed to be accommodated to a higher degree, even though the question of official status on any level was a red line which no Latvian politician would seriously consider crossing. Impacts on policies towards Russian and a better inclusion of Russophones in society (e.g. more media in the Russian language financed by the Latvian state in order to provide a small counter-balance to media from Russia) are, however, not part of the discussion of this chapter.

## 5.1 State initiatives

Within weeks after the referendum, the government initiated a new dialogue with regional politicians and representatives of different parts of society on issues concerning Latgale. As a result, in June 2012, only 4 months after the referendum, the government approved a plan prepared by the Ministry of Regional Affairs on regional development of Latgale. Important issues which were taken up included better guarantees for maintaining small rural schools, support of small businesses, and generally a plan to create better living conditions, education and economic opportunities, also in the light of the on-going out-migration out of Latgale. The plan also envisaged to develop better media coverage of Latgale and of Latgalian issues on national TV – with the explicit aim to discuss problems, but also to highlight positive practices and developments. For the Latgalian language this suggested an increased presence also in more formal domains. In this respect, the government for the first time acknowledged that it should conduct a more explicit language policy for Latgalian.

The obvious question in this respect is whether the connection between the referendum and these changes in policies were purely coincidental. When looking at politicians' comments on the results, however, it becomes evident that there was indeed a direct causal relationship between the referendum and more awareness for Latgalian issues. When commenting on the referendum results, Prime Minister at the time Valdis Dombrovskis immediately highlighted the work group which would be created under the umbrella of regional development plans

for Latgale. Similarly, former President of Latvia Valdis Zatlers, who at the time was the leader of one of the coalition parties, promised that a development plan prepared in a ministry led by a member of his party would be adopted within a week's time (draugiem.lv 2012). Other comments emphasized the protest nature of the Latgalian vote: "The inhabitants of Latgale, independent of the referendum, cast a protest vote, thereby confirming their dissatisfaction with the region's poverty, unemployment and the ignorance by the state" (Zālīte 2012; here and in the following translations from the Latvian by the authors). At the same time, also Latvian President Andris Bērziņš promised to pay more attention to job creation and production in the border counties (ibid.).

Along similar lines, several analytical comments were published in major Latvian media. On 22 February 2012, four days after the referendum, a researcher from a major university of economics in Riga stressed that the political elite in Latvia needed to pay more attention to Latgale by "helping to create a living space which allows to be in Latvia also during news broadcasts, instead of following what is happening in Latvia through news from the Kremlin" (Kaša 2012). The author thereby stressed the separation of information spaces that many Russophones and Latvians in Latvia live in, in particular with regard to Latgale where media from Russia are often more easily accessible than media from Latvia. Similarly, political journalist Ozoliņš asked on 19 February 2012 "Quo vadis Latgale?". Even if he denounced fears that Latgale might be in danger of separation from the Latvian state by Russian forces similar to what had occurred in the cases of the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (a scenario that started to be discussed widely again in the Baltic countries in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea by Russian forces), Ozoliņš argued: "Just to talk will not be enough. Long-term economic and social solutions will be necessary, and also the return of the region to the Latvian informational space will demand time and money. Latgale will be a true litmus test of the ability of politicians to speak with non-Latvians" (Ozoliņš 2012). Journalist Jākobsons on 12 March 2012 even went as far as to demand official status for the Latgalian language: "On the road to drawing Latgale closer into the common Latvian house, an important role would play to assign official status to the Latgalian language, which is also one of the literary forms of the Latvian language. It could be defined as a regional language" (Jākobsons 2012). Looking back at political changes since the referendum from a perspective of about half a year later, Klismeta (2012) therefore stressed the importance of new programmes with a focus on regional issues, including education, and a generally increased awareness of the regions. In this sense, it can be concluded that the referendum indeed contributed to more positive attitudes to political decentralization – even

if the political structures as such were not changed, central institutions devoted more resources to the regions, and institutions on the county and municipality levels received more competence for decentralized decision-taking.

## **5.2 Increased presence of Latgalian in society**

Initiatives by politicians and the state are an important element for providing a minoritized language and its speakers with an increase in status. Also in the case of Latgalian, such top-down policies have been important in order to create a more positive atmosphere. The ultimate question is, however, what impact these changes have had on the use of Latgalian, in particular with regard to functions in more official domains.

One important aspect in this is that Latgalian has started to be used much more frequently in cultural activities, in particular with regard to a noteworthy increase in the formerly rare use of written Latgalian, e.g. when announcing performances, markets, concerts, or exhibitions. There has also been a noticeable increase in the use of Latgalian on souvenirs as part of the cultural tourism industry, such as proverbs in Latgalian printed on T-shirts, fridge magnets or post cards. Of particular importance is, however, that written Latgalian is now occasionally used even by municipalities, e.g. on city maps. Additionally, the increased interest in Latgalian can also be seen in the way how scientific and popular scientific publications on Latgale have been received by the general public as well as by officials. A linguo-territorial dictionary (Šuplinska 2012) and an encyclopaedia for school children (Lazdiņa 2012), for instance, were met with considerable interest e.g. by the city council and the mayor of Rēzekne – thereby Latgalian raised awareness at a political and administrative level where it had hardly ever been displayed previously. Similarly, Latgalian features increasingly also in ergonyms and on restaurant menus (e.g. Figure 3, cf. also Pošeiko 2014a; 2014b; Lazdiņa 2013).

Figure 3: *Glocalized kebab: A Latgalian-only menu in a café in Rēzekne*



The Latgalian flag which was renewed and officially accepted some years ago is now increasingly used in private, semi-official and even some official contexts, e.g. at local municipality offices, schools or at the cultural centre and concert hall *Gors/Gars*, one of the most important elements of regional policy which opened in the regional centre of Rēzekne in summer 2013. The logo of *Gors/Gars* (cf. Figure 4) is an interesting symbolic representation of the – depending on the interpretation – struggle or link between Standard Latvian and Latgalian and points to a possible re-positioning of both languages in local society: “*Gars*” is Latvian, “*gors*” Latgalian for “spirit”, the logo incorporates both forms and suggests a co-existence of both varieties (instead of a competition or a dominance of one over the other). The sign may be read as the Latgalian variant claiming its way into the foreground; it may also be interpreted, however, that the Latvian is always behind the Latgalian. Mikelis Baštiks, the designer of the logo, stressed the co-existence of both varieties in the symbol: “During the process of designing *GORS*, we had the wish to build a story about the unique cultural and linguistic heritage of Latgale. Not to hide it and put it aside as secondary, but quite the opposite – to surrect and celebrate it. We wished to tell this story by lifting the apparent peculiarities of the Latgalian language and by displaying lexical differences as a story of a united visual identity” (Latgaļes *Gors*, translation by the authors). Note, however, that the term “Latgaļes Vēstniecība” (“Latgalian Embassy”) is again in Standard Latvian, indicating how Latvian is still perceived as the dominant form in such contexts.

Figure 4: Symbolic overlap of Latvian and Latgalian in the logo of the cultural centre Gors/Gars



The word play is taken even further in the cultural centre's restaurant/café, where the lexemes “gors”/“gars” are linked with “gords”/“gards” (“delicious”), two lexemes which display the same phonetic and orthographic differences between Latgalian and Latvian as “gors”/“gars” (cf. Figure 5).

Figure 5: Advertizing the restaurant/café Gords/Gards within the cultural centre Gors/Gars



In addition to this more frequent use of Latgalian in its core region, also an (albeit small-scale) increased presence of Latgalian in other regions of Latvia could be noted. There is a regular column in Latgalian in the national weekly “Ir”, as well as some radio broadcasts and programmes on national TV. The popular TV show “Dziedošās ģimenes” (“Singing families”), broadcast on the first national programme with participants from all Latvia, was led in 2012 by two brothers from Latgale, with families who came to this show from Latgale

frequently singing their songs in Latgalian. Online comments on this show, however, reflect the tradition of intolerance towards the presence of Latgalian in songs on national TV as well as towards the clearly audible Latgalian accent in spoken Latvian by the programme leaders among parts of the population. Under the heading “žēl” (“a shame”) a commentator writes on 24 September 2012, 18:37: “Doesn’t the State Language Act apply to this show? At least the two first songs would have needed subtitles, also Latvians would like to understand something. If this was shown on regional TV in Latgale, it would be something different. And as programme leaders also such people should be chosen who are able to speak the Latvian literary language”. “Latgaliete” (“Latgalian woman”), in response, reacts with sarcasm (24 September 2012 21:39): “Great. Again envious, that Latgalians win over the public. We have to continue like that, if they speak about us, we are alive. And the leaders are also from Latgale....ha ha ha” (translations by the authors, Vipi.lv). Despite such discussions, however, this situation is emblematic for the increased self-confidence of Latgalians which allows the performance of songs in Latgalian as well as the changing attitudes by Latvian national TV.

Other examples where Latgalian was present outside Latgale are theatre performances based on Latgalian productions which have started to be taken to Riga (Latvijas Nacionālais teātris), and the bimonthly journal “A 12” which has since 2012 been published with the sub-heading “The road to Latgale. To be positive about people in Latgale and the world” and which includes some articles in Latgalian. In summary, this still does not mean a very strong presence of Latgalian in official and higher-prestige domains when compared to Latvian (and Russian), but in contrast to the previous situation this has been perceived by many speakers of Latgalian as a major step forward towards more visibility of Latgalian.

Lazdiņa (2013) summarizes the changes in functions of Latgalian also in the light of an increased economic value. The functional or direct use value of Latgalian thereby lies in the increased communication possibilities. The use of Latgalian in the economy and other prestigious domains has increased because inhabitants know and wish to use it, and at the same time they have become aware that business partners or customers accept that communication may take place in Latgalian. This functional presence includes the use of Latgalian in names of shops, services, advertisements or posters. The indirect use value, on the other hand, refers to the more symbolic side of language use, for instance for marketing purposes. In the tourism sector, Latgalian is used in order to attract tourists by creating an image of Latgale as a diverse, culturally rich, and tolerant

Figure 6: A monolingual Latgalian advertisement in Upīte village (except for several musicians' names in English)



Figure 7: Quadrilingual information in Rēzekne



In the educational sector, a pilot project to introduce the subject “Regional Studies” has been initiated in schools in Latgale. It started as an initiative by Rēzekne University College and has been supported financially by Rēzekne municipality. Since September 2013, this optional subject may be chosen by pupils in the schools of Rēzekne, its aim is to familiarize them with the history of Latgale, the Latgalian language, culture and literature. Teachers are reporting that this course is popular not only among pupils whose families and friends use the Latgalian language, but also among pupils who are less connected to Latgalian culture and language, implying that there is an interest in the subject beyond core circles of activists and the speech community. Major problems are, however, for the time being caused by the lack of tradition of writing Latgalian since the 1930s which has rendered even many regular users of oral Latgalian illiterate in this variety. Another major challenge for teachers is how to work without any fixed curriculum and in the light of a lack of adequate teaching materials. One of the teachers involved in this project reports: “We are a group of enthusiasts which was created predominantly among teachers of Latvian. And we ourselves have made a syllabus. Let us see how it will develop, how this syllabus will be accepted” (LRT 2014).

### 5.3 Presence of Latgalian in party politics

In this last section, we will now look at how Latgalian has been present in most recent political debates. In 2014, more than two years after the referendum, two elections were held in Latvia: to the European Parliament on 24 May and to the Latvian national parliament Saeima on 4 October. In the following, we will discuss a few examples of where Latgalian appeared in the election campaigns.

The cleavage of political parties in Latvia runs mostly along ethnic lines. Right-wing parties in this sense are pro-Latvian parties, left-wing parties are pro-Russian. With regard to other typical political cleavages in Europe, pro-Latvian parties could mostly be classified as nationalist, conservative or liberal (and they also cooperate with such parties e.g. in the European Parliament), whereas pro-Russian parties largely claim a social-democrat or socialist ideology. There have been attempts to overcome this ethnic distinction in party politics, but in the current political landscape in Latvia, these are marginalized.

In the Saeima election campaign, the major political parties displayed surprisingly diverse attitudes to Latgalian. Liberal conservative “Vienotība” (“Unity”), both before and after the elections the strongest party in the coalition government, did not make a reference to the Latgalian language in its 2014 Saeima election manifesto at all; it only announced to “continue the implementation of the development plan for Latgale” (4. partija “Vienotība” 2014). In contrast, national conservative “Nacionālā apvienība” (“National Alliance”) demanded to introduce the written Latgalian language as an optional subject in all schools in Latgale (7. Nacionālā apvienība 2014). Antons Kursītis, candidate for the National Association, acknowledged in a programmatic article in his party’s election journal for the Latgalian constituency: “Small minority languages (Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, Ukrainian and others), as well as the Latgalian written language, which the state has to protect, maintain and develop according to the State language law, are practically not used in the work of state and local institutions.” If information by official bodies is available in foreign languages, it should also be available in minority languages, “as well as in the Latgalian written language according to demands by the inhabitants. (...) The state budget has to ensure teaching in written, as well as in oral Latgalian in the same way as the teaching of foreign languages – Russian. The financial means dedicated to preparing Latgalian regional TV and radio programmes and to broadcast in the Latgalian language as a variety of the State language as well as in minority languages have to be increased considerably” (Kursītis 2014, translations here and in the following by the authors). Four aspects are remarkable in this: First, Latgalian is dealt with at all, and it is called “Latgalian language” (“latgaliešu valoda”), this in itself being a considerable level of recognition which cannot be taken for granted. Second,

the text stresses that Latgalian is part of the Latvian language, thereby giving a concrete answer to the question of the status of Latgalian and ensuring that speakers of Latgalian are not alienated from Latvians. Third, the Latgalian topic is raised in conjunction with other small traditional minority languages – a classification which on the one hand is not appreciated by many speakers of Latgalian who see themselves as part of Latvianness, but which at the same time stresses the importance of Latgalian as a traditional autochthonous language of Latgale. Fourth, Russian is explicitly denoted as a foreign language and thereby set in opposition to Latgalian.

The election journal of “Latvijas Reģionu Apvienība” (“Union of Latvian Regions”) even went a step further by printing the editorial in Latgalian (Viļums & Igaunis 2014). It proudly highlighted two candidates which had read the oath of allegiance in Latgalian after they had been elected to Saeima four years earlier (as members for another party): “In Saeima again the Latgalian language – the Latvian of Latgale – could be heard”. In addition, the party’s logo “Spāks ir reģionūs!” (“Power is in the regions!”) was in Latgalian. Whereas the programme did not contain any explicit statements on language policies, this was an important instance of officialization of Latgalian on a symbolic level, in line with the party’s aim to devolve more power to the regions.

Finally, the major left-wing party, “Saskaņas centrs” (“Harmony centre”) connected the Latgalian topic with questions of other languages. Their election manifesto contained a section entitled “Language policy” which claimed that “acquisition of languages of the European Union as well as of traditional minority languages of Latvia” should be supported in the educational system. It is emblematic of the discourse on languages in Latvian society that the “Harmony Centre” stresses the role of Russian as a “traditional minority language” – in contrast to the focus laid by the National Alliance on smaller minority languages. The last line of Harmony Centre’s programme calls the Latgalian language “a unique wealth of Latvian culture” and supports its “official recognition, support and use together with the State language in municipal offices according to demand and ability to meet the demands” (Saskaņas centrs 2014).

Even though it is at the time of writing (November 2014) too early to draw conclusions on the practical implications of the attitudes expressed to Latgalian during the election campaigns, it is noteworthy that the Latgalian language was mentioned to such a regular extent at all – arguably as a result of and in the context of increased attention to policies of regional development.

## 6. Conclusion and outlook: Possible futures of Latgalian

As a whole, the developments with regard to Latgalian in recent years show a slow, but clearly visible change towards more acceptance of Latgalian in official functions, as well as its increased use in domains of higher prestige. In terms of a domain analysis, Latgalian thereby moves from a restriction to low-prestige, unofficial domains towards more presence on higher-prestige levels. Among speakers of Latgalian, careful optimism with regard to these latest changes prevails and has led not only to an increased prestige of the language, but also to more self-confidence in the speech community. The slowly increasing presence of Latgalian in, for instance, regional education raises hopes that revitalization might be stimulated on a broader level, in particular since this goes hand in hand with changing attitudes to Latgalian in other regions of Latvia. On the other hand, some critical opinions on the increased presence of Latgalian continue to be heard, not least because of the low literacy rate in Latgalian and the lack of experience with reading or writing the language.

It is therefore possible to conclude that, in the case of Latgalian, the dominating conflict between Latvian and Russian as the two major languages in society has triggered substantial changes to the benefit of a marginalized variety. Speakers of Latgalian have gained a considerable increase in voice: Latgalian is – at least to some degree – present in domains where it was previously almost non-existent, even beyond the region of Latgale. Speakers of Latgalian are more self-confident in using Latgalian in public domains, and the use in more official contexts ensures that issues of the Latgalian language are discussed among the political elite and in society at large. Ideologies are slowly changing, and even if Latgalian-hostile positions continue to exist, discourse on Latgalian has become by far more multilayered. Previous lines of power stratification within this discourse are increasingly being questioned – Latgalian-friendly views are today by far more likely to be expressed by high-ranking politicians or by political parties, and pro-Latgalian voices are much less restricted in their access to prestigious media.

In this sense, the referendum results in Latgale may also be considered a strong bottom-up reaction to existing top-down policies. These have not only helped to decrease differences in power through the acceptance of Latgalian by top-down policies, but have also triggered a reinforcement of bottom-up confidence and thereby helped to change language practices of the Latgalian-speaking community. In this sense, our research confirms Cassels Johnson's (2013) assumption that an interplay between different levels of policy-making is most likely to create changes in language practices. These language practices have, at the same time, been influenced not only by policy measures through active language management, but – in

the case of Latgalian – rather by a display of attitudes towards first the state policies (by the voters in the referendum) and then a change of attitudes in politics and the media – thereby confirming the importance of the interplay of these three layers of language policy according to Spolsky.

In summary, this shows therefore that conflict between dominant languages does not always need to be an obstacle to speakers of a smaller language. Under certain conditions discourses on major languages may facilitate re-negotiation processes about the status of and attitudes towards a smaller language in society. In fact, there are other examples where the solution of a conflict between larger languages made it necessary for a state to grant rights also to a smaller language community, e.g. in South Tyrol where speakers of Ladin have been included in the solution of the German-Italian divide (e.g. the 1948 and 1972 Autonomous Statutes, cf. Euromosaic), or in the case of Aranese in Northern Catalonia, which has considerably benefitted from the Catalan Autonomy Statute and subsequent attempts by the Catalan government to raise the status of Catalan within the context of the Spanish state (cf. Euromosaic). In a similar way, also speakers of Latgalian have become more aware of their position in society and at the same time been able to express their perceptions and desires in more successful ways because of the changed perceptions by the Latvian state. Their voice is heard more clearly – with the difference to the South Tyrolian and Catalan examples that the antagonism between the two major languages in Latvia has not been solved. Quite the opposite, Latgalian has rather been used in order to stabilize the Latvian-minded majority in the country.

Therefore, it is also by far too early to evaluate whether these changes in policies, status and attitudes will have a longer-lasting impact. Will attention for Latgalian continue to trigger changes in policies which might eventually lead to better chances of language maintenance? In particular in the light of the political crisis in Europe since the winter of 2013/14 after the Russian annexation of Crimea, of the on-going destabilization policies by Russia in other parts of Ukraine and of explicit policies by Russia to perceive all Russophones as ethnic Russians and to reserve a right to “protect” them, the question of loyalty among non-Latvian-speaking citizens of Latvia has undergone a tragic actualization which not many had considered to be possible. Yet, the attention that the region of Latgale has been receiving – not least in order to prevent increasing disloyalty towards the Latvian state – may in the end be to the benefit not only of a better integration of the Russian-speaking population, but also of a stronger Latgalian identity and an opportunity for the Latgalian language and its speakers to gain an increase in voice.

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