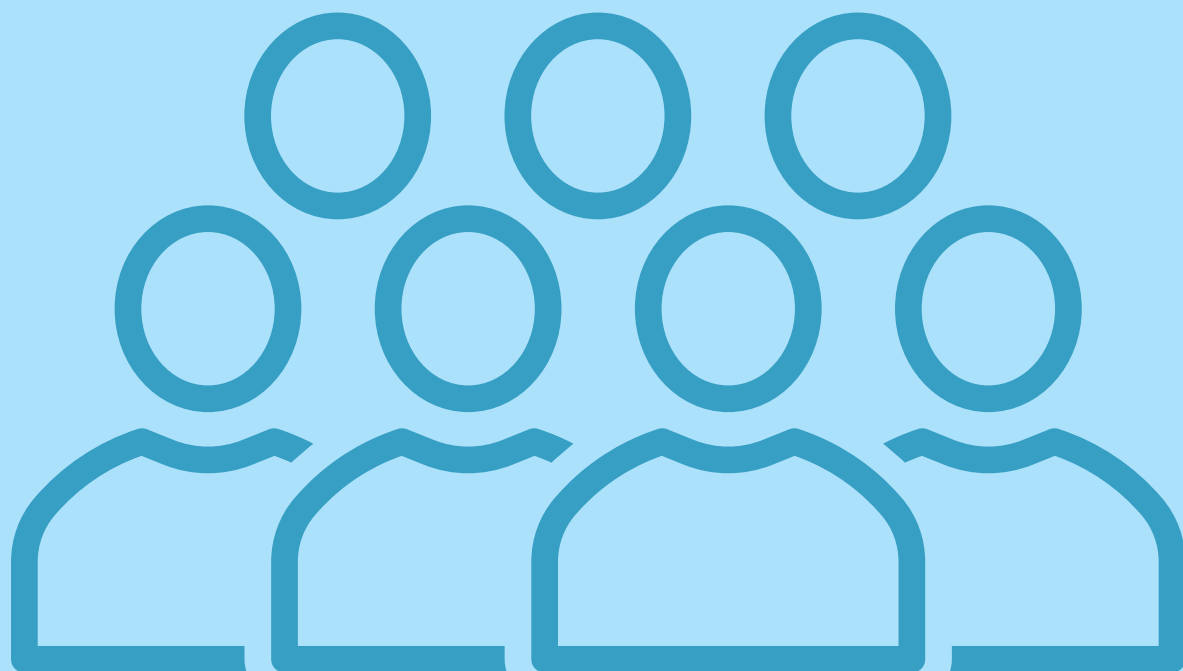


Dr Mārtiņš Hiršs
March 2025

Russian speakers in Latvia

Divisions, challenges and opportunities



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Executive summary

Soviet occupation and colonisation policies left a long-lasting legacy in Latvia. Latvia hosts the largest ethnic minority community in the European Union, with predominantly Russian-speaking non-Latvians accounting for 37 per cent of the population. More than 30 years after the end of the Soviet occupation, roughly a quarter of these non-Latvians still lack adequate Latvian language skills, limiting their economic and social opportunities. Furthermore, the legal status of some of Russian speakers also presents an ongoing challenge. As of 2024, non-citizens represent 9 per cent of Latvia's population, while approximately 2 per cent of residents hold Russian Federation passports.

Throughout the decade up to 2022, government policy toward the Russophone community can be characterised as one of deliberate neglect. Integration policy was not a government priority and attempts to change this situation were shut down. This is partially because of a deep ethnic electoral divide, with Latvian speakers voting for 'Latvian' political parties and Russian speakers predominantly supporting 'Russian' parties. The latter have been systematically excluded from government coalitions because of their sympathies towards Russia.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine this situation changed. Recent government policies, while framed as national security measures by the government, have been perceived as discriminatory by many Russophones. The government imposed new requirements on Russian citizens residing in Latvia, mandating they demonstrate basic Latvian language proficiency or face potential expulsion. This policy, together with the 'de-Russify Latvia' campaign, has been perceived as punitive and retribitional by many of those affected. The education system started a transition to exclusively Latvian-language instruction. This long-overdue policy is facing substantial implementation hurdles, however. In the media, the ban on Russia state-owned or indirectly controlled propaganda media has been unable to redirect Russian speakers towards local independent media sources.

While these and similar policies claim to enhance national security and reduce Russia's influence in Latvia, they have helped to increase social tensions and alienation within the Russophone community. 63 per cent of Russian speakers believe that Latvians' attitudes towards the Russian-speaking population has worsened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The data indicate that the current approach risks further marginalising a significant portion of Latvia's population and deepening existing social divisions.

Introduction

The challenges of social cohesion and Russian influence in Latvia are deeply rooted in the country's historical experience of Soviet occupation. Latvia gained its independence from the Russian Empire in 1918. However, it was illegally occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. Latvia remained a Soviet Republic until 1991. The Soviet era exemplified a classic colonial model of territorial conquest: following military occupation, the regime systematically exploited local resources and engaged in large-scale population transfers. The latter process was a deliberate strategy of demographic transformation, in which predominantly Russian-speaking settlers from other parts of the Soviet Union were systematically relocated to Latvia.¹ The percentage of ethnic Latvians dropped from 80 per cent in 1945 to 52 per cent in 1989.² Together with the policy of suppressing national identity, Soviet occupation fundamentally altered Latvia, creating long-lasting social and ethnic tensions that continue to resonate in contemporary Latvian society.

After regaining independence in 1991, the Latvian government implemented a set of policies designed to address the legacy of Soviet occupation and colonisation. These efforts have yielded mixed results. On one hand, Latvia has achieved significant milestones, successfully transforming into a fully functioning democratic state and securing membership in both the European Union and NATO. On the other hand, the integration of Russian-speakers who were resettled to Latvia during the Soviet period has proven to be a complex and challenging process, as this report will demonstrate.

This report provides an overview of four topics:

1. Latvia's ethnolinguistic composition
2. The legal status of Russophones
3. The voting preferences of Russophones
4. Policies towards the Russophone community

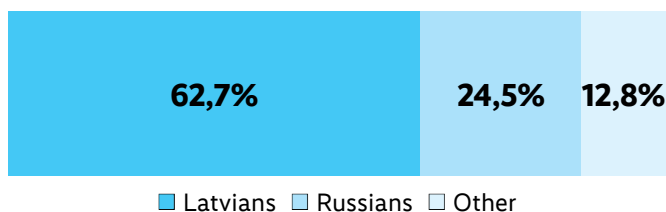
¹ Annus, E. (2012) *The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics*. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 43 (1): 31. DOI: 10.1080/01629778.2011.628551.

² Kasekamp, A. (2010) *A History of the Baltic States*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 154–155.

Latvia's ethnolinguistic composition

Latvia presents a unique demographic profile within the European Union, characterised by significant ethnic diversity, distinguishing it from other Member States. According to the 2021 national census, ethnic Latvians comprise 62.7 per cent of the population. **Non-Latvians account for 37.3 per cent.** This composition represents the highest percentage of minorities among EU Member States, in stark contrast to countries such as Germany, in which ethnocultural minorities constitute only 11 per cent of the total population.³

Ethnic composition, 2021

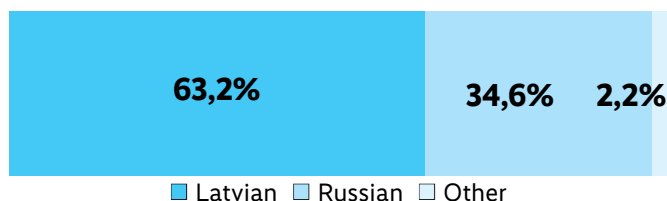


Source: *Latvijas 2021. gada tautas un mājokļu skaitīšanas galvenie rezultāti.* (2022). Oficiālais statistikas portāls. https://admin.stat.gov.lv/system/files/publication/2022-12/Tautas_Skaitisana_2021.pdf

The non-Latvian population is composed predominantly of ethnic Russians, who represent 24.5 per cent of the total population. The remaining 12.8 per cent encompasses a diverse array of ethnic groups: Belarusians (3.1 per cent), Ukrainians (2.2 per cent), Poles (2 per cent), and other smaller ethnic communities (5.5 per cent). However, looking only at ethnic composition statistics can be misleading when assessing the nature of diversity in Latvia.

A critical aspect of this demographic landscape is the linguistic and cultural homogenisation resulting from Soviet-era policies. The Soviet regime systematically introduced settlers from various Soviet republics and simultaneously implemented aggressive Russification policies designed to suppress their native languages and cultural identities. Most of these minority groups are Russian-speaking or were Russified during the Soviet occupation.

Linguistic composition, 2023



Source: *Latvijas iedzīvotāju dzimtā valoda ir latviešu.* (2023) Oficiālais statistikas portāls. <https://stat.gov.lv/lv/statistikas-temas/izglitiba-kultura-zinatne/izglitibaslimenis/preses-relizes/21052-dzimta-un-majas>

The definition of a 'native' language in Latvia is determined by the language primarily used at home. While 63.2 per cent of the total population speaks Latvian, non-Latvians are predominantly native Russian speakers. Out of all survey respondents, 34.6 per cent use the Russian language at home, while only 2.2 per cent use another language.

This legacy of Soviet occupation represents a profound vulnerability in Latvia's contemporary social and informational landscape. The widespread knowledge of the Russian language among ethnic minorities – often more fluent than their command of Latvian – has created a significant cultural and informational conduit that Russia has exploited systematically since the 1990s. Russian language proficiency among minorities has directed their media consumption toward Russian-controlled or heavily influenced media outlets. These channels have emerged as critical vectors of Russia's geopolitical influence, systematically disseminating Kremlin-aligned narratives and values.

In a strategic response to this information landscape, Latvian government institutions began systematically restricting access to Russia-based television channels and online news outlets in 2021. This measure aimed to mitigate the potential influence of external media sources that could potentially undermine national security. See the Media policy section of this report for details.

³ *Ethnocultural minorities in Europe: A potential triple win.* (February 8, 2024). McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/europe/ethnocultural-minorities-in-europe-a-potential-triple-win>.

Latvian language skills of Russophones, 2011

28%

of non-Latvians speakers have no or poor Latvian language skills

Source: Apekojuma 'Pieaugušo izglītība' rezultāti. Centrālā statistikas pārvalde, p. 7. https://admin.stat.gov.lv/system/files/publication/2023-10/Nr_08_Apekojuma_Pieauguso_izglitiba_rezultati_2022_%2823_00%29_LV.pdf

Approximately a quarter (28 per cent) of non-Latvians have very poor or no Latvian language skills. This is a trend that extends beyond the senior population. Notably, 23 per cent of pupils in minority education programmes perform poorly on the centralised Latvian language exam at the end of ninth grade (around 15 years of age).⁴ These non-Latvians tend to live in self-segregated communities, use the Russian language in daily communication and consequently cannot effectively consume Latvian media and integrate into society. The language barrier creates significant socio-economic challenges, particularly for young Russophones. Limited Latvian language proficiency restricts their employment opportunities and social integration, potentially leading to alienation and disillusionment.

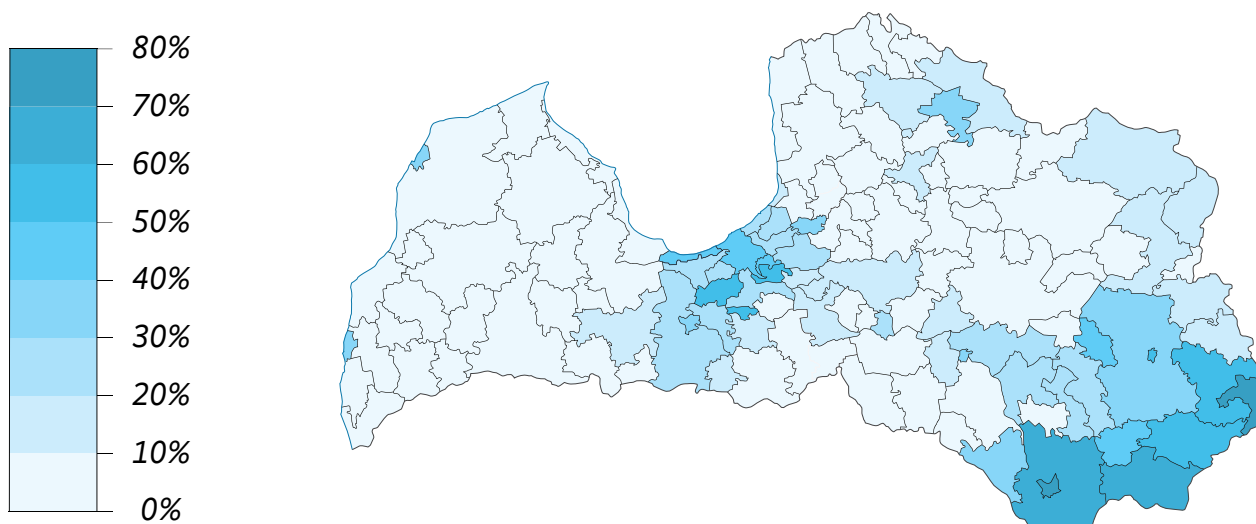
Thirty years after the Soviet occupation, a quarter of non-Latvians remain marginalised from full societal participation. The most concerning trend is the continued linguistic segregation of young Russophones, who struggle to speak Latvian and integrate effectively. This persistent lin-

guistic and social divide represents a long-standing challenge in Latvia's post-Soviet societal development, highlighting the complex legacy of Soviet occupation and colonialism.

The Russian-speaking population in Latvia has a distinctive geographical concentration around the Latgale region and major urban clusters.⁵ Latgale, an eastern region bordering Russia and Belarus, represents the most densely Russophone area, with approximately half its population being Russian-speaking. Daugavpils, the largest city in Latgale and second largest in Latvia is notable, with 80 per cent of its inhabitants Russian speaking.

Besides Latgale, urban centres form the primary nexus of Russian-speaking communities. In Riga, the capital, roughly half the population are Russophones. The surrounding metropolitan area similarly has a substantial Russian-speaking population. Western port cities such as Liepāja and Ventspils, along with Jelgava in central Latvia, also host significant Russian-speaking communities.

Geographic distribution of Russophones, 2011



Source: Pastāvīgie iedzīvotāji pa statistiskajiem reģioniem, republikas pilsētām un novadiem pēc dzimuma, mājās pārsvarā lietotās valodas un pa vecuma grupām. (2011). Oficiālais statistikas portāls. https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_OD/OSP_OD__tautassk__taut__tsk2011/TSG11-07.px

⁴ Centralizētais eksāmens latviešu valodā (mazākumtautību izglītības programmās) 9. klasei. (2022). Valsts izglītības satura centrs. <https://www.visc.gov.lv/lv/media/18533/download?attachment>.

⁵ Regrettably the 2021 census does not provide any information about the language used at home, hence the latest geographical data is available only from the 2011 census. Nonetheless, this data is still relevant and mostly correct.

Legal status of Russophones

While the majority of Russian speakers are citizens of Latvia, there exist two specific sub-groups: non-citizens and citizens of Russia. The former are granted permanent residence in Latvia and enjoy most of the rights of Latvian citizens. The latter are allowed to reside in Latvia with residence permits. Both have been politically sensitive issues within Latvia. Russia has used both as leverage in foreign policy.

Non-citizens of Latvia, 2024

9%

of total population are non-citizens

Source: *Iedzīvotāji pēc dzimuma, valstiskās piederības un pa vecuma grupām gada sākumā 1996 – 2024*. Oficiālais statistikas portāls. https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRV/IRV020

After Latvia regained its independence in the 1990s it created a special status for people who were settled in the territory of Latvia throughout the Soviet occupation. Those who had resided continuously in Latvia for at least 10 years and were not citizens of any other country could obtain non-citizen status and continue living in the country. After the establishment of non-citizen status, 27 per cent of the inhabitants of Latvia became non-citizens in 1996. This status was originally intended to be temporary, with non-citizens expected to either naturalise or acquire the nationality of another country. While the number of non-citizens initially decreased, as many became citizens of Latvia or left the country, this trend eventually slowed. As of 2024, non-citizens still represent 9 per cent of Latvia's population.

Non-citizens are granted permanent residence in Latvia and enjoy state protection both within the country and abroad, along with most other rights. While they are not yet citizens, Latvia has consistently maintained that non-citizens should not be classified as stateless persons, a stance that has been accepted by international human rights monitoring bodies. Non-citizens are issued a special passport, which grants the special status of belonging to the state and has been recognised by the EU as valid for visa-free travel allowing non-citizens to enjoy Latvian diplomatic protection. **The main differences between Latvian**

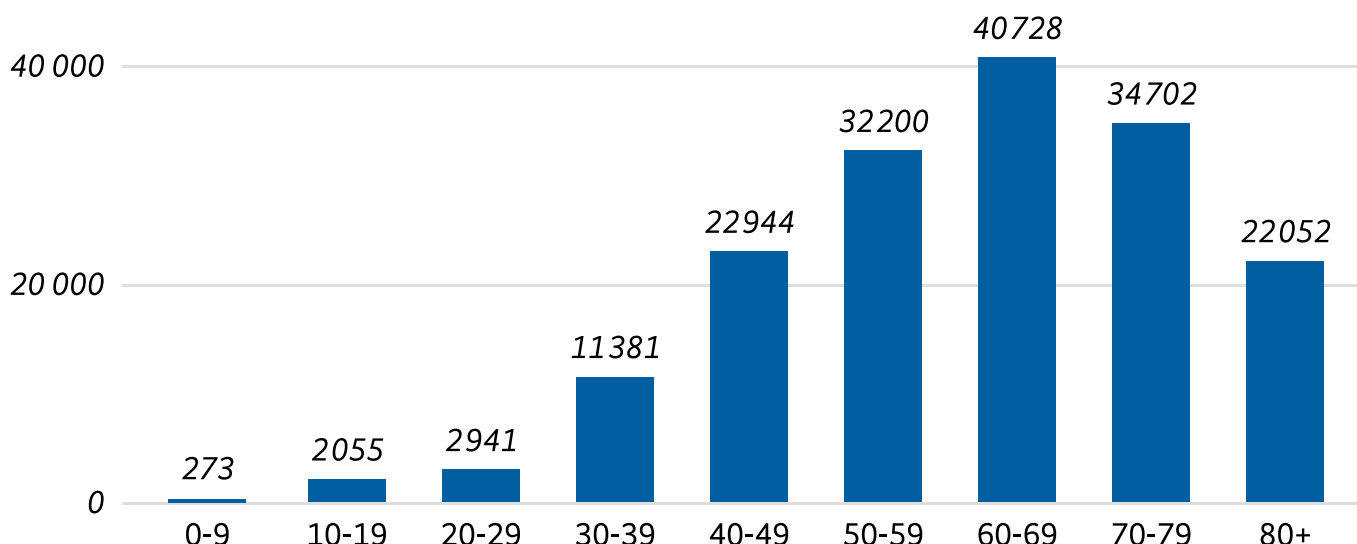
citizens and non-citizens are that the latter are not entitled to vote in parliamentary and municipal elections, and there are certain restrictions on working in the civil service or holding positions related to national security.

Non-citizen status has contributed to the alienation of these individuals from the state. The literal translation of the 'Nepilsoņa pase' document is 'Non-citizen's passport'. However, the legal term used in the official translation is 'Alien's Passport', which is clearly written on the cover of the passport. From a legal standpoint, this term is valid. However, the use of the term 'alien' has led to negative perceptions, as it is seen as both humorous and offensive. Historically, the ironic slogan 'The aliens are coming' has been used in Russophone protests against government policies toward non-citizens and the Russophone community.

Most non-citizens in Latvia are Russian-speaking, the majority being over the age of 60. In 2024, 58 per cent of the 169,276 non-citizens were aged 60 or older. However, some young children are non-citizens as well. Until 2020, nearly 30 years after the restoration of independence, the children of non-citizens could still be registered as non-citizens as citizenship was not granted to newborns automatically. Non-citizen parents had to actively request citizenship for their child by ticking a box on the birth registration document. **It was only in 2020 that Latvia began automatically granting citizenship to all newborns.** This is the only policy implemented over the past decade that has been aimed at the inclusion of non-citizens.

In recent decades, there has been a lack of significant policies aimed at integrating non-citizens. For instance, in 2016 President Raimonds Vējonis established a Social Cohesion Working

Age distribution of non-citizens, 2024



Source: Iedzīvotāji pēc dzimuma, valstiskās piederības un pa vecuma grupām gada sākumā 1996 – 2024. Oficiālais statistikas portāls. https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRV/IRV020

Group intended to develop strategies for integration and to engage non-citizens. However, the National Alliance, a conservative nationalist political party within the ruling coalition at the time, rejected all proposals related to this initiative. In the ensuing years, there have been no further major systematic attempts to address non-citizen integration. The government's unofficial stance appears to be that this issue will resolve itself over time.

Citizens of the Russian Federation, 2023

2%

of the total population are citizens of the Russian Federation

Source: Latvijas iedzīvotāju sadalījums pēc valstiskās piederības. (1 July 2023). Pilsonības un migrācijas lietu pārvalde. <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/media/10698/download?attachment>

Another subgroup of Russophones in Latvia consists of citizens of the Russian Federation. In 2023, approximately 48,000 people (2 per cent of the population) held Russian passports. They are permitted to reside in Latvia with special residence permits. Some of them have immigrated to Latvia over recent decades, but the majority have been living in Latvia for decades, even before the restoration of independence, and have acquired Russian citizenship within the past three decades.

Passportisation policy of the Russian Federation

One of the elements of the compatriots policy around 2010 was **passportisation** – Russia granted non-citizens in Estonia and Latvia a simplified procedure for acquiring Russian citizenship. This was accompanied by an information campaign. Essentially Russia was offering Russian passports to ethnic Russians living in Latvia in an attempt to increase its leverage and political influence in Latvia.

Those who chose to accept Russian passports probably did so for both personal and pragmatic reasons. Personal reasons can vary considerably, but there were two main pragmatic reasons **why people wanted a Russian passport**:

- **Ease of travel to Russia and Europe.** For a Latvian resident a Russian passport gives its holder two privileges: in addition to enjoying the right to travel freely in the EU and the Schengen zone as a resident of Latvia, they can also travel freely to Russia and have all the rights of a citizen of Russia.
- **Monetary incentives.** The retirement age in Russia around 2010 was considerably lower than in Latvia. Women could retire at 55 and men at 60. In Latvia the retirement age for both men and women at the time was 62. For seniors, obtaining Russian citizenship was a way to access retirement pensions much earlier than they otherwise would.

Most of them, around 25,000 people, became citizens of Russia around 2010 as a result of Russia's 'passportisation' campaign.⁶

Starting in 1996 a new Russian foreign and security policy doctrine started to emerge. Russia started to assert itself as a great power charged with defending ethnic and linguistic communities with historic or cultural ties to Russia ('compatriots') within its self-styled 'sphere of influence'.⁷ Russia's compatriots policy envisions the protection of Russian speakers, ethnic Russians and Russian citizens living abroad and attempts to use them as a tool in Russia's offensive foreign policy. As Sergey Karaganov, Vladimir Putin's advisor from 2001 to 2013, openly asserted: 'Everything must be done to keep Russian speakers in those regions where they live right now [former Soviet republics] ... because we must leave these strands of influence [leaving open] further prospects'.⁸

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and in response to concerns about Russia's compatriots policy, the Saeima (parliament) amended the Immigration Act. The amendment requires approximately 25,000 former Latvian citizens and non-citizens who have acquired Russian citizenship and currently reside in Latvia to demonstrate basic Latvian language proficiency or face expulsion as a consequence of non-compliance. For comprehensive details, please refer to the Language Policy section of the report.

⁶ Spundīna, L. (3 April 2023) *Cik veiksmīgi Latvijā integrēti iedzīvotāji ar Krievijas pasēm?* LSM. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/04.04.2023-cik-veiksmigi-latvija-integreti-iedzivotaji-ar-krievijas-pasem.a503573>.

⁷ Melvin, N. (1 May 2020) *Russia's Policy of Passport Proliferation*. RUSI. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-policy-passport-proliferation>.

⁸ Conley, H.A. and Gerber, T.P. (eds) (2011) *Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century: An Examination of Russian Compatriot Policy in Estonia*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, p. 12.

Voting preferences of Russophones

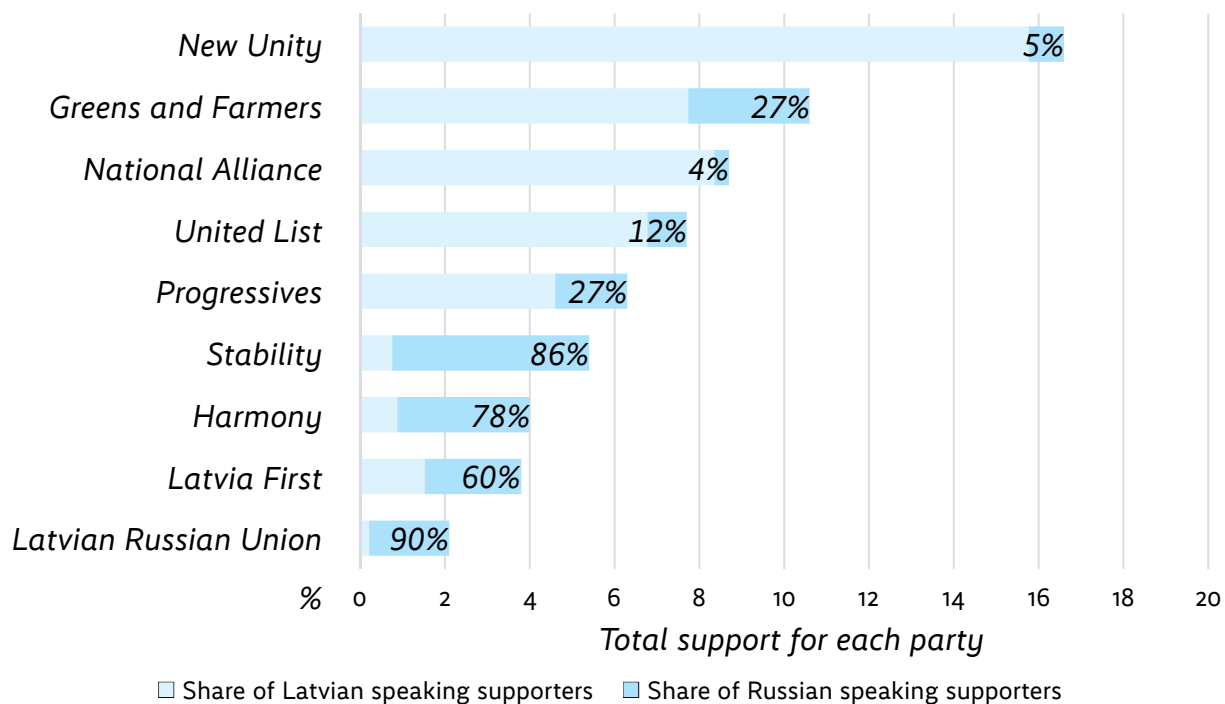
Latvia's political landscape is characterised by a pronounced ethnic electoral divide, rooted in the perception among Russian speakers that political parties formed by Latvian speakers do not represent their interests. This sentiment has crystallised into a distinct voting pattern whereby the majority of Russian-speaking voters consistently support parties composed predominantly of Russian-speaking candidates. This pattern has created an informal division between the 'Latvian' and 'Russian' parties. In the 2022 Parliamentary election, 'Harmony, Stability!' and the Latvian Russian Union were the 'Russian' parties and received the majority of Russophone votes. This voting pattern reflects deeper social cleavages and political marginalisation of the Russophone population in Latvia.

National Alliance and New Unity, the two dominant ruling coalition parties over the past decade, have consistently maintained power with minimal Russophone electoral sup-

port. **New Unity** (25 seats in the Saeima), a centrist party, has no targeted Russophone outreach. **National Alliance** (12 seats), a national conservative party, maintains an explicitly anti-Russophone stance (covered in the next section of this report). This has resulted in systematic marginalisation of Russian-speaking communities, whose political needs remain unaddressed because of these parties' lack of electoral incentives to represent them.

The Harmony party (not represented in parliament) has historically attracted the majority of Russian-speaking voters and even won multiple elections. Despite these electoral victories, Harmony has consistently been excluded from governing coalitions because of its historical ties with Putin's United Russia party and the Communist Party of China.⁹ This repeated exclusion has reinforced Russophone perceptions that elections do not matter and Latvia is not democratic, narratives amplified by Russian propaganda.¹⁰

Share of Russian-speaking voters in the electorates of different parties, 2022



Source: Kažoka, I. (2022). *Desire for Stability Versus Desire for Change: Polarization of Attitudes During Latvia's General Elections of 2022*. Providus. <https://providus.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Polarization-of-Attitudes-During-Latvias-General-Elections-of-2022.pdf>

⁹ Milne, R. (5 October 2014) *Pro-Russian party takes biggest vote share in Latvian elections*. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/fba58d3a-4c5f-11e4-a0d7-00144fe-ab7de>.

¹⁰ Balodis, M. (22 May 2020). *Kāpēc Latviju sauc par neizdevušos valsti?* TVNET. <https://www.tvnet.lv/6978584/kapec-latviju-sauc-par-neizdevusos-valsti>.

In recent years, Harmony has increasingly become critical of Russia, even explicitly condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a result, Harmony lost voter support and didn't get any seats in the 2022 elections.

Two other parties maintain a pro-Kremlin orientation. **Stability!** (10 seats out of 100) is a populist party formed before the 2022 Saeima elections that frequently disseminates conspiracy theories and Kremlin-aligned narratives. **The Latvian Russian Union** (not represented in parliament) is a long-standing party with strong pro-Kremlin leanings. Its former European Parliament member Tatjana Ždanoka is facing accusations of collaboration with Russian intelligence agencies during her parliamentary tenure (2004–2024). The three aforementioned parties probably receive a significant portion of Russophone votes because they communicate in Russian and address issues relevant for the Russophone community. All parties also harbour sympathies towards Russia, although Harmony has distanced itself from Russia since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Several 'Latvian' parties attract some Russophone votes, though many have controversial connections to local oligarchs. **Latvia First** (8 seats), drawing 60 per cent of its support from Russian-speaking voters, is led by Ainārs Šlesers, a local oligarch who employs Trump-like rhetoric and campaign strategies. **The Greens and Farmers** (16 seats) party has historically been associated with Aivars Lembergs, a prominent oligarch featured on Western sanctions lists. In recent years, the party has attempted to distance itself from Lembergs's controversial reputation. However, both oligarchs have expressed statements favorable towards Russia and both parties have attempted to engage the Russophone electorate. In contrast, the **Progressives** (10 seats) stand out as a party without any ties to oligarchic interests. As Latvia's most liberal political party, they distinguish themselves by actively supporting LGBTQIA+ rights, women's rights, and progressive social policies. They also reach out to the Russophone community in their election campaigns, and they have managed to draw some support from liberal, West-leaning Russophones.

Policies towards the Russophone community

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the previous two coalition governments implemented a series of policies targeting Latvia's Russian-speaking community. The National Alliance, the primary architects of these policies, framed them as necessary measures to enhance national security and counteract the Soviet legacy. In contrast, many within the Russophone community perceived these policies as revanchist, discriminatory and undemocratic. These policies have managed to alienate a significant portion of Russophones.

63%

of Russian speakers think Latvians have started treating Russian-speakers worse

Source: Krumm, R., Šukevičs, K. and Zariņš, T. (2023) *Under Pressure: An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking Minority in Latvia*. Friedrich Ebert Foundation, p. 7 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/baltikum/20445.pdf>

According to 2023 survey data, 63 per cent of Russian speakers think that the attitude of Latvians towards the Russian-speaking population of Latvia has **worsened** since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The previous two coalition governments pursued multiple policies that were endorsed by Latvian speakers but were highly unpopular with many Russophones. For example, the government removed various monuments glorifying the Soviet military and Russian culture, the most notable being the so-called Victory Monument in Riga. Cities in Latvia renamed some of their streets and buildings to eradicate Russia-related names. The Saeima made amendments to the Immigration Act in 2022, requiring Russian citizens living in Latvia to prove a certain level of Latvian language skills. Parliament has also started to transition to exclusively Latvian-language education in minority schools. Politicians from the Conservative party started the 'de-Russify Latvia' campaign, which many Russophones perceive as highly offensive. The current government has been struggling with a legacy proposal from the previous ruling coalition to close Public Broadcasting's Russian-language section.

Before 2022, government policy toward the Russophone community was characterised by deliberate neglect. The

National Alliance consistently obstructed meaningful integration efforts, particularly during its control of the Ministry of Culture, the governmental body responsible for integration policy, from 2011 to 2023. As subsequent sections will demonstrate, substantive integration was absent during this period, reflecting the political and social marginalisation of the Russophone community.

This section of the report will cover major recent policy changes (or lack thereof) in five areas:

- Integration
- Language
- Media
- Education
- Economy

Integration policy

Over the past decade, Latvia's integration of its Russian-speaking community has been "ineffective," "unclear" and "uncoordinated."¹¹ Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine allowed nationalist parties to frame the Russophone community and language as a national security threat. Hence, the previous two coalition governments pursued an approach characterised by nationalist rhetoric around 'de-Russifying Latvia', which many Russophones perceived as punitive and retributive. The current coalition government, while departing from the most controversial previous policies, remains hesitant to meaningfully engage with the Russophone community. This cautious approach continues a longstanding pattern of systemic marginalisation of this community.

Integration policy in Latvia has been stagnant and not a political priority for more than a decade. The integration policy outlined in the policy paper 'On the guidelines for the development of a united and civically active society for 2021–2027' was developed under the auspices of the National Alliance party, which was in charge of the Min-

¹¹ *Saliedētas sabiedrības politika – neskaidra un nekoordinēta*. (2025). Latvijas Republikas Valsts kontrole, pp. 8-11 <https://www.lrvk.gov.lv/lv/getrevisionfile/29703-TrunR1tvtpeFUQLmyE62yFTRI0VBDd3T-.pdf>

istry of Culture. Russian speakers, who comprise roughly 35 per cent of the Latvian population, are mentioned only twice in this document. However, the Roma minority, which makes up roughly 0.4 per cent of the total population, is mentioned more than 60 times.¹² While Russian speakers have not been a priority for this integration policy, some of the initiatives outlined in the document do aim to integrate the Russophone minority.

The linguistic and social divisions in Latvian society can be directly attributed to inadequate and incomplete integration policies implemented since the 1990s. These policies consistently failed to address the comprehensive linguistic and social barriers facing the Russian-speaking population. A striking example of this systemic failure is that integration initiatives targeting Russian speakers are rarely conducted in the Russian language, undermining their potential effectiveness and reinforcing existing social exclusion. This persistent policy approach has perpetuated a cycle of linguistic, social and political separation, preventing the meaningful integration of a significant portion of Latvia's population.

"I believe that the term 'Russian speakers' should be removed from communications. We should talk about Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Kazakhs and so on, and not about some kind of mystical Russian-speaking people."¹³

Liana Langa – National Alliance party, former member of the Conservative political party

The National Alliance and Conservative parties in Latvia have consistently framed 'Russian speakers' as dangerous and toxic following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These national-conservative politicians claim that Putin uses the term 'Russian speakers' to exert Russia's influence abroad. They argue that Latvia should not use the same terms used by Putin and Russia. These ideas have pervaded some government institutions. Some government officials have emphasised the use of the term 'non-Latvians' or similar, and have criticised people and scholars who talk about 'the Russian-speaking community' in Latvia.

There are two problems with this approach, however. First, it obscures the fact that these people do speak Russian. Hence, the Russian language is left out of integration policy and government communications (and a quarter of Russophones do not speak Latvian fluently). Second, and even more problematic, calls to abandon the term 'Russian speakers' often go hand in hand with more hard-core, even Russophobic ideas (covered below). These policies and statements from the nationalist National Alliance and Conservative parties have been perceived as offensive or Russophobic by many Russophones.

Language policy

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Saeima amended the Immigration Act, which required all former citizens and non-citizens of Latvia who have acquired Russian citizenship and live in Latvia (roughly 25,000 people) to take a language exam by September 2023. In this exam, they had to prove that their Latvian language skills are at least at a basic level or face expulsion from Latvia. Most of the people targeted by this policy were in their 60s and 70s. As the September 2023 deadline approached, the current coalition government extended it for another two years. As of March 2024, a total of 1,017 Russian citizens had not submitted the necessary documents to extend their stay in Latvia for an additional two years. Of these, at least 213 had left Latvia for another EU country, and six had already been issued with an order to leave Latvia. The government plans gradually to expel the rest of those who have made no effort to renew their residence permits.¹⁴

On one hand, the members of the previous government coalition, especially the National Alliance, argued that this policy would strengthen national security. Russia giving out passports to people living in Latvia was part of their 'compatriots' policy, which attempts to increase Russian leverage and political influence in Latvia. Protecting 'compatriots' abroad has been an active part of Russia's foreign policy for two decades and one of the claimed *casus belli* for invading Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.

On the other hand, this policy has created resentment among many Russophones and fostered a perception that the Latvian government is mistreating elderly Russians to get back at Russia, even though these individuals have nothing to do with the invasion of Ukraine. Opponents of this policy argue that there is no evidence that these

¹² Ministru kabineta 2021. gada 5. februāra rīkojums Nr. 72 "Par Saliedētās un pilsoniski aktīvas sabiedrības attīstības pamatnostādņēm 2021.–2027. gadam". (2021). Likumi.lv <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/320841>

¹³ Langa, L. (1 November 2023) *Termins "krievvalodīgie" ir jāizņem no saziņas aprites*. <https://lasi.lv/latvija-pasaule/viedoklis/liana-linga-termins-krievvalodigie-ir-jaiznem-no-sazinas-aprites.7868>

¹⁴ Rīta Panorāma (8 March 2024) *First six expulsion orders issued to Russian citizens in Latvia*. Eng.LSM. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/08.03.2024-first-six-expulsion-orders-issued-to-russian-citizens-in-latvia.a545938>

seniors pose a threat to national security simply because they have acquired Russian citizenship and have only limited proficiency in the Latvian language. This policy has fostered alienation from the state and increased tensions between the two ethnolinguistic communities. These perceptions have not been manufactured artificially by Russian propaganda. They are the result of what Russophones perceive as revanchist policies passed by the previous two coalition governments.

The two previous government coalitions and former president Egils Levits endorsed the campaign to ‘de-Russify Latvia’. Before the 2022 Parliamentary elections, the Conservatives party floated the idea that the use of the Russian language should be restricted in public places. The leader of this campaign was a member of the Conservative party, Liana Langa. The official goal of the ‘de-Russify Latvia’ campaign is to remove the Russian language from public life in Latvia. However, in practice, she and supporters of this campaign disseminated hateful and aggressive content towards both Latvians who speak Russian and native Russian speakers in Latvia. For example, Russian language ‘disgusts’ Langa, as do businesses that use Russian or where employees talk among themselves in Russian.¹⁵ Many Russophones perceive this campaign as highly offensive.

Media policy

The media has been ‘one of Russia’s most powerful tools¹⁶ of influence in Latvia. Since the restoration of independence in 1991, a considerable segment of Latvia’s population has not been consuming local media but has been dependent on media outlets from Russia. For decades, the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia have been systemically shaping the values, attitudes and beliefs of Russian speakers in Latvia. ‘Russian media companies and their broadcasting services work essentially

71%

of Russian speakers used to consume currently banned Russian media outlets

Source: Pētījums par mediju un tehnoloģiju lietošanas paradumiem Latvijā un mediju vides attīstības tendencēm (2023). CIVITTA, p. 154 <https://www.neplp.lv/lv/media/6708/download?attachment>

in tandem with the Russian political authorities, at least in the sense that they convey political messages coherent with the latter actors’ views in their news services in the Baltic states.’¹⁷ Russian media in the Baltic states have freely promoted traditional moral values (as opposed to ‘decadent liberal’ values) and the virtues of authoritarianism (as opposed to ‘chaotic and incompetent’ democracy), as well as its own, Russia-centric version of history and international events.

For many Russophones, until 2021, when Latvia started banning Russian media outlets, their information about Latvia came from Russia-based TV channels and online news outlets, which were used by 71 per cent of Russophones. In response to Russia’s increasingly hostile foreign policy, Latvia’s Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) started banning Kremlin-aligned and Russia-based TV channels in the first half of 2021, thus even before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These included the most popular Russian-language channels in Latvia, PBK, RTR Planeta Baltija, NTV Mir Baltic, and REN TV Baltic. After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, NEPLP closed most of the remaining Russia-based TV channels and online news outlets still available in Latvia. Following the ban, the consumption of Russia-based TV channels and online news outlets has been declining in Latvia. In autumn 2023 only 14 per cent of Russophones admitted they were consuming banned Russian media, predominantly through YouTube.¹⁸

While Latvia has banned access to media outlets directly or indirectly controlled by the Kremlin, this has not yielded significant positive change. First, the government has failed to attract Russophones to independent local media. Russian speakers have not started consuming good-quality independent media. Consumption of local TV channels¹⁹ or local online news sources has not increased since the ban. Second, attitudes among Rus-

15 Search results for use of the term ‘pretīgi’ (disgust) in Tweets of Liana Langa. Available at: [https://x.com/search?q=pret%C4%ABgi%20\(from%3Aliana_langa\)&src=typed_query&f=top](https://x.com/search?q=pret%C4%ABgi%20(from%3Aliana_langa)&src=typed_query&f=top)

16 Winnerstig, M. (ed.) (2014) *Tools of Destabilization Russian Soft Power and Non-military Influence in the Baltic States*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), p. 87 https://appc.lv/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/FOI_Non_military.pdf

17 Ibid., p. 143. https://appc.lv/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/FOI_Non_military.pdf

18 Pētījums par mediju un tehnoloģiju lietošanas paradumiem Latvijā un mediju vides attīstības tendencēm (2023). CIVITTA, pp. 154–155 <https://www.neplp.lv/lv/media/6708/download?attachment>

19 TV viewership in Latvia, percentage share of the total viewing time (n.d.). Kantar. https://www.kantar.lv/petijumu_dati/televizija

sian speakers towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine and similar questions have not significantly improved in the wake of the ban.²⁰ Quite the contrary, many Russophones perceive this ban as 'censorship' and proof that Latvia is not democratic.

The latest political contention with regard to media policy has been caused by the proposal to shut down Russian-language Public Broadcasting. The National Alliance party, which has for decades obstructed any policy extending a hand to Russophones, is currently lobbying for the abolition of Russian in Public Broadcasting's Russian-language section – LTV7, LR4, and Rus. LSM – by 2026. This policy of banning Russian from Public Broadcasting is ideologically driven. It was proposed and included in Latvia's National Security Concept by former Minister of Culture Nauris Puntulis, of the National Alliance. Puntulis stated that the inclusion of the Public Broadcasting Russian-language ban in the National Security Concept was 'purely my own and my bureau's decision'.²¹ It is the political agenda of one party, not an evidence-based policy that enhances national security, based on a comprehensive agreement of security experts and institutions. While the current ruling coalition does not support this idea, this proposal will remain a hot topic in Latvian politics for years.

Education policy

From September 2023 Latvia embarked on education reform in minority schools. The legacy of the Soviet education system was a division between schools which taught in Russian and in Latvian. In 2004, the transition to bilingual education was started in all minority schools of Latvia, gradually increasing the number of subjects to be studied in Latvian. This system whereby minority schools taught at least 60 per cent of subjects in Latvian is gradu-

43%

of minority schools have problems in the transition to education exclusively in Latvian

Source: *Vienotas skolas pieeja vairumā izvērtēto izglītības iestāžu tiek īstenota labi.* (12 March 2024) State Education Quality Service. <https://www.ikvd.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/vienotas-skolas-pieeja-vairuma-izverteto-izglitibas-iestazu-tiek-istenota-labi>

ally being phased out. Starting September 2025, all education programmes will be taught only in the official state language. This reform, at least on paper, will end the divided education system and the existence of the so-called 'Russian schools'. However, this long overdue education reform is trying to fix deeply rooted, decades-long problems in minority schools within a few years.

The State Education Quality Service monitoring has already identified significant challenges with the transition to exclusively Latvian-language education. The State Education Quality Service conducted an evaluation of the transition to teaching in Latvian in 134 minority schools across Latvia from September 2023 to February 2024. It concluded that in 43 per cent of schools the transition to exclusively Latvian-language education is insufficient or needs to be improved. The evaluation identified that 22 per cent of schools had children whose language skills were so poor that they were not able to learn in Latvian. They also found 87 teachers who lacked sufficient Latvian language skills to be able to teach. Four schools did not use Latvian in classes that were supposed to take place in Latvian. Out of the monitored schools, 32 per cent had long-term vacancies. Russian-speaking parents also express fears that the education reform is rushed, chaotic and will lead to worse quality education for their kids.

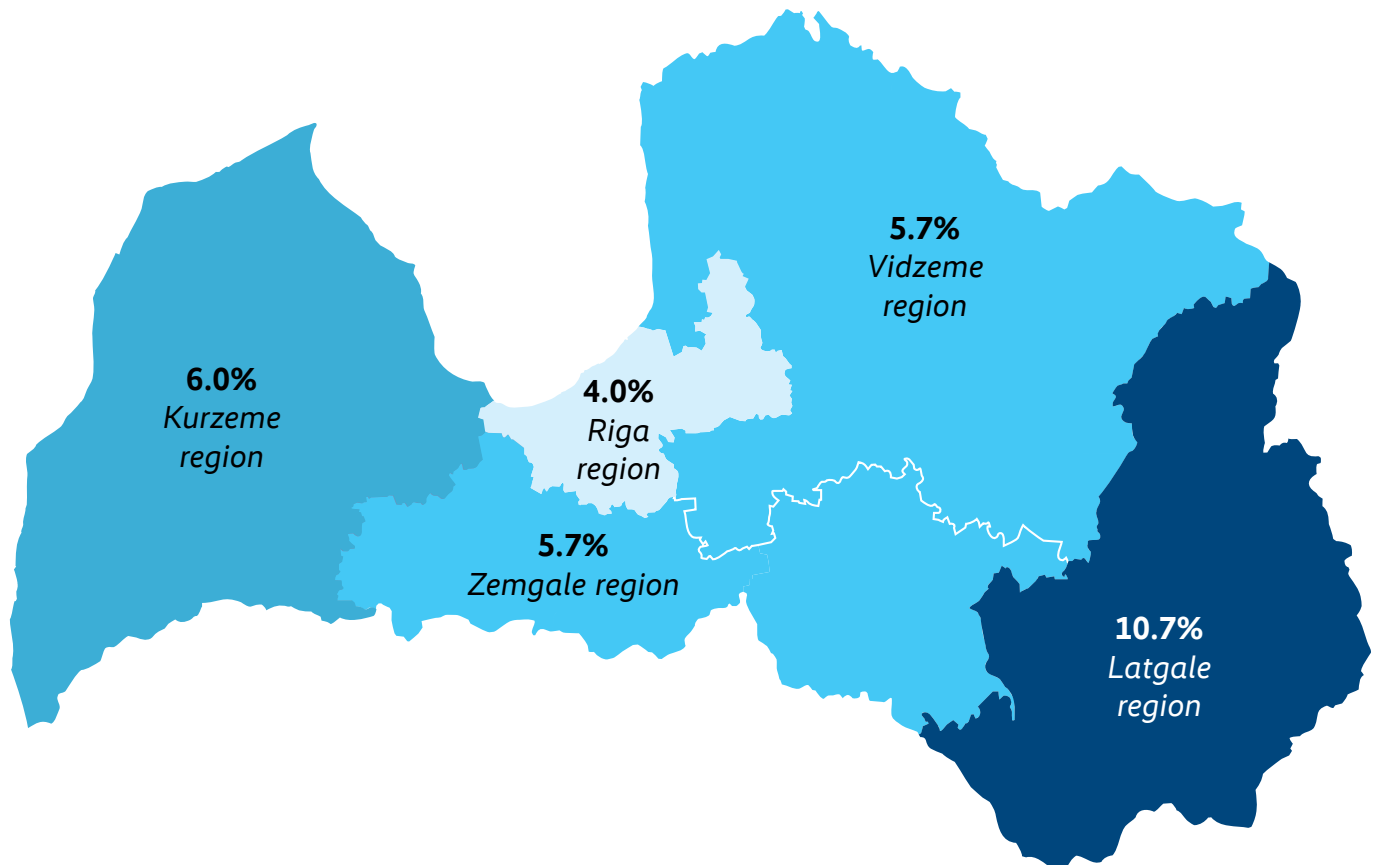
Minority school education has been a problematic issue for decades. In 2022, in the centralised Latvian language exam at the end of the 9th grade, 23 per cent of pupils (around age 15) in minority education programmes performed poorly,²² which means that they graduated without being able to communicate in the Latvian language. This is because some minority schools did not teach 60 per cent of subjects in Latvian even more than a decade

²⁰ Krumm, R., Šukevičs, K. and Zariņš, T. (2023) *Under Pressure: An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking Minority in Latvia*. Friedrich Ebert Foundation. p. 10-11 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/baltikum/20445.pdf>

²¹ Kļava, B. (6 October 2023) *Pētnieki un uzraugs: Sasteigtā krievu valodas pazušana no sabiedriskajiem medijiem kaitēs valsts drošībai*. Atvērtie faili. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/26.10.2023-petnieki-un-uzraugs-sasteigta-krievu-valodas-pazusana-no-sabiedriskajiem-medijiem-kaites-valsts-drosibai.a529266/#8>

²² *Centralizētais eksāmens latviešu valodā (mazākumtautību izglītības programmās) 9. klasei* (2022) Valsts izglītības satura centrs. <https://www.visc.gov.lv/lv/media/18533/download?attachment>

Unemployment rate by region, January 2025



Source: *Unemployment statistics* (31 January 2025) State Employment Agency. <https://www.nva.gov.lv/en/unemployment-statistics-1>

after the previous education reform, which increased the proportion of mandatory classes in Latvian. Furthermore, the government authorities had not fully enforced this previous law. The gap between the previous policy and its implementation has created a new generation of segregated and un-integrated young Russian speakers who will also have difficulty finding a job in Latvia and becoming full-fledged members of society. Current reform attempts to fix these deeply rooted problems also risk alienating Russian-speaking parents if the reform is perceived to be a failure.

Economy policy

Although specific data about economic equality between Latvian and Russian speakers are not available from the

Central Statistical Bureau, income inequality is undoubtedly a problem in Latvia. The Gini coefficient measures inequality among income levels, with 0 being completely equal and 1 completely unequal. In 2021, the Gini coefficient for Latvia was 0.343.²³ This is the third-highest score in the EU, although lower than those of the United Kingdom and the United States. This income inequality trend has been stable, without any improvement, since 2010. Furthermore, Russophones are likely to be affected by income inequality in Latvia slightly more than Latvian speakers.

Latgale region, in which half of the population are Russophones, has been stagnating and somewhat neglected by the government for the past decade. Latgale is the poorest region not only in the Baltics, but also the whole EU. Unemployment in Latgale in January 2025 was 10.7 per cent, while the average unemployment rate in Latvia was only 5.5 per cent. Average wages after tax in Q3 2024 in Latgale were EUR 910, almost EUR 300 less than the average wage in the country (EUR 1,231), and EUR 400 less than the average wage in Riga (EUR 1,351).²⁴

²³ OECD (2024) *Income inequality (indicator). Gini coefficient*. OECD Library. doi: 10.1787/459aa7f1-en 20

²⁴ *Strādājošo mēneša vidējā darba samaksa reģionos (eiro) – Bruto/ Neto (n.d.)* Officiālais statistikas portāls. https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START__EMP__DS__DSV/DSV041c

Economic stagnation in the Latgale region dates back to the 2008 Great Recession. Subsequent government support has been sporadic and unfocused. The region's long-term economic marginalisation reflects a broader systemic issue. It is likely that as half of the population of Latgale are Russian speakers, who tend to vote for the so-called 'Russian' parties, the 'Latvian' coalition parties do not have any political incentive to invest actively in this region to fix systemic unemployment and underdevelopment. The political division between the 'Latvian' and 'Russian' parties reflects a deep social cleavage that permeates Latvian politics and has probably led to the economic marginalisation of the Latgale region and consequently also of a significant segment of the Russophone population.

Conclusion

Latvian society is fraught with systemic, long-term divisions. These divisions are illustrated by the distinct voting pattern whereby the majority of Russian-speaking voters consistently support parties composed predominantly of Russian-speaking candidates and most Latvians vote for the so-called 'Latvian' parties. Similar divisions exist between segments of both ethno-linguistic communities relation to a multitude of other issues. The latest government policies towards the Russophone community, covered in this report, are also perceived significantly differently by Latvian and Russian speakers.

These divisions create a unique set of challenges for Latvia. Not only does Latvia host the largest ethnolinguistic minority of any EU member state, but also relations between the titular nation and the Russophone minority have become strained. While during the decade before 2022 government policy toward the Russophone community can be characterised as one of deliberate neglect, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed the dynamic between the communities. For many Latvians Russia's ongoing atrocities in Ukraine evoke memories of Soviet repressions during the occupation. This reopening of deeply engrained generational trauma, together with a more acute military threat from Russia has led to securitisation policies aimed at the Russophone minority and the Russian language in Latvia.

Many of the new government policies towards the Russophone community have been framed as national security measures aimed at reducing Russia's influence in Latvia. However, these policies, together with negative statements from national conservative Latvian politicians, have been perceived as discriminatory, punitive and retribitional by many Russophones. In the short term, these new government policies have managed to alienate many in the Russophone community. It is unclear whether these policies will fulfil their official goal of creating a more cohesive society in the long term.

About the author

Dr Mārtiņš Hiršs has been researching Russian disinformation and influence in the Baltics since 2014. He has attained extensive experience working on projects for the American GEC, the British FCDO and NATO, as well as the Latvian Ministry of Defence. He has a PhD in Politics from the University of Latvia and an MA in Politics from New York University.

Russian speakers in Latvia

Predominantly Russian-speaking non-Latvian minorities comprise 37 per cent of Latvia's population. Latvia also faces ongoing socio-political challenges stemming from the legacy of the Soviet occupation. Throughout the decade before 2022, government policy toward the Russophone community can be characterised as one of deliberate neglect. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Latvia implemented a new set of policies towards Russian speakers, including language requirements for citizens of Russia, education reforms, and restrictions on media based in Russia to name but a few. While these and similar measures claim to strengthen national security and reduce Russia's influence in Latvia, they also have increased social tensions. Some 63 per cent of Russian speakers report that the attitude of Latvians towards the Russian-speaking population of Latvia has worsened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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