Luīze Līce-Tane, Mārtiņš Vargulis
May 2025

Latvia's municipal elections:

political trends, regional dynamics and public sentiment ahead of 2025

POWERHOUSE LATVIA

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Regional Office for Baltic States

Luīze Līce-Tane, Mārtiņš Vargulis
May 2025

Latvia's municipal elections:

*political trends, regional dynamics
and public sentiment ahead of 2025*

Content

Executive summary

This study provides a broad analysis of Latvia's municipal political landscape ahead of the 2025 elections, assessing how regional inequality, demographic divides, electoral dynamics and institutional reform intersect to shape public sentiment and governance. While the 2020/21 regional reform introduced major administrative changes, its effects on political engagement and trust appear limited. Instead, long-standing disparities between the capital and the regions, uneven service delivery and deeply rooted leadership structures remain the key drivers of political attitudes across municipalities.

Drawing on case studies and sentiment analysis, the research highlights four persistent themes in public discourse: frustration with financial management, disillusionment with entrenched leadership, the symbolic role of infrastructure, and ideological polarisation, particularly in cities such as Rēzekne and Riga. The data also reveal strong regional variation in political competition, with parties such as the Union of Greens and Farmers and the Latvian Regional Alliance performing best in municipalities with strong local identities.

Demographic analysis further illustrates the complexity of Latvia's municipal environment. Cities such as Daugavpils and Rēzekne maintain large Russian-speaking populations, while others, such as Valmiera and Ogre, remain more ethnically homogeneous. These differences shape patterns of political behaviour and identity, influencing both voter engagement and party strategies.

The findings suggest that Latvia's municipal politics remain shaped by historical legacies, demographic divides and uneven development. Reversing civic disengagement and strengthening democratic legitimacy will require sustained, locally grounded strategies that go beyond structural reform.

1. Introduction

The 2025 municipal elections in Latvia will take place against the backdrop of persistent voter disengagement, political continuity and regional disparities. These elections come at a time when public trust in institutions remains fragile, and questions persist about the ability of local governance to respond effectively to citizens' needs. Long-standing political figures continue to dominate many municipalities, while civic engagement remains uneven across regions.

Latvia's electoral landscape is further shaped by broader socio-political dynamics that remain distinct in the European context, including divides around language, identity and security. These cleavages, alongside entrenched regional inequalities, influence both party competition and patterns of voter engagement, particularly in municipalities with large minority populations.

One notable institutional development shaping the background of these elections is the 2020/21 regional reform. While not the focus of this study, it forms part of the wider context in which municipal politics now unfold. The reform substantially redrew administrative boundaries and modified local governance structures, with the stated aim of improving efficiency and service delivery. Early evidence suggests, however, that these structural changes alone have not revitalised local democratic engagement,

and in some areas may have disrupted established institutional ties. Although the reform aimed to improve efficiency, financial sustainability and service delivery, early evidence suggests that it has had little or no positive impact on political participation. As later sections of this study will show, the redrawing of administrative boundaries appears to have disrupted familiar institutional connections and contributed to a sense of political distance, particularly in rural areas. Rather than revitalising local engagement, the reform may inadvertently have deepened civic detachment.

Voter turnout in municipal elections has been historically low in Latvia – the 2021 elections marked a record low of 34.01 per cent. As Figure 1 show, this long-term pattern of civic detachment raises questions about how local governance and party strategies respond to citizen needs and whether upcoming elections will reveal shifts in participation, sentiment and representation. The 2025 elections provide an opportunity to observe how broader patterns of political participation, party competition and regional inequality are evolving, as well as the extent to which recent institutional changes, including the 2020/21 reform, have shaped local democratic dynamics.

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of Latvia's municipal political landscape ahead of the 2025 elections.

Figure 1. Voter turnout in Latvian municipal elections, 1994–2021
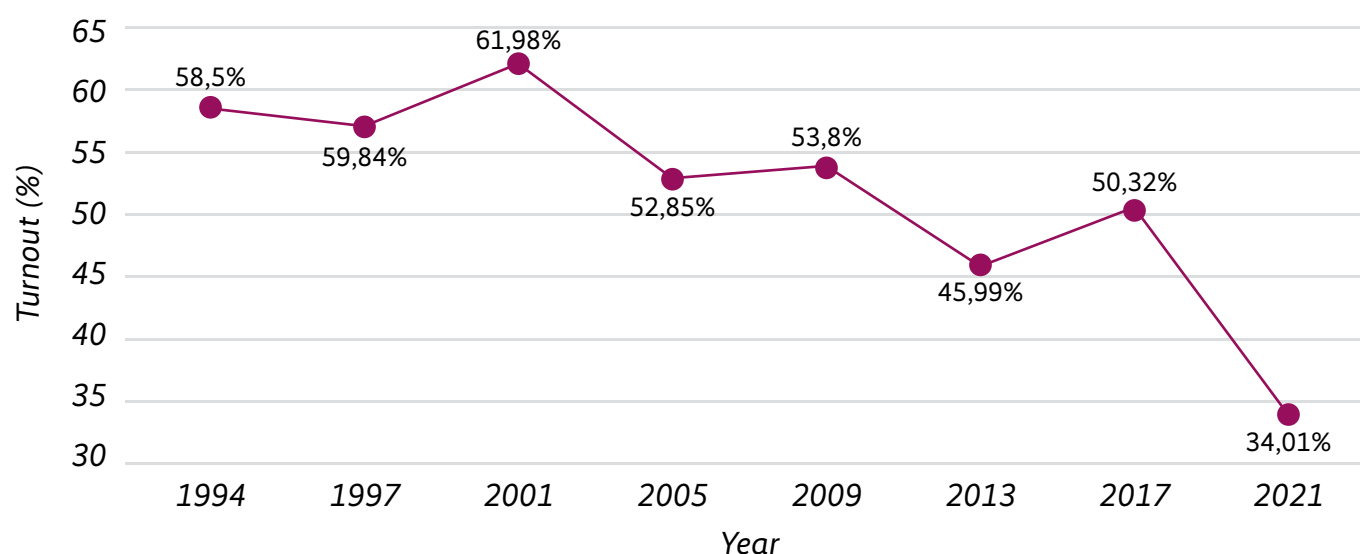
Source: *Central Election Commission of Latvia (CVK)*

It evaluates how institutional reforms, electoral trends and public sentiment intersect to shape local governance. By combining case-based and sentiment-driven analysis, the research seeks to clarify whether recent developments have contributed to greater political inclusion or reinforced disillusionment and institutional stagnation. Consequently, three interlinked objectives have been identified:

(i)   to examine pre-election dynamics, including party strategies, voter sentiment and key policy debates;
(ii) to assess the impact of the 2020/21 regional reform on local political representation and effectiveness of governance;
(iii) to identify regional variations in voter behaviour, political engagement and electoral outcomes.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative discourse and sentiment analysis with contextual quantitative insights to examine electoral trends and political dynamics in Latvia's municipalities. By combining these methods, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how the 2020/21 regional reform has shaped public discourse, governance patterns and voter sentiment across different regions. This research draws on a range of sources, including:

–   official election results from the Central Election Commission of Latvia;
–   political party programmes and campaign materials;
–   social media discourse and sentiment trends;
–   news media content and structured analysis of online public discourse;
–   public opinion surveys and demographic indicators.

These sources provide both quantitative data and qualitative insights into political dynamics, public sentiment, and voter engagement at the municipal level. The data are analysed using the following research methods:

–   Quantitative analysis: assesses voting patterns, turnout rates and party performance across municipalities to identify statistical and electoral trends.
–   Sentiment and media discourse analysis: analyses digital media content and online public discourse to identify dominant narratives, voter concerns and the emotional tone of municipal politics.
–   Qualitative discourse analysis: explores political messaging, campaign strategies and candidate positioning to uncover how issues are framed and communicated during the electoral process.
–   Case study approach: focuses on selected municipalities – Rīga, Jelgava, Ogre, Ventspils, Rēzekne, and Talsi – to explore regional variations in political engagement, governance dynamics and the effects of the 2020/21 reform.

To ensure a well-rounded analysis, this study examines municipalities representing diverse political, socio-economic and regional contexts (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Location of the six case study municipalities: Rīga, Jelgava, Ogre, Ventspils, Rēzekne and Talsi

- Rīga: as Latvia's capital, Rīga serves as a key political hub with a competitive electoral environment and a diverse electorate. Its prominence makes it essential for understanding national political trends and the role of ideological polarisation at the municipal level.
- Jelgava, Ogre, Ventspils: these municipalities are characterised by long-standing local leadership and political continuity, offering insights into governance dynamics in areas in which strong mayors remain central to local politics. They help to illustrate how entrenched leadership shapes public discourse and engagement. In the case of Jelgava and its surrounding region, the presence of a significant Russian-speaking population may also influence patterns of political identity and engagement (see Section 3).
- Rēzekne, Talsi: these cities reflect governance challenges linked to financial instability and public trust, offering distinct perspectives on how municipal conditions shape public sentiment and political engagement. In Rēzekne, where a large share of the population is Russian-speaking, these dynamics intersect with questions of representation and identity (see Section 3).

By integrating these case studies, the research aims to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of pre-election dynamics ahead of the 2025 municipal elections in Latvia. The findings contribute to broader discussions on democratic participation, local governance and the longer-term impacts of administrative reform.

2. Latvian municipal elections and the context of previous elections

2.1 Structure of the Latvian municipal election system

Latvia's municipal elections are held every four years and cover 43 local government entities – 10 "state cities" (*valstspilsēta*) and 33 municipalities – across the country's four historical regions: Kurzeme, Zemgale, Vidzeme and Latgale.[1] Local councils are elected using a proportional representation system with open lists, allowing voters to choose a political party and express preferences for individual candidates. Each council is responsible for providing public services and for managing local development, infrastructure and education.

Municipal budgets are funded mainly through a share of personal income tax revenue, which is distributed automatically to the municipality in which the taxpayer resides. Councils also receive grants from the state budget and collect certain local fees and service charges. However, local governments do not have the authority to set or raise major taxes themselves, as tax rates are determined by national legislation. This means that while municipalities manage a broad range of services, their financial resources are largely shaped by decisions made at the central level.

Voting eligibility extends to Latvian citizens, EU citizens and permanent residents who have declared their place of residence in the municipality. However, inclusivity in eligibility has not translated into greater engagement. Voter turnout in municipal elections has been steadily declining over the past decade, from 50.4 per cent in 2013[2] to 45.9 per cent in 2017,[3] and dropping sharply to a record low of 34.01 per cent in 2021.[4] This suggests that structural access alone does not resolve the deeper issues of political disengagement. By contrast, voter turnout in national parliamentary (Saeima) elections has remained significantly higher, reaching 59.41 per cent in 2022.[5]

The current institutional structure was significantly reshaped by Latvia's administrative-territorial reform, which came into effect shortly before the 2021 municipal elections. The re-form reduced the number of municipalities from 119 to 43, consolidating smaller administrative units into larger and ostensibly more capable entities. Framed as a measure to improve administrative capacity, enhance public service delivery and ensure financial sustainability, the reform was in line with broader governance trends across Europe. However, the process in Latvia has raised concerns about the balance between efficiency and local representation.[6]

Following the 2020/21 territorial reform, municipalities in Latvia now differ significantly in size and administrative capacity. This restructuring has introduced challenges in maintaining equal political representation and ensuring accessible public services, particularly in geographically large or demographically diverse areas. Based on case study observations, the merger of smaller rural communities into larger units has, in some instances, weakened the direct relationship between residents and their elected representatives. In several municipalities, there are also signs of diminished public engagement, which may be linked to changes in perceived local identity and reduced opportunities for meaningful participation. Additionally, the need to build broader coalitions in newly merged councils appears to have shifted some political focus away from strictly local concerns toward broader, consensus-driven agendas.

The election system's proportional representation model theoretically enables diverse representation, but in practice it has not prevented voter disengagement. The complexity of local party dynamics, limited accountability mechanisms and the lack of visible local impact from council decisions continue to undermine citizen trust. This structural disconnect between elected representatives and local communities poses a long-term challenge for democratic legitimacy at the municipal level.

2.2 Results of the 2021 elections and changes since then

The record-low turnout in Latvia's 2021 municipal elections, discussed in the previous section, highlights a deepening

1   Vides aizsardzības un reģionālās attīstības ministrija (2024) *Pašvaldības*, 24 August, https://www.varam.gov.lv/lv/pasvaldibas

2   Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija (2013) *2013. gada 1. jūnija pašvaldību vēlēšanas: Vēlētāju aktivitāte*, http://www.pv2013.cvk.lv/activities.html

3   Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija (2017) *2017. gada 3. jūnija pašvaldību vēlēšanas: Vēlēšanu rezultāti.* http://pv2017.cvk.lv/ElectionResults

4   Central Election Commission (2021) *2021 municipal elections: Election results.* https://pv2021.cvk.lv/pub/en/election-results

5   Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija (2022) *14. Saeimas vēlēšanas.* https://sv2022.cvk.lv/pub/velesanu-rezultati

6   Council of Europe (2020) *Fact-finding report on territorial reform in Latvia.* Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. https://rm.coe.int/fact-finding-report-on-territorial-reform-in-latvia-co-rapporteurs-xav/1680a0bfb8

Figure 3. Municipalities by leading party in the 2021 municipal elections

Legend:
- Union of Greens and Farmers
- Latvian Regional Alliance
- Harmony
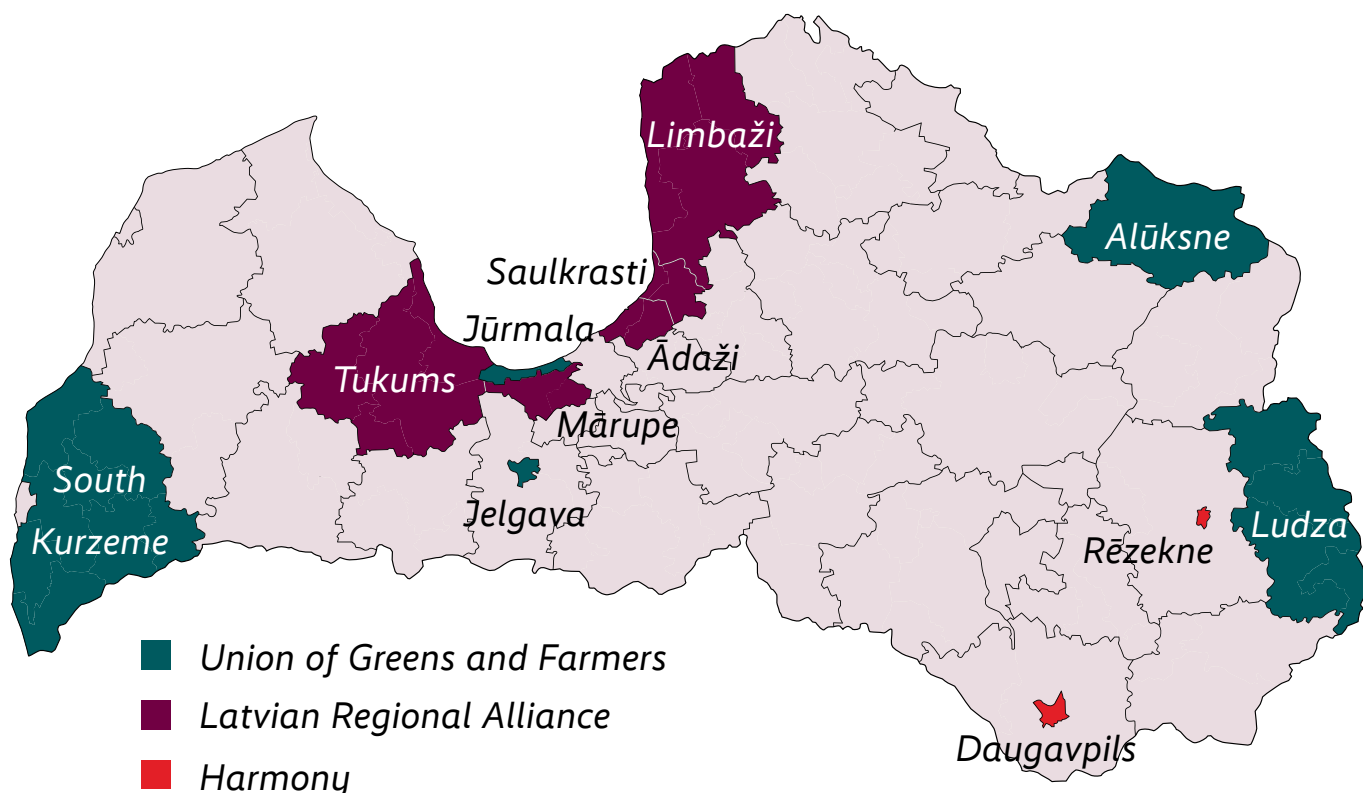
disconnect between the electorate and political representatives. Rather than reversing long-term disengagement, the extensive administrative-territorial reform implemented just a year prior to the elections may have intensified it. The question this raises is straightforward: can institutional reform alone restore trust in local democracy?

Adding to this complexity, elections were held in 40 of the 43 newly formed municipalities, with the exception of Varaklani and Rēzekne, where legal disputes over territorial boundaries prompted the Constitutional Court to delay voting until September 2021. This fragmentation of the electoral calendar only deepened the sense of irregularity surrounding the process. It also introduced uneven campaign dynamics and voter mobilisation efforts across the country, complicating efforts to interpret national-level trends.[7]

One notable innovation in the 2021 elections was the implementation of the electronic voter register (EVR), a system designed to streamline voter registration and reduce administrative burdens.[8] While the EVR functioned smoothly on a technical level, its effect on voter turnout was negligible. The experience reinforced a broader truth about electoral modernisation: while technological tools can improve process efficiency, they do not address the deeper structural and cultural factors that determine civic engagement. The low turnout suggests that disengagement is rooted in more fundamental disillusionment with political representation, rather than logistical barriers.

Survey data from the Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre (SKDS) after the election supports this conclusion. Among non-voters, 30.3 per cent reported they would have been more motivated to participate if elected representatives had fulfilled their campaign promises. Additionally, 26.1 per cent expressed support for the introduction of mechanisms to recall poorly performing representatives, and 26 per cent wanted candidates with many crossed-off votes to be excluded. Only 8.2 per cent cited the administrative-territorial reform itself as a primary reason for abstaining.[9] This suggests that the main driver of apathy lies in perceived failures of accountability and representation rather than dissatisfaction with structural change.

The election results also revealed important patterns. Parties with strong regional roots outperformed many na-

---

7   Central Election Commission (2021) *2021 municipal elections: Election results.* https://pv2021.cvk.lv/pub/en/election-results

8   Ibid.

9   SKDS (2021) *Vēlētāju attieksmju pētījums 2021: Pēcvēlēšanu aptauja*, 7-11. https://ppdb.mk.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Veletaju_attieksme_julijs_PETIJUMS.pdf

tional parties, continuing a trend seen in past elections. Zaļo un Zemnieku savienība (*Union of Greens and Farmers*) secured 12.5 per cent of the seats and led in municipalities including South Kurzeme, Ludza, Alūksne, Jūrmala and Jelgava. Latvijas Reģionu apvienība (*Latvian Regional Alliance*), which ran in 31 districts, emerged victorious in Tukums, Mārupe, Ādaži, Saulkrasti and Limbaži.[10] These successes underscore the resilience of local political identities and the limits of central party influence in municipal elections.

To clarify the regional dimension of these results, Figure 3 presents a map of Latvia highlighting the municipalities in which these regionally grounded parties led in 2021. It visually underscores the geographical distribution of their support and illustrates how several areas remain shaped by strong local allegiances, especially in the western and central parts of the country.

Within the governing coalition, Latvijas attīstībai (*Latvia's Development*), Jaunā Vienotība (*New Unity*) and Nacionālā Apvienība "Visu Latvijai! – Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK" (*National Alliance "All For Latvia! – For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK"*) performed respectably, maintaining a stable presence across the newly formed councils. However, their reach was uneven and rarely sufficient for outright majorities.

The opposition party Saskaņa (*Harmony*) retained dominant positions in Daugavpils and Rēzekne.[11] These cities, located in Latvia's eastern region of Latgale, have high concentrations of Russian-speaking residents, a demographic that has historically formed Harmony's core electorate. The party has long positioned itself as the primary political voice for this community, focusing on minority rights and social stability. However, its influence at the national level has diminished in recent years due to geopolitical tensions, internal divisions and changing voter expectations.

The election also confirmed the fragmented nature of Latvia's political landscape. Few councils saw single-party majorities, and coalition-building was required in nearly all municipalities. Governing alliances often included combinations of national, regional and independent candidates, leading to complex and frequently unstable coalitions. This dynamic highlights a deeper problem: the growing divide between centralised political agendas and localised voter expectations. In municipalities in which institutional capacity is weak, or political traditions are underdeveloped, the lack of clear leadership complicates decision-making and erodes public trust, a tension further explored in Section 2.3, which examines the effects of Latvia's 2020/21 regional reform.

Despite low turnout, political engagement is not disappearing, it is shifting. While fewer citizens are voting, political actors continue to negotiate, align and reposition themselves. Coalition negotiations and power-sharing arrangements have become the primary arenas for political influence, often taking place away from public view. This reconfiguration of participation, from open electoral mobilisation to closed-door bargaining, raises important questions about transparency, legitimacy and the future of democratic representation at the municipal level.

The 2021 elections ultimately left several issues unresolved. The reform delivered administrative consolidation, but not political revitalisation. It improved the technical side of elections but not the participatory one. Regional political forces remain strong, often outperforming national parties, while coalition-building reflects deepening fragmentation. Administrative reforms and technological upgrades have not been enough to counter voter disengagement. Rebuilding trust will depend not just on further institutional reform, but on a shift toward more accountable and responsive governance. The 2021 elections thus confirmed a continuing trend of voter participation, revealed the limitations of structural reform alone, and underscored the continuing challenge of bridging the growing distance between voters and local power. With the next municipal elections scheduled for 2025, the question remains whether these unresolved issues will resurface. Whether they are addressed or further entrenched will shape the future trajectory of local democracy in Latvia.

2.3 Impact of the 2020/21 regional reform

The 2020/21 territorial reform was introduced with the promise of streamlined governance, improved efficiency and more effective service delivery. In practice, however, it exposed significant structural and procedural weaknesses, triggering legal disputes, institutional criticism and growing doubts about the health of local democracy. The process revealed unresolved tensions between administrative efficiency and democratic legitimacy, a conflict further highlighted by the lack of meaningful consultation with local authorities and communities. The Latvian Association of Local and Regional Authorities filed a formal complaint to the Council of Europe, arguing that the reform bypassed democratic norms. The Council's subsequent fact-finding mission in 2019 concluded that the process had prioritised top-down restructuring over participatory engagement, warning of a "deterioration in the overall situation of local democracy".[12]

In addition to concerns raised by local authorities, legal challenges also arose regarding the reform's compli-

---

10   Central Election Commission (2021) *2021 municipal elections: Election results*. https://pv2021.cvk.lv/pub/en/election-results

11   Ibid.

12   Council of Europe (2020) *Fact-finding report on territorial reform in Latvia*. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. https://rm.coe.int/fact-finding-report-on-territorial-reform-in-latvia-co-rapporteurs-xav/1680a0bfb8

ance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a key international framework that ensures local governments have autonomy to represent their citizens effectively, particularly with regard to the principles of subsidiarity and community representation. These disputes highlighted a deeper issue: whether institutional streamlining can be considered legitimate if it weakens local autonomy and erodes political trust. While efficiency gains were the official rationale, the process itself raised doubts about the reform's democratic foundations.

Public reception has reflected this disconnect. A 2024 Norstat survey conducted in cooperation with LSM.lv found that only 9 per cent of respondents reported experiencing any tangible benefits from the reform.[13] This low figure illustrates the persistent gap between the reform's policy objectives and residents' everyday experience. Rather than reinforcing trust in local governance, the restructuring appears to have deepened a sense of distance between citizens and decision-makers.

The dilution of local political identity has been another unintended consequence. As smaller municipalities were absorbed into larger units, residents lost proximity to their elected representatives. This shift weakened traditional political linkages, especially in rural areas, and potentially contributed to declining engagement. In smaller municipalities, citizens typically feel a stronger connection to their local leaders, which can encourage greater political participation and trust.[14] Larger administrative units may be more financially viable, but they often struggle to replicate the immediacy and responsiveness of smaller-scale governance. The trade-off between capacity and connection remains a central tension in the post-reform landscape.

Moreover, the reform lacked accompanying measures to address the cultural and communicational transitions required for successful implementation. Latvia's historical reliance on smaller administrative units had fostered close relationships between citizens and their local leaders.[15] The sudden transition to larger structures, without robust public education or civic engagement strategies, potentially left many residents uncertain of how to navigate the new system. In this vacuum, disengagement and confusion are likely to have taken hold, particularly in peripheral regions where political trust is already fragile.

In some municipalities, the perceived lack of representation following the reform has prompted local efforts to re-establish civic voice. For example, in Jelgava municipality, where several smaller rural parishes were merged into a larger administrative unit, residents in several parishes organised their own civic councils to ensure that local interests were heard.[16] This reflects concerns that the new administrative structure did not provide sufficient channels for participation. A similar dynamic has been noted in Latgale, particularly in geographically large and administratively fragmented areas, such as Tukums,[17] where the post-reform governance model has made it difficult to hold regular public meetings or maintain contact with decision-makers. In both regions, the expanded scale of municipalities appears to have deepened feelings of exclusion and weakened trust in local governance. This initiative illustrates how communities sought ways to maintain representation in the face of perceived distance from decision-making.

While the full long-term effects of Latvia's 2020/21 regional reform will become visible only over the coming years, some initial outcomes are already observable. Given the scale and complexity of the reform, it is understandable that measurable results may take time to materialise. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation will be essential to assess whether the reform delivers on its objectives, namely, improved governance efficiency and more equitable service provision. Although concrete evidence remains limited, and many anticipated benefits are still in progress, several positive developments have emerged. One of the most tangible outcomes has been the 64 per cent reduction in the number of municipal council members – from 1,348 to 492 – which resulted in approximately €10 million in savings on councillor remuneration between July 2021 and July 2022.[18] This resource consolidation is also expected to positively influence regional investment potential.

Furthermore, despite structural changes, the continuity of local services has been maintained. Service points of the merged municipalities and unified state and municipal customer service centres (VPVKAC) continued operations. By 2023, 166 VPVKAC were functioning nationwide, and by the end of 2026, this network is expected to expand to 592 access points, ensuring that essential services are available in every parish and town.[19]

13   Latvian Public Media (2024) *Survey: Latvia's residents see no point in municipal reform*, 31 May, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/21.05.2024-survey-latvias-residents-see-no-point-in-municipal-reform.a554767

14   Seimuškāne, L. and Pūķis, M. (2021) *Jauno pašvaldību problēmas un izaicinājumi*, 6 August, Latvijas Universitātes Ekonomikas un sociālo zinātņu fakultāte, https://eszf.lu.lv/par-mums/zinas/zina/t/91735

15   Ibid.

16   Jelgavas novada dome (2024) *Jelgavas novada iedzīvotāju padomes nolikums (Saistošie noteikumi Nr. 3)*, 11 March, https://likumi.lv/ta/id/350499-jelgavas-novada-iedzivotaju-padomes-nolikums

17   Tukuma novada dome (2025) *Konsultatīvās padomes*, 3 April, https://www.tukums.lv/lv/konsultativas-padomes

18   Latvijas Republikas Finanšu ministrija (2023) *Latvijas Nacionālā reformu programma 2023. Gadam*, 51, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-04/Latvia_NRP_2023_LV.pdf

19   Ibid.

While administrative consolidation may be justified economically, it does not automatically translate into better governance. The absence of clear public benefit, combined with legal and institutional controversy, has potentially undermined confidence in the reform's legitimacy. Nevertheless, Latvia's experience with the 2020/21 territorial reform highlights both the risks and the potential of structural change. As the political system absorbs the effects of this reform cycle, the question remains whether governance can be both efficient and meaningfully representative, or whether the trade-off between the two will continue to define Latvia's local democratic landscape.

3. Political analysis

3.1 Key issues and trends in state-cities

Latvia's urban landscape reveals significant disparities between its capital, Rīga, and regional state-cities. Rīga, home to nearly half of the country's 1.87 million population,[20] is the primary centre of economic, political and cultural activity. This centralisation has left other state-cities, such as Daugavpils, Liepāja and Rēzekne, grappling with significant challenges, including population decline, economic stagnation and underdeveloped infrastructure. These disparities hinder regional growth and create challenges for social cohesion, highlighting the limitations of current policies aimed at fostering balanced development.

Demographic shifts are a primary driver of these disparities. By 2030, Latvia's population is projected to drop to 1.78 million, with cities such as Daugavpils (−17 per cent), Rēzekne (−20 per cent) and Liepāja (−16 per cent) experiencing the sharpest declines.[21] In contrast, Rīga is projected to experience a more modest reduction of only 3 per cent,[22] and continues to attract residents because of its comparatively better employment opportunities, wages

and access to services. This systemic issue – regional cities' inability to retain or attract residents – leaves local governments with shrinking tax bases, making it more difficult to maintain infrastructure and provide public services.

Migration patterns further intensify this divide. Smaller cities consistently lose residents to Rīga and abroad, contributing to aging populations and weaker local economies. Rīga continues to attract investment and employment opportunities, reinforcing the urban-rural divide.[23]

Wage disparities further illustrate this imbalance. In 2024, the average gross monthly salary in Latvia was €1,685, but significant regional variations persist. This is illustrated in Figure 4, which compares gross monthly earnings by region.[24]

Infrastructure development processes display similar asymmetries. Rīga benefits from modern transportation systems and digital connectivity, reinforcing its central position. In contrast, other cities suffer from aging infrastructure,

Figure 4. Average gross monthly wages by region in Latvia, 2024
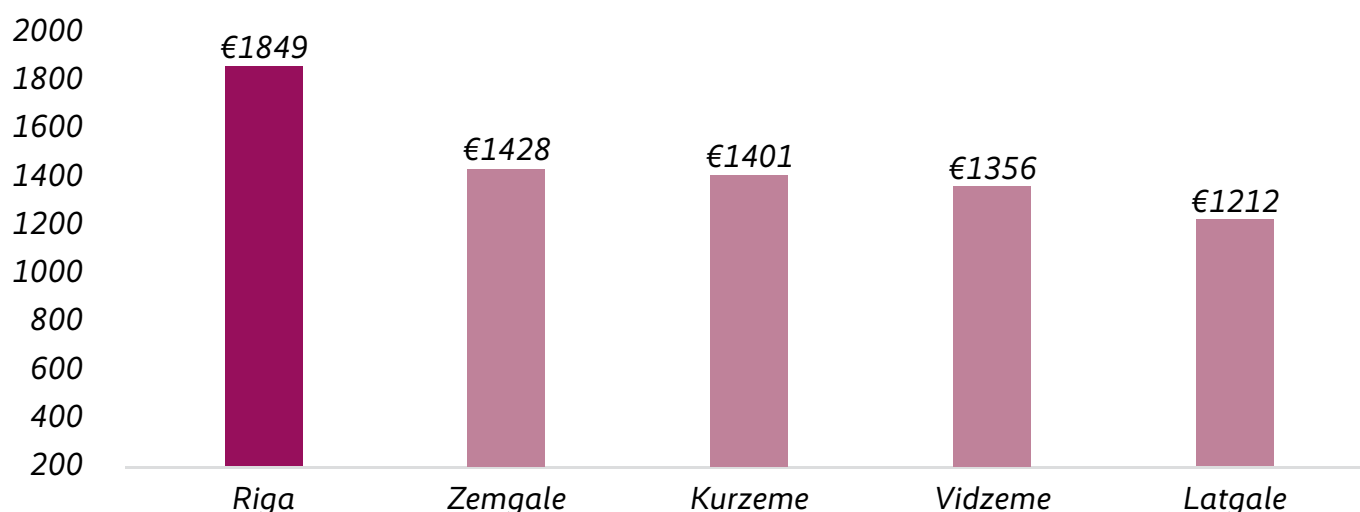
Source: *Official Statistics Portal*

20 Official Statistics Portal (n.d.) *Population and population change*, https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/population/population/247-population-and-population-change
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Pārresoru koordinācijas centrs (2020) *Latvijas Nacionālais attīstības plāns 2021.–2027. gadam*, https://likumi.lv/wwwraksti/LIKUMI/NAP/NAP2027.PDF
24 Official Statistics Portal (n.d.) *Average monthly wages and salaries by region (in euro) 2021–2024* [Data set], https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__EMP__DS__DSV/DSV041/table/tableViewLayout1

Figure 5. Ethnic Composition in Selected Latvian Cities, 2024

Latvians
Russians
Others

reduced connectivity and limitations in public service delivery. Projects such as Rail Baltica, a major EU-funded high-speed railway project connecting the Baltic states with Central Europe, are expected to enhance regional integration and mobility.[25] In Latvia, the project includes the development of new infrastructure in Rīga and several regional hubs. However, it remains unclear whether such initiatives will substantially alter existing economic hierarchies or simply reinforce the dominance of the capital. Much depends on whether these investments translate into wider regional advantages rather than primarily benefit the capital.

The Latvian National Development Plan 2021–2027 includes strategies aimed at reversing these trends through regional investment, improved infrastructure and support for entrepreneurship.[26] However, their effectiveness remains uncertain. Previous development strategies have struggled to deliver measurable results, and Rīga's continued gravitational pull may limit the impact of these efforts unless paired with more comprehensive structural reforms.

Demographic diversity adds further complexity to regional dynamics. In 2024, ethnic Latvians comprised 52 per cent of Rīga's population, with ethnic Russians making up 31 per cent. Daugavpils had a majority Russian-speaking population, with Latvians at 21 per cent and Russians at 46 per cent. In Rēzekne the proportions were more balanced, with Latvians constituting 48 per cent and Russians 40 per cent. By contrast, cities such as Liepāja, Jelgava and Ventspils had stronger Latvian majorities. In Valmiera and Ogre, Latvians accounted for 85 per cent and 74 per cent, respectively.[27] These regional differences are illustrated in Figure 5, whose scope extends beyond the six case study municipalities to provide a broader overview of ethnic composition in selected Latvian cities.

These demographic differences shape political identities and social cohesion, presenting challenges for national integration. Policies aimed at minority inclusion, including education reforms, language integration programmes and civic participation efforts, have had mixed success and have yet to fully address the complexities posed by regional diversity.

In conclusion, Latvia's regional disparities highlight the structural limitations of current policy frameworks. Despite targeted strategies and infrastructure investment, Rīga's central role continues to marginalise peripheral areas.

25 Rail Baltica (25 May 2020) *Kā Rail Baltica palīdzēs atgūties Baltijas valstu ekonomikai?*, https://www.railbaltica.org/lv/ka-rail-baltica-palidzes-atguties-baltijas-valstu-ekonomikai

26 Pārresoru koordinācijas centrs (2020) *Latvijas Nacionālais attīstības plāns 2021.–2027. gadam.*, https://likumi.lv/wwwraksti/LIKUMI/NAP/NAP2027.PDF

27 Official Statistics Portal (n.d.) Population in regions, cities, municipalities, towns, rural territories, neighbourhoods and densely populated areas by ethnicity (experimental statistics) 2000–2024 [Data set], https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRE/RIG040/table/tableViewLayout1

Population decline, wage inequality and uneven access to services persist, raising questions about the distribution of power and opportunities. Addressing these imbalances may require not only renewed investment, but also a broader rethinking of how regional development, identity and representation are approached in Latvia's political system. Whether these challenges are confronted or allowed to deepen are likely to shape the trajectory of Latvia's regional stability in the years ahead.

3.2 Regional aspects and the Latgale context

Latgale remains Latvia's most economically challenged region, grappling with persistent economic stagnation, demographic decline and political disengagement. Despite decades of national and EU development programmes, Latgale's GDP per capita stood at just €9700 in 2022, about a third of Rīga's €27600.[28] This stark disparity reflects deep-rooted structural conditions, such as limited private investment, outdated infrastructure and an aging population. While other regions have partially diversified their economies, Latgale continues to find it difficult to develop a self-sustaining growth model.[29]

Public investment has contributed to visible improvements in infrastructure and local support schemes. However, these measures have not attracted sufficient private sector engagement, which remains a key obstacle to long-term revitalisation. In contrast to regions such as Rīga or Kurzeme, where foreign and domestic investment plays a decisive role, Latgale still relies heavily on state-supported sectors,[30] and traditional industries such as small-scale agriculture.[31] Businesses remain hesitant to invest due to logistical barriers, limited workforce availability and uncertainty over economic returns. Although new policy initiatives have emerged, these underlying constraints continue to hinder regional competitiveness.

The region's historical trajectory helps to explain these persistent challenges. Under the Russian Empire, Latgale was separated administratively from the rest of Latvia as part of the Vitebsk Governorate, while Vidzeme and Zemgale belonged to Livonia, and Kurzeme to the Courland Governorate. This division reinforced Latgale's weaker economic integration, leaving a legacy of isolation that impeded its participation in broader modernisation processes.

Unlike other regions that developed stronger institutional and infrastructural ties during the interwar and Soviet periods, Latgale remained relatively peripheral, both geographically and economically.[32]

Contemporary demographic trends reinforce these structural disadvantages. The region faces one of the steepest population declines in Latvia, driven by persistent emigration and low birth rates. Younger residents leave in search of better employment opportunities elsewhere in Latvia or abroad, exacerbating labour shortages and undermining the viability of essential services, such as education and health care. As schools close and services shrink, a negative feedback loop develops; businesses hesitate to invest due to labour shortages, and residents leave because of a lack of opportunity.

Political disengagement compounds these socio-economic challenges. Latgale's voter turnout in the 2021 municipal elections was just 34.05 per cent, among the lowest in the country, with Daugavpils at 31.13 per cent and Rēzekne at 31.22 per cent.[33] Contributing factors include economic instability, dissatisfaction with political representation and a persistent sense of marginalisation, particularly among the Russian-speaking population. Ethnic Russians make up 35 per cent of Latgale's population, the highest proportion in any Latvian region, and this demographic often feels excluded from national political discourse. Additionally, 11.5 per cent of Latgale's residents are non-citizens,[34] who are ineligible to vote in municipal elections, further weakening civic engagement.

While political disengagement is often reduced to turnout statistics, deeper patterns are evident. The long-standing dominance of social democratic parties such as Harmony in Latgale reflected a demand for policies addressing minority concerns. In the 2021 elections, Harmony maintained strongholds in Rēzekne (63.19 per cent) and Daugavpils (42.25 per cent).[35] However, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, national security has become a central concern in Latvian politics, shifting voter priorities. This shift has eroded support for openly pro-Russian parties

28   Latvian Public Media (2024) *Rīga accounts for two thirds of Latvia's GDP*, 28 December, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/economy/28.12.2024-Riga-accounts-for-two-thirds-of-latvias-gdp.a581773

29   ESPON (2021) *Business Development Opportunities at External EU Borders: Report on Latgale (LV)*, https://archive.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/BusDEV_ANNEX%20I_Report%20on%20Latgale%20%28LV%29.pdf

30   Mikulić, D., Lovrinčević, Ž. and Nagyszombaty, A. G. (2013) *Regional convergence in the European Union, new member states and Croatia*, South East European Journal of Economics and Business, 8(1), 53, https://doi.org/10.2478/jeb-2013-0001

31   Šūmane, S., Kilis, E., Tisenkopfs, T., Adamsone-Fiskovica, A. and Grivins, M. (2018) *Latgale (RR14) – Latvia – Food System Regional Report*. Baltic Studies Centre, 3, https://www.bscresearch.lv/uploads/files/RR14_Latgale_FS%20Regional%20Report_final_no%20KI.pdf, 3

32   Gibson, C. E. (2020) Latgale's palimpsestuous past in contemporary Latvia, in M. Hann (ed.), Post-socialist borderlands: A comparative study of the cultural, political and economic transformations of the borderlands of Eastern Europe, 125-150, OAPEN, https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/46783/PSBSR-04_Gibson.pdf

33   Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija (2021) *2021. gada pašvaldību vēlēšanas: Latgales vēlēšanu rezultāti*, https://pv2021.cvk.lv/pub/en/latgale/election-results

34   Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (n.d.) Population in regions, cities, municipalities, towns, rural territories, neighbourhoods and densely populated areas by ethnicity (experimental statistics) 2000–2024 [Data set], https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRE/RIG040/table/tableViewLayout1

35   Central Election Commission (2021) *June 5, 2021 local elections: Daugavpils – "Harmony" Social Democratic Party – candidate list*, https://pv2021.cvk.lv/pub/en/daugavpils/election-results/candidate-lists/saskana-socialdemokratiska-partija

without generating strong alternatives, leaving a gap in political representation. Fragmentation and a lack of new, locally rooted leadership continue to shape the region's political landscape.

In order to address these ongoing structural issues, the Latvian government launched the Action Plan for Security and Growth on the Eastern Border (2025–2027), a strategic framework aimed at revitalising Latgale through targeted investments in economic development, security infrastructure, human capital and public services. The plan includes the creation of new industrial zones, and with it jobs, the integration of regional academic institutions with national universities, as well as infrastructure upgrades and regional resilience near the eastern border.[36]

Latgale's position at the intersection of economic underdevelopment, demographic shifts and political transformation makes it a critical case for understanding regional disparities in Latvia. While state policies and EU funding have attempted to mitigate some of the structural challenges, the region remains locked in a cycle of economic dependence, political fragmentation and declining human capital. Without targeted strategies that address the root causes of economic stagnation and political disengagement, Latgale is likely to remain an outlier in Latvia's development trajectory. With the next electoral cycle approaching, the region's evolution – or continued marginalisation – will reflect the ability of Latvia's political system to respond to regional inequality and sustain democratic legitimacy.

3.3 Analysis of the Russian-speaking voter segment

The Russian-speaking electorate remains one of Latvia's largest minority voter groups,[37] yet it is highly fragmented and politically underrepresented. Historically mobilised around identity and language rights, this segment now has to navigate a complex political landscape shaped by shifting national security concerns, limited political participation and demographic change. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further intensified political realignment, complicating how Russian-speaking voters relate to both national parties and state institutions.

Language policy remains a central point of contention. The 2018 education reforms mandating Latvian as the primary language of instruction in public schools[38] triggered a backlash, particularly among Russian-speaking communities.[39] While framed by the government as an integration measure, these changes were widely perceived as discriminatory, politically alienating many Russian speakers.

Civic exclusion further weakens engagement. A substantial share of the Russian-speaking population, particularly older generations, are non-citizen permanent residents and thus cannot vote in municipal or national elections, nor run for office. According to 2024 data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, over 65 per cent of non-citizens are aged 50 or above, underscoring the generational concentration of non-citizenship and its lasting impact on political participation.[40] This legal exclusion reinforces feelings of political marginalisation and detachment. In regions such as Latgale, especially Rēzekne and Daugavpils, many residents express frustration over the limited investment and a lack of influence in national decision-making. In cities such as Liepāja, the concern is less about identity and more about a perceived distance from power and political relevance.[41] The issue continues to serve as a key platform for parties such as Harmony and Latvijas Krievu Savienība (*Latvian Russian Union*), both of which advocate for preserving the status of the Russian language in public life. Next to these two parties also Progresīvie (*The Progressives*) as well as Stabilitātei! (*For Stability!*) try to represent the interests of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia.

Harmony has historically positioned itself as the main representative of Russian-speaking voters, combining advocacy for language rights with a focus on economic redistribution. The party has maintained strongholds in cities such as Daugavpils and Rēzekne, but its national credibility has suffered in recent years due to high-profile corruption scandals, most notably the Rīgas Satiksme case, and shifting geopolitical attitudes. Its association with pro-Russian narratives has become increasingly problematic in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, pushing younger and more security-conscious voters away.

The Latvian Russian Union, with its more singular focus on cultural preservation and language, has failed to expand its appeal. Despite occupying a similar ideological space to Harmony, the Latvian Russian Union has been limited by its narrow messaging and the electorate's broader pivot

36   Latgale Special Economic Zone Authority (2024) *The Action Plan for Security and Growth on the Eastern Border provides extensive support for business and economic zones*, 16 January, https://invest.latgale.lv/en/news/26-government-approves-eur-640-million-plan-to-strengthen-eastern-border-area

37   Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (n.d.) *Population by ethnicity and age group at the beginning of year 2011–2024* [Data set], https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRE/IRE040

38   Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia (2018) *Discover the important facts regarding the transition to studying in the state language*, 24 January, https://www.izm.gov.lv/en/article/discover-important-facts-regarding-transition-studying-state-language

39   Epifanova, M. (2018) *Children go native as Latvian schools say "ne" to Russian*, Euronews, 20 July, https://www.euronews.com/2018/07/20/children-go-native-as-latvian-schools-say-ne-to-russian

40   Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2024) *Population usually resident by citizenship, sex and age group at the beginning of year 1996–2024* [Data set], https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRV/IRV020/table/tableViewLayout1

41   Kažoka, I., Tarasova, S. and Pelse, D. (2023) *Is the civic apathy of Latvia's Russian-speaking population a myth or a reality?*, 14. Providus, https://providus.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/PETIJUMS_250423.pdf

toward security-oriented concerns. Support in traditional strongholds has declined, further fragmenting the Russian-speaking vote.

The Progressives have made limited inroads among Russian-speaking voters, especially in Rīga, by emphasising inclusive values and social rights. However, their positioning on national identity and pro-Western alignment has limited their appeal to more conservative segments of the Russian-speaking electorate. Their platform has gained traction among younger, urban voters but remains distant from those in Latgale and similar regions.

For Stability!, led by Aleksejs Roslikovs, has captured attention by mobilising public frustration and discontent with the political mainstream. With an anti-EU and anti-NATO message and a strong social media presence, the party has gained support among disillusioned Russian-speaking voters who feel excluded from mainstream politics. Roslikovs' refusal to take a consistent position on Ukraine, combined with criticism of Latvia's military aid to Ukraine, has resonated with segments of the electorate frustrated by the perceived neglect of domestic issues.[42]

Recent polling suggests that attitudes toward the war in Ukraine within the Russian-speaking population remain divided and in flux. According to a 2024 SKDS survey, around 39 per cent of Russian-speaking respondents in Latvia blame Russia for the war, an increase from 32 per cent in 2022.[43] However, over 50 per cent either disagreed, were neutral or declined to respond, reflecting both ideological fragmentation and a potential hesitancy to express views that diverge from the dominant national narrative.[44] Generational divides are also evident: among younger Russian speakers (aged 18–30), nearly 48 per cent support the view that Russia is the aggressor, while among older generations (aged 51–75), support drops below 30 per cent.[45] This growing divergence within the Russian-speaking electorate not only shapes political alignment but also suggests shifting patterns of integration, identity and security perception.

The urban-rural divide within the Russian-speaking electorate continues to widen. While Harmony and the Latvian Russian Union still hold sway in regions such as Daugavpils and Rēzekne, in urban centres such as Rīga, there are signs of increasing support for pro-European platforms such as the Progressives, particularly among more diverse and potentially younger segments of the electorate. These patterns reflect broader shifts in Latvia's political landscape, in which identity and geopolitics now intersect with generational and regional divides.

Several Latvian parties have made attempts, albeit limited, to engage Russian-speaking voters. For instance, Latvija pirmajā vietā (*Latvia First*) maintains a Russian-language version of its website in an effort to reach beyond its core electorate and appeal to a broader public. The party has also featured Russian-speaking candidates on its electoral lists and frames many of its messages around economic justice, pensions and social stability, issues that resonate across linguistic lines. However, such outreach remains more symbolic than structural and has not translated into significant political integration. Moreover, in the post-2022 environment, most Latvian parties have been cautious about directly courting the Russian-speaking electorate, opting instead for values-based messaging in Latvian and avoiding identity issues. Legislative restrictions limiting the use of Russian in official campaign materials have further constrained these efforts, reinforcing a primarily Latvian-language political sphere, even when targeting a bilingual electorate.

The political landscape for the Russian-speaking electorate is thus shaped by a combination of historical grievances, national security concerns and economic issues. The language rights debate and economic inequality remain central to political discourse, but the increasing prominence of national security issues is shifting the allegiances of Russian-speaking voters. As the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, so too will the political preferences of this group. The shift in Russian-speaking voter behaviour reflects Latvia's changing political dynamics, in which identity, security and economic factors are all inextricably linked.

Overall, the Russian-speaking electorate can no longer be treated as a monolithic voting bloc. The interplay between limited political participation rights, shifting geopolitical attitudes and diverging regional identities has created a highly fractured political space. While still a central force in Latvian politics, the Russian-speaking electorate has become increasingly fragmented, with political allegiances shifting in response to external and internal dynamics. Concentrated in cities such as Daugavpils and Rēzekne, this demographic has historically supported parties such as Harmony and the Latvian Russian Union, whose platforms focus on language rights and cultural recognition. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has disrupted these affiliations. Many Russian-speaking voters now face a tension between cultural identity and Latvia's geopolitical direction, with national security concerns reshaping political preferences. Some voters have distanced themselves from openly pro-Russian parties, while others remain loyal because they feel overlooked or unsupported by mainstream Latvian political parties. Whether this leads to political reintegration through new platforms or deeper disengage-

42 Golubeva, M. (2022) *Latvia's Russian speakers make radical electoral choices*, CEPA, 7 October, https://cepa.org/article/latvias-russian-speakers-make-radical-electoral-choices

43 Andžāns, M. (2024) *Do Latvia's Russian-speakers blame Russia for the war in Ukraine?* Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University, 28 June, https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/do-latvias-russian-speakers-blame-russia-war-ukraine

44 Ibid.

45 Jesajana, J. (2024) *Shifting identities: Russian speakers in Latvia*, 4liberty.eu, 8 January, https://4liberty.eu/shifting-identities-russian-speakers-in-latvia

ment will be a key indicator of how inclusive and adaptable Latvia's political system truly is.

These regional contrasts also shape how parties approach voters. National campaigns must adjust their messages to local realities, as few issues resonate equally across Latvia. In urban centres such as Rīga, inclusivity and European integration dominate, while in economically struggling regions, platforms centred on social protections and cultural recognition tend to perform better.

3.4 Positioning of social democrats and other parties

This shifting demographic and regional landscape has also coincided with the rising prominence of national security in Latvian political discourse. Once a background theme, it now plays a central role in electoral debates and contributes to the fragmentation of voter preferences, especially among Latvian-speaking urban voters.

At the municipal level, Latvia's political field is often less ideologically defined than it may appear at the national level. Party affiliation is frequently driven by local personalities and practical governance concerns rather than by clear ideological platforms. Nevertheless, if one were to identify two parties that promote social democratic ideas at the national level, they would be Harmony and the Progressives.

As of early May 2025, 340 candidate lists have been confirmed for the upcoming municipal elections in Latvia.[46] However, the exact number of political parties contesting the elections remains unclear, as lists are submitted at the municipal level and may be formed by individual parties or multi-party alliances.

At the national level, New Unity currently holds the largest share of seats in the Saeima and leads the government coalition. Other prominent forces include the National Alliance and Apvienotais Saraksts (*United List*), and the Progressives. While these parties shape the current political mainstream, a closer look at the left-wing spectrum, particularly those traditionally associated with the Russian-speaking electorate, reveals notable shifts in recent election cycles.

Latvia's left-wing political landscape is undergoing a period of fragmentation. Harmony, once the dominant force representing Russian-speaking voters, has suffered a sharp electoral decline. Meanwhile, the Progressives have gained visibility, particularly in urban areas, but have yet to establish a broader national presence. The absence of a cohesive left-wing alternative underscores the challenges facing social democracy in Latvia.

Harmony previously played a central role in left-leaning politics, advocating for social justice, economic redistribution and minority rights. It performed strongly in Rīga, securing 22 seats in the 2017 municipal elections.[47] By 2020, its representation had dropped to 12 seats, reflecting growing dissatisfaction among voters.[48] This decline was exacerbated by corruption scandals involving party figurehead Nils Ušakovs, particularly the Rīgas Satiksme affair, in which senior officials at the municipally owned public transport company were accused of large-scale bribery and procurement fraud. Although Ušakovs was formally charged, his close political ties to the company's leadership and perceived inaction severely damaged the party's image. His controversial support for making Russian a second official language, most notably during the 2012 national referendum, further alienated moderate voters. These controversies, combined with a growing detachment from broader national political discourse, significantly eroded the party's credibility.

By the 2021 municipal elections, Harmony's voter base had become increasingly localised. It remained dominant in Rēzekne (63.2 per cent) and Daugavpils (42.3 per cent) but lost ground in other key cities, such as Jelgava, Jūrmala and Liepāja.[49] The 2022 parliamentary elections marked a turning point: Harmony failed to surpass the 5 per cent threshold, losing all representation in the Saeima for the first time since 2006. This result not only reflected a loss of voter confidence but also revealed the party's inability to adapt to a shifting political environment.

The Progressives have emerged as a potential successor, particularly among urban, younger and more liberal voters. Their emphasis on European integration, climate policy, gender equality and minority inclusion distinguishes them from Harmony's more traditional messaging. In the 2021 municipal elections, the Progressives secured seats in Rīga, Rēzekne and several smaller municipalities, signalling increased visibility. However, their support remains largely confined to urban constituencies and they have yet to resonate with rural or economically marginalised voters, and have not succeeded in filling the electoral void left by Harmony, particularly among the Russian-speaking population.

The decline of Harmony and the rise of the Progressives are also framed by broader trends in Latvia's political landscape, including the fragmentation of the electorate

46   Central Electoral Commission (2025) *2025. gada pašvaldību vēlēšanu kandidātu saraksti,* https://dati.cvk.lv/PV2025/en/kandidatu-saraksti

47   Central Election Commission (2017) *June 3, 2017 local elections: Rīga – "Harmony" Social Democratic Party and "Honor to Serve Rīga" – candidate list,* http://pv2017.cvk.lv/ElectionResults/CandidateList?candidateListId=j5B87E9C5M9Vt2O85vxpbQ%3D%3D&locationId=7GMEialdZcbMlUF05%2FV2NA%3D%3D

48   Central Election Commission (2020) *August 29, 2020 Rīga city elections: "Harmony" Social Democratic Party – candidate list,* https://rd2020.cvk.lv/pub/velesanu-rezultati/Rīga/saraksti/saskana-socialdemokratiska-partija

49   Central Election Commission (2021) *2021 municipal elections: Election results,* https://pv2021.cvk.lv/pub/en/election-results

because of the emergence of centre-right and nationalist parties, such as New Unity and National Alliance. Geopolitical events, particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have further influenced voter preferences. Many Latvian-speaking left-leaning voters have shifted towards the Progressives, while segments of Harmony's traditional electorate have either disengaged or turned toward regional or issue-specific alternatives.

The contrasting trajectories of Harmony and the Progressives indicate that, while there remains a left-leaning voter base, its political representation is shifting. The Progressives have positioned themselves as a progressive alternative, particularly in urban areas, advocating for European integration, social justice and environmental policies. However, their electoral success remains limited compared with the broader reach Harmony once enjoyed. The broader challenge for social democracy in Latvia lies in the absence of a unifying force capable of appealing to a wide range of voters. Harmony remains diminished and ideologically adrift, while the Progressives are still in the process of building national relevance. No single left-wing party has managed to consolidate support across ethnic, generational and geographic divides. As a result, the future of social democracy in Latvia remains uncertain. With the next elections approaching, the coming years will reveal whether either party can adapt to new political realities or whether fragmentation on the left will deepen further.

4. Sentiment analysis

4.1 Theoretical framework and methodology of sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis is a core component of this study, designed to complement the institutional and policy-focused findings of previous chapters by capturing the emotional dimension of public discourse. This approach is crucial for understanding how political and governance dynamics are perceived within municipalities, offering deeper insight into public reactions to leadership, infrastructure and administrative performance. By systematically evaluating and interpreting public attitudes, emotions and opinions toward specific topics, events or entities, sentiment analysis categorises sentiments as positive, negative or neutral. This methodological frame-

work enables the quantification of societal sentiment over time, helping to reveal how narratives are reflected or contested in the digital space. The goal of this section is to determine whether public sentiment aligns with institutional patterns and to identify the dominant themes, emotional tone and intensity of local discourse. These findings will help to assess how the reform and broader governance dynamics are perceived across municipalities.

The analysis focuses on the period from mid-January to mid-April 2025, when public discourse intensified in anticipation of the municipal elections. Rīga, Jelgava, Ogre, Ventspils, Rēzekne and Talsi were selected as case studies, not for geographical coverage, but because each illustrates

Figure 6a. Media distribution in Ventspils
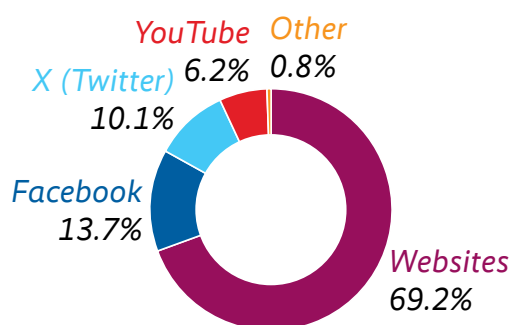
In Ventspils, public discourse is predominantly shaped by conventional media, accounting for 69% of all content sources.

Figure 6c. Media distribution in Rēzekne
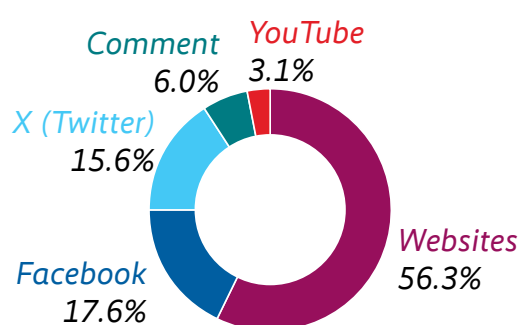
Although social media is relatively active in Rēzekne, conventional media still account for most content (56.3%).

Figure 6b. Media distribution in Ogre
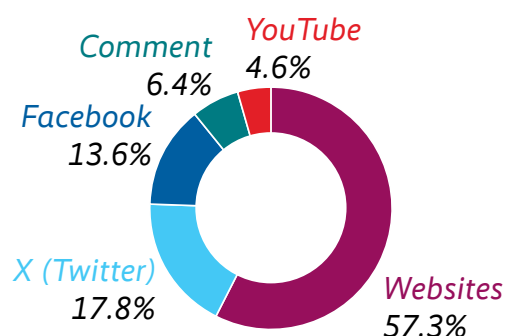
Media distribution in Ogre. Although social media is relatively active in Ogre, conventional media still account for the majority of content (57.3%).

Figure 6d. Media distribution in Jelgava
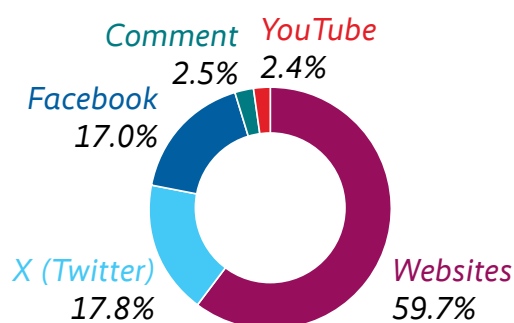
Media distribution in Jelgava. Although social media is relatively active in Jelgava, conventional media still account for the majority of content (59.7%).

a distinct structural challenge. These include financial instability, long-standing leadership, infrastructure deadlock and ideological polarisation. In addition to sentiment tone and thematic focus, the analysis also considers the source distribution of discourse, specifically, the balance between conventional and social media. This distinction is essential for understanding the framing, tone and emotional resonance of local narratives.

In regional municipalities such as Ventspils, Ogre, Jelgava and Rēzekne, sentiment-relevant content is shaped predominantly by conventional media, particularly news portals and institutional publications. In each case, over 55 per cent of all captured content originated from traditional sources, while platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook played a comparatively smaller role. These distributions are visualised in the following figures (Figure 6a–6d), confirming that regional discourse is still largely driven by formal media ecosystems. This has direct implications for the tone and intensity of public sentiment, which often reflects the structural characteristics of the information environment.

This dominance of conventional media suggests a more structured and less volatile information environment, in which narratives tend to be more uniform and emotionally moderated. In contrast, regions with higher levels of social media activity, as in Rīga, often exhibit greater emotional fluctuation, fragmentation and ideological polarisation.

4.2 Case analysis by dominant themes

Preliminary findings from sentiment analysis suggest that the reform did not meaningfully alter the core patterns of discourse or emotional engagement in Latvia's municipal politics. Despite the structural changes introduced in 2020/21, four dominant themes persist in public discourse across the municipalities analysed. These include: (i) financial instability and budgetary critique, (ii) entrenched leadership and personalised governance, (iii) infrastructure as a symbol of governance (dis)function, and (iv) ideological polarisation and national identity. The remainder of this section illustrates how these themes are emotionally expressed in different municipalities.

Financial instability and budgetary critique. Rēzekne exhibits predominantly negative sentiment toward its financial management and infrastructure planning. Public criticism primarily targets the municipal SPA complex, which, despite being physically completed, has never opened due to a lack of operational funding and investor interest. Frequently labelled in public discussions as a 'project nobody needs' or a 'monument to mismanagement', the SPA complex symbolises wasteful spending and highlights a deep disconnect between administrative decisions and community priorities. Additionally, the Olympic Centre's multifunctional sports hall, although operational since September 2020, also faced public disapproval due to its nearly three-year delay after construction concluded in 2017. This frustration is further personalised through references to Mayor Aleksandrs Bartaševičs, whose leadership is seen as emblematic of broader financial mismanagement and broken promises within the city administration.

These sentiments are further reflected in Figure 7, which captures the conversational trends and sentiment in Rēzekne. While terms such as 'miljoni eiro' (millions of euros) may seem neutral in isolation, they often appear in contexts of criticism about overspending and questionable priorities. Phrases such as 'valdīja pilsētā' (ruled the city), 'gadiem valdīja' (ruled for years), 'problēma ūdens' (water problem), 'džakuzi pirtis' (jacuzzi saunas) and 'stāv tukša' (stands unused) reflect public discontent with how resources have been allocated. While seemingly humorous, references such as 'jacuzzi saunas' are used sarcastically to criticise projects perceived as excessive or disconnected from local needs, particularly in relation to the unopened SPA complex. These expressions reinforce perceptions of poor planning, symbolic excess and long-standing governance issues. The term 'Eiropas Savienība' (European Union) also appears frequently in the data and reflects its prominence in the broader public discourse.

The negative emotional reactions in Rēzekne align closely with broader governance failures. In 2023, when Rēzekne's municipal budget was approved with a deficit exceeding €8 million, it led to the dissolution of the city council by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional

Figure 7. Frequently used phrases reflect public frustration with perceived waste, excessive spending and prolonged governance failures

Development.[50] This drastic measure intensified national debates on municipal autonomy and fiscal discipline. Public discourse echoed these concerns, reinforcing sentiments of financial mismanagement and institutional instability, and underlining the erosion of public accountability.

In contrast, Talsi exhibits a subdued and neutral-negative sentiment. Despite facing similar financial hardships, including significant austerity measures in 2024 to manage an €8 million deficit, public discourse in Talsi is remarkably restrained. Discussions about financial instability are infrequent and usually appear in routine announcements about service changes or municipal updates, rarely framing these developments as systemic failures. This silence in the face of economic adversity may suggest a resigned acceptance among the populace, indicative of a broader disempowerment or disillusionment with local governance. The lack of visible emotional engagement signals low public expectations of institutional responsiveness, making this passive sentiment landscape both consequential and indicative of long-term risks for democratic engagement.

Entrenched leadership and personalised governance. In Jelgava, Ogre and Ventspils, public sentiment reflects the continuity of long-serving or highly visible mayors. These figures are not always the focus of emotional polarisation, but their prolonged presence and distinctive leadership styles shape the tone and focus of local discourse.

Jelgava presents a predominantly neutral sentiment towards Mayor Andris Rāviņš, who has been in office since 2001. While his name occasionally appears in connection with infrastructure delays, such as road repairs and traffic congestion, there is little polarisation in the way his leadership is discussed. He is not framed as either a success or a failure, which suggests that stability, political continuity and low emotional engagement dominate the local digital discourse. This may indicate quiet satisfaction with the status quo, or alternatively, a form of disengagement from municipal politics in the absence of viable alternatives or contentious public debate.

This overall impression is reflected in the sentiment balance observed in recent online discourse, where the majority of mentions related to Mayor Rāviņš remain neutral in tone, with only limited expressions of approval or criticism (see Figure 8).

In Ogre, Mayor Egils Helmanis's, in power since 2017, draws a sentiment that ranges from positive to mixed. Known for his assertive and independent approach, Helmanis is a central figure in public discussions, often symbolising a resistance to central government control. Expressions such as 'Ogre did not

Figure 8. Sentiment distribution for Mayor Andris Rāviņš (January-April 2025). Neutral sentiment prevails, with low levels of both positive and negative engagement
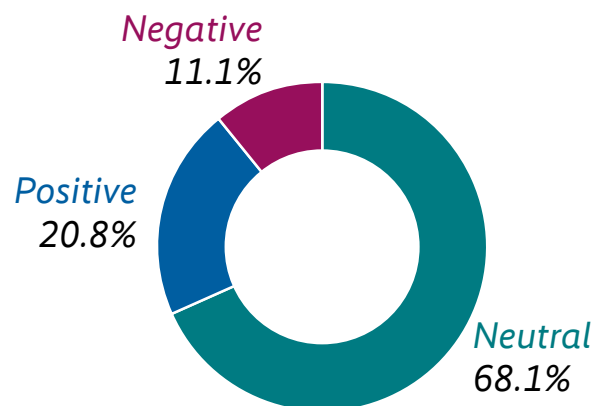
cave in to pressure' or 'Only Ogre ruins the narrative of top-down control' frame the municipality as politically distinct and intentionally oppositional to central authority. The 2023 controversy surrounding Helmanis's intervention in the municipal museum's governance, while criticised as overreach,[51] also reinforced his symbolic role as a bold and autonomous leader. His name is frequently mentioned in local discourse, reflecting both his high visibility and the personalised nature of municipal leadership in Ogre. Sentiment here reflects pride in strong leadership and symbolic defiance, rather than policy-based critique or concern with day-to-day governance.

Figure 9 illustrates the dominant conversational trends and sentiment in Ogre's digital discourse. Terms such as 'Egils Helmanis' (mayor of Ogre), 'Ogres novada' (*Ogre municipality*) and 'domes priekšsēdētājs' (*chairman of the council*) feature prominently, pointing to a political environment strongly focused on individual figures. This pattern supports the observation that public perception in Ogre is driven less by institutional critique and more by leadership personality and symbolic representation.

In Ventspils, public discourse is markedly different, defined by a tone that ranges from positive to neutral and dominated by economic themes. Conversations focus primarily on the city's ongoing prosperity, particularly around the Ventspils port, a major engine of local growth. The port is consistently framed in positive terms, as a reliable source of growth and a symbol of economic competence. While former mayor Aivars Lembergs, whose political career dates back to the late 1980s and who was convicted in 2021 for bribery and money laundering,[52] is rarely

---

50   Vides aizsardzības un reģionālās attīstības ministrija (2024) *Valdība atbalsta Rēzeknes valstspilsētas pašvaldības domes atlaišanu*, 6 February, https://www.varam.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/valdiba-atbalsta-rezeknes-valstspilsetas-pasvaldibas-domes-atlaisanu

51   Delna (2023) *Delna nosūta vēstuli VARAM par Ogres mēra atstādināšanu*, 19 April, https://delna.lv/lv/2023/04/19/delna-nosuta-vestuli-varam-par-ogres-mera-atstadinasanu

52   Auers, D. (2021) *Continuity in change? Latvia's local governments after regional reform and local government elections*, 7-8. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/baltikum/18054.pdf

šovs ksprofl
ksprofl fight
fight night
novada pašvaldības
ogres mērs
rīgā notiks
priekšsēdētājs egils
laura putne
cīņu šovs
notiks cīņu
novada domes
ogres novadā
linards dvarīšķis
egils helmanis
pašvaldības domes
pašvaldības budžeta
vecuma grupā
domes priekšsēdētājs
ogres novada
krišjānis helmanis

mentioned directly his legacy, particularly with regard to the Ventspils port, continues to influence the city's image and trajectory. The absence of debate over governance suggests that his leadership is understood less through current political involvement and more through his economic legacy and the institutional memory of economic success. This governance model is discussed in neutral terms, with discourse focusing on continuity and inherited stability rather than on present accountability or change. The lack of emotional mobilisation around leadership issues points to political continuity and relative civic detachment. Residents appear broadly satisfied with the economic status quo, even as active political engagement remains low.

Across these municipalities, entrenched leadership is not viewed uniformly as problematic. Instead, it has become normalised, interpreted as a symbol of either stability, strength or pragmatic continuity. In Ogre, leadership visibility becomes a rallying point for local identity. In Jelgava and Ventspils, longevity in office is met with either muted acceptance or passive approval. In all cases, sentiment reflects how personalisation of power continues to shape local narratives, with few signs of emergent alternatives or substantive contestation.
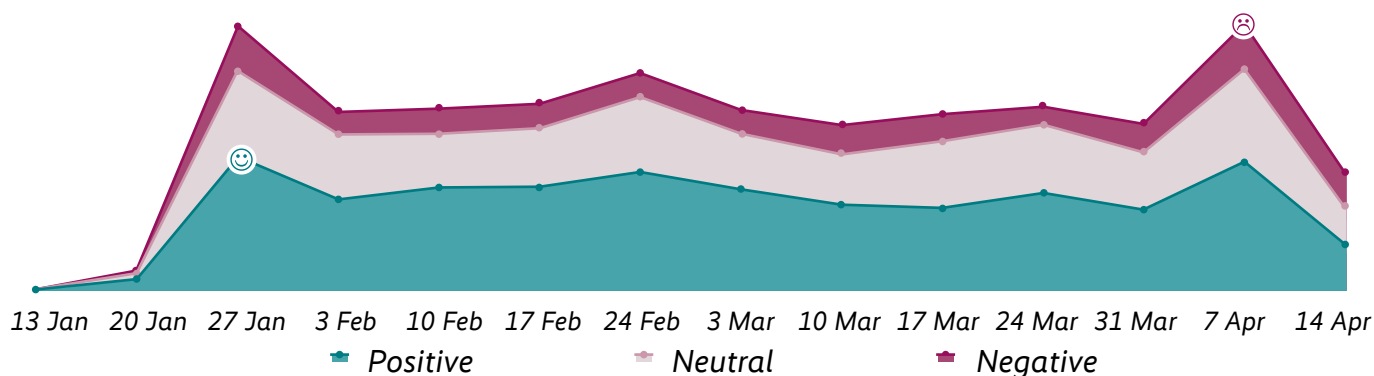
Infrastructure as a symbol of governance (dis)function. Infrastructure emerges as a recurring and emotionally resonant theme in the public discourse of Rīga, Rēzekne and Jelgava, each illustrating how local infrastructure projects

shape perceptions of governance capacity, responsiveness and institutional credibility.

In Rīga, public discourse reveals widespread frustration with persistent infrastructural disruption. Rail Baltica has become a focal point of frustration, but it is part of a broader public discourse in Rīga that reflects dissatisfaction with delayed repairs, disorganised traffic planning and poor coordination between municipal institutions. While the project was intended as a symbol of EU integration and modernisation, it is often portrayed instead as a source of daily disruption and a reflection of governance failure. Residents express disillusionment not only with the delays and demolition plans tied to Rail Baltica but also with broader inefficiencies that undermine trust in municipal planning. This emotionally charged discourse conveys a strongly negative sentiment, in which infrastructural disruption becomes a proxy for institutional fragmentation and eroding confidence in the city's long-term strategy.

This dynamic was particularly visible on 13 April 2025, when public discourse intensified in response to a visible dip in the road surface on Tērbatas Street, reportedly linked to ongoing construction at the former Sports Palace site. The incident prompted widespread public commentary on disorganised planning, traffic disruption and concerns about construction oversight. Figure 10 illustrates the rise in infrastructure-related mentions on this day.

Figure 10. Mentions peaked following a road surface subsidence on Tērbatas Street linked to nearby construction works, January-April 2024

13 Jan   20 Jan   27 Jan   3 Feb   10 Feb   17 Feb   24 Feb   3 Mar   10 Mar   17 Mar   24 Mar   31 Mar   7 Apr   14 Apr

— Positive   — Neutral   — Negative

Rēzekne similarly demonstrates a strongly negative sentiment, shaped by infrastructural shortcomings that symbolise unfulfilled promises and institutional mistrust. The municipal SPA complex, though physically completed, remains unused, reinforcing public perceptions of poor planning and failed accountability. Similarly, the delayed opening of the Olympic Centre's multifunctional sports hall amplified scepticism toward local governance effectiveness, deepening existing critiques about systemic financial oversight and leadership accountability.
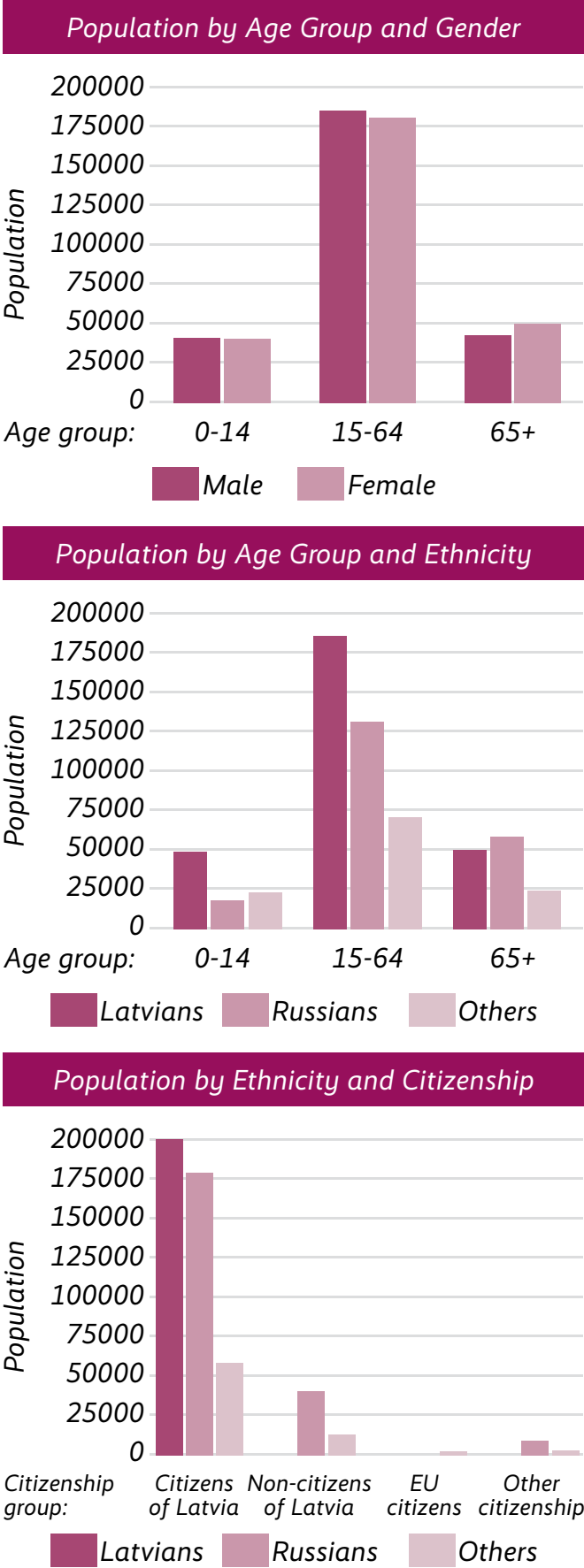
In Jelgava, discourse is less emotionally polarised but still reveals a neutral-to-negative sentiment. Mentions focus on long-standing concerns over road conditions and delays in construction or repairs, particularly in neighbourhoods such as Medemciems. While these issues do not spark polarised reactions they are persistently cited as signs of inefficiency and underperformance. The tone is muted, but the accumulation of complaints suggests a slow erosion of confidence in the city's capacity to deliver basic services. Rather than open outrage, the sentiment manifests as quiet dissatisfaction, less visible but no less meaningful in its implications for how governance is perceived.

Taken together, these cases show how infrastructure, whether through high-profile failures, neglected maintenance or delayed modernisation, functions as a symbolic lens through which residents assess not just project outcomes, but the overall credibility of local governance.

Ideological polarisation and national identity. Of the municipalities analysed, Rīga exhibits the most intense ideological polarisation, and consequently, a predominantly negative sentiment tone. As the nation's capital and symbolic heart, the city remains a flashpoint for legacy ideological disputes, especially those related to language policy, historical memory and expressions of national solidarity. The city's digital discourse is marked by polarising narratives, emotional intensity and deep ideological division. This ideological tension plays out within a demographically complex population, as illustrated in Figure 11, in which differences across age groups, gender, ethnicity and citizenship status shape how identity and belonging are expressed politically.

This polarisation is rooted not in recent developments, but in enduring identity-based cleavages shaped by ethnicity, language and generational experience. Debates around Soviet-era monuments, Latvian-language education and support for Ukraine serve as focal points through which broader struggles over belonging, collective memory and national values are played out. These dominant narratives are deeply informed by collective historical memory and identity-based grievances, making them more than surface-level political disagreements: they are expressions of who belongs, how history should be interpreted and what values the country should embody.

Figure 11. Demographic composition of Rīga residents by age group, gender, ethnicity, and citizenship, 2024

Population by Age Group and Gender

Legend: Male, Female

Population by Age Group and Ethnicity

Legend: Latvians, Russians, Others

Population by Ethnicity and Citizenship

Legend: Latvians, Russians, Others

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, IRE091 dataset, 2024.

Figure 12. Phrases such as 'in Russian', 'Latvian state' and 'during wartime' reflect the emotional weight of language, identity and security themes in Rīga's public discourse

The emotional charge of these issues is heightened by Riga's dual role as both an administrative centre and ideological stage. Public reactions to policy decisions frequently transcend practical considerations. For example, monument removals are seen not only as acts of urban planning, but as statements about national identity and historical justice. Likewise, education reforms are debated not just in terms of effectiveness, but as existential questions of national identity.

National security concerns, particularly in relation to the war in Ukraine, intersect with these themes and add further emotional weight. Expressions of solidarity with Ukraine often serve as proxies for deeper debates about Latvia's geopolitical orientation and internal cohesion.

Unlike other municipalities in which sentiment is shaped by economic or administrative performance, Rīga's discourse is defined by symbolic confrontation and emotional division. It is less about the functionality of governance, and more about how residents see themselves and each other within broader national and historical narratives. The intensity of these debates and the emotionally charged framing of nearly all identity-linked issues contributes to an overall sentiment landscape that is predominantly negative, not in terms of hostility toward governance itself, but in the sense of heightened tension, conflict and unresolved grievance.

These dynamics are further illustrated in Figure 12, which presents the most commonly recurring phrases in ideologically charged discourse in Rīga. Terms such as 'krievu valodā' (*in the Russian language*), 'latvijas valsts' (*Latvian state*), 'kara laikā' (*during wartime*) and 'Eiropas Savienības' (*European Union*) reflect the interplay between identity, memory and security in public debate. Other notable phrases include 'Rīgas domes' (*Rīga City Council*), 'valsts drošības' (*state security*) and 'karš Ukrainā' (*war in Ukraine*), each underscoring the geopolitical context of these discussions. Less frequent but symbolically charged mentions such as 'Čehova Rīgas' (*Riga Chekhov*) and 'Mihaila Čehova' (*Mikhail Chekhov*) refer to the Mikhail Chekhov Rīga Russian Theatre, often invoked in debates over language policy and the cultural role of Russian institutions in Latvian public life. This underscores how emotionally salient issues, such as language use, geopolitical orientation and symbolic representation, are expressed in digital discourse.

Conclusions

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of Latvia's municipal political landscape ahead of the 2025 elections, combining institutional, political and sentiment-based insights to assess how public trust, political engagement and governance are evolving across different localities. By integrating case studies, electoral dynamics and sentiment analysis, the research has explored not only how formal structures function but also how they are emotionally perceived and interpreted by local communities. Special attention was paid to regional disparities, patterns of political continuity and the role of identity-based cleavages in shaping local political life.

One of the central conclusions is the high degree of divergence in political sentiment and engagement across municipalities, revealing significant variation both regionally and along ethnic lines. These differences are not incidental but deeply rooted in historical trajectories, economic structures and demographic realities that influence how residents perceive their local governments and political agency.

- **Regional disparities remain decisive in shaping political behaviour and discourse.** While municipalities such as Ventspils and Ogre exhibit relative institutional stability and economic continuity, others, such as Rēzekne and Talsi, reflect ongoing 'conflict' of trust and fiscal viability. In Ventspils, economic performance appears to buffer governance scrutiny, while in Rēzekne, chronic financial mismanagement has triggered national intervention and strong negative sentiment. In Talsi, silence and resignation dominate the discourse, pointing to passive disengagement rather than active contestation.

- **Ethnic composition continues to influence both political affiliation and emotional tone.** In cities with large Russian-speaking populations, such as Rēzekne and Daugavpils, disillusionment is often shaped by a sense of marginalisation, policy exclusion (for example, education reforms) and shifting geopolitical pressures. While formerly consolidated under parties such as Harmony, the Russian-speaking electorate has grown increasingly fragmented, with no single political force effectively articulating its evolving concerns. In contrast, municipalities with ethnically homogeneous Latvian majorities (for example, Valmiera, Ogre) display more coherent political narratives, often aligned with national security and Euro-Atlantic integration.

- **Public discourse is highly sensitive to the personalisation of leadership.** Long-serving mayors such as Andris Rāviņš in Jelgava or Egils Helmanis in Ogre continue to shape local narratives, often becoming symbolic proxies for the strengths or shortcomings of municipal governance. In some cases, this fosters stability; in others, it inhibits political renewal or stifles participatory culture.

- **Infrastructure plays a central role in how governance is evaluated by the public.** Whether through mismanaged projects (for example, the unused SPA complex in Rēzekne), delayed modernisation (as seen in parts of Jelgava) or highly disruptive development (for example, Rail Baltica in Rīga), physical infrastructure emerges as both a practical and symbolic indicator of political competence or failure. These reactions are often emotionally charged and embedded in broader frustrations about responsiveness and transparency.

- **Ideological polarisation is most acute in Rīga**, where discourse is not only more intense but also deeply fragmented. Here, debates around language, identity, historical memory and security intersect with infrastructure grievances, creating a complex emotional landscape of contested engagement. Unlike the quiet detachment seen in rural municipalities, civic discourse in the capital is active but deeply divided, reflecting unresolved tensions about national direction and democratic representation.

- **The 2020/21 municipal reform**, while significant in administrative terms, has had limited visible impact on the emotional and political culture of municipalities. In most cases, it has neither revitalised participation nor disrupted entrenched leadership. In some areas, it has further distanced communities from decision-making structures, particularly where local identity was diluted by boundary changes. Nonetheless, the reform did contribute to administrative consolidation and cost savings, suggesting some progress on technical grounds, even as deeper political and social challenges remain unresolved.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight that **Latvia's municipal politics cannot be understood through institutional design alone**. Local governance is shaped by a convergence of regional development patterns, ethnic diversity,

leadership legacies and emotional perceptions of fairness, competence and voice. The persistence of civic disengagement in some areas, and highly polarised engagement in others, indicates that Latvia's democratic vitality at the local level remains uneven and vulnerable to broader societal tensions.

Future strategies to strengthen local democracy must therefore move beyond structural reform. They should focus on fostering inclusive political cultures, supporting community-based civic participation, and addressing long-term regional inequalities that continue to shape public trust, democratic legitimacy, and the emotional resonance of governance across Latvia's municipalities.

About the authors

Luīze Līce-Tane is a project manager at analytics and advisory group 'PowerHouse Latvia'. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in international relations and diplomacy from Riga Stradiņš University.

Mārtiņš Vargulis is a director at analytics and advisory group 'PowerHouse Latvia' and lecturer at Rīga Stradiņš University. Mr Vargulis has been deputy director and researcher at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, as well as visiting fellow at Nuclear Threat Initiative. In his long professional career as a representative of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, he has been Head of Defence Policy and Strategy Section, as well as diplomat at the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Latvia to NATO and the EU, where he dealt with a wide range of security issues, including nuclear weapons and arms control. He is the author of numerous articles and the editor of several publications.

About analytics and advisory group 'PowerHouse Latvia'

'PowerHouse Latvia' is an independent analytics and advisory group based in Rīga. It focuses on political risk analysis, public sentiment research and strategic communication, primarily within the Baltic region. The organisation works with public institutions, international partners and private clients to support informed decision-making in complex environments.

Latvia's municipal elections

Latvia's municipalities are facing persistent challenges in the lead-up to the 2025 elections, including persistent political disengagement, demographic divides, and the lingering effects of the 2020/21 regional reform. This study provides an in-depth examination of local governance and public sentiment across six municipalities: Rīga, Jelgava, Ogre, Ventspils, Rēzekne, and Talsi. It highlights patterns of disillusionment, polarisation, and uneven development.

Combining political and sentiment analysis, the research identifies four key themes shaping local discourse: financial instability, entrenched leadership, symbolic infrastructure, and identity-based tensions. In cities such as Rēzekne and Rīga, these issues are reflected both in voter behaviour and in emotionally charged public debate.

The findings suggest that structural reform alone is insufficient to restore democratic trust. Addressing regional inequality, fostering inclusive civic participation, and rethinking local representation will be essential to strengthening Latvia's democratic resilience at the municipal level.

Further information on this topic can be found here:
↗ **baltic.fes.de**

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung