
**SHOULD
LATVIANS
BLAME
UKRAINIANS'
LANGUAGE
*SKILLS?***

European nation-states often see monolingualism as the norm. A single language, often argued to be the very core of their national identity, should be dominant and spoken by everyone.¹

It is the case of Latvia which, since its renewed independence in 1991, has established Latvian as the sole official language of Latvia through its constitution and in a series of language laws, notably regarding education and diverse language requirements for employment.² Latvia is an interesting case when looking at questions of majority and minority languages, as two main languages coexist: Latvian, which is spoken almost exclusively on this territory, and Russian, historically dominant but the knowledge of the language is declining, and one can hardly argue that it is a threatened language.

While the territory of Latvia had always been linguistically diverse, the Latvian language and other minority languages lost of their importance to the profit of Russian as it was incorporated into the

USSR, notably due to war losses, mass deportation and Russian-speaking immigration from other republics of the Soviet Union, followed by efforts to “russify” the country. As a result, Latvia was left with a large Russian-speaking population, a term encompassing a group far from being uniform and made up of different origins, including immigrant groups whose native language was not originally Russian, including Ukrainians. In 1989, 42% of the country’s population spoke Russian as a mother tongue and 37% today.³

From its independence onwards, Latvia was under international scrutiny throughout its democratization process.⁴ Indeed, the question of minorities – especially in the light of its citizenship law rendering 30% of the population stateless⁵ – attracted attention from both Russia and the West. To this day, no ethnic conflict has taken place in Latvia, and while the linguistic domains of Russian have been reduced, a significant part of the population speaks the language as their mother

1 This can be called a language ideology. See [Blommaert\(2006\): Language Ideology](#). and May (2012): *Language and minority rights: Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of language*.

2 For a detailed account of Latvia’s language policy and sociolinguistic landscape, see [Hogan-Brun et al.\(2008\): Language Politics and Practices in the Baltic States](#).

3 Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, [1991, 2023](#).

4 Galbreath, D. J., & Muižnieks, N(2008). Latvia: managing post-imperial minorities.

5 [Pavlenko, A.\(2008\)](#). Multilingualism in Post-Soviet Countries.



as opposed to other Russian-speakers in Latvia.

There is a widely shared sense of empathy for Ukrainians, which risks fading in the upcoming years if Ukrainians are not perceived as making “efforts” to learn the language sufficiently – and are seen as relying on Russian too much, or not showing the “respect” for the nation that some would like to see. I suggest however not to overestimate the impact of Ukrainian refugees on the use of Russian in Latvia, as there is very little interaction between Latvians and Ukrainians.

While the Russian language provided opportunities for social inclusion for many Ukrainians, it increasingly became a symbol of Putin’s aggression – and more widely Russian imperialism. Minority language questions in Latvia are complex, and languages are symbolically charged. It is difficult to resolve the tension between the need to accommodate minorities in a multicultural approach while taking into account the perception of Russian and the threat caused by Russia, as well as the need to historicise the current situation. That being said, the arrival of Ukrainian

refugees has created an increasingly multilingual environment in Latvia.

Policy aiming to accommodate minority languages in Latvia would also benefit Ukrainians and the preservation of their language(s). In addition, Latvia's declining population makes immigration one of the few viable ways to reverse its declining population number, emphasizing the importance of inclusive language policies. That would certainly require moving beyond official monolingualism and embracing more multilingual practices, allowing minority languages to flourish. The question from there is, how do we make languages coexist and allow both Latvian and other languages to prosper? 