

## THE ETHNIC GEOGRAPHY OF LATVIA

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### POVZETEK

#### GEOGRAFIJA NARODNOSTI V LATVIJI

Latvija izkazuje najbolj zamotan etnični mozaik v Evropi. Prispevek obravnava številčna razmerja in prostorsko razporeditev sedmih največjih etničnih skupin v Latviji. Raziskava temelji na rezultatih popisov preteklega 40-letnega razdobja, podrobno pa so obdelani podatki popisa iz leta 1989, vključno z novejšimi podatki, ki sta jih posredovala Ministrstvo za šolstvo in Oddelek za migracije in državljanstvo. V diagramih, na kartah in v tabelah je prikazana etnična struktura, oziroma so obravnavane spremembe v številu in poselitvenem prostoru posameznih etničnih skupin. Prostorska razporeditev temelji na administrativni razmejitev, ki vključuje 26, pretežno ruralnih območij, 7 mestnih aglomeracij ter skoraj 500 mikro-ruralnih enot – pagastov. Prispevek osvetli tudi sodobne trende v populacijskem razvoju Latvije. Po izračunih naj bi se delež prebivalstva latvijske narodnosti v kratkem povečal na 60 % vsega prebivalstva države.

In the last year the Baltic states are faced with Russia's undocumented accusations of the discrimination against ethnic minorities in Latvia and Estonia. The Latvian politicians try to explain that Latvians are more a discriminated minority in their homeland than Russians are in Latvia. In the period before World War II, Latvia was considered one of the countries with the most democratic internal politics toward ethnic minorities in Europe. Being occupied Latvians, as well as Estonians and Lithuanians were small minorities in the former empire of USSR. Did Latvians in a few years really became an aggressive suppresser of human rights of minorities in their own country or it is too difficult for some Russians to give up the privileges to rule another country and people there?

This research can deal only briefly with an introductory description of the ethnic composition in the country. What is the spatial distribution of different nationalities? How is the number of different nationalities changing? What are the differences of the ethnic composition in various parts of Latvia, and in different countries in the region? Why are Latvians so concerned about the immigrants from Russia? What could be the development of the situation in future?

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Most of the data about the nationalities in Latvia can be found in the materials of population census. Ten different population censuses took place during the last hundred years in Latvia. The first general data about the ethnic structure of Latvia is offered by the people's census from 1897. At that time in Latvia 68% Latvians were counted – to be more exact, those who acknowledged the Latvian language as their native language. The later changes of the borders might have somewhat increased the number of Latvians.

The next four population censuses were organized by the Latvian Statistical Department. The censuses were held every 5 years during the first independence time (1918–1940). The percentage of Latvians reached 73% in 1920. In subsequent years the Latvian percentage gradually continued to grow to 76% in 1935, mainly as a result of assimilation. Taking into consideration that in 1944 the region of Abrene was disconnected by the Russian S.F.S.R., the Latvian percentage in Latvia was larger. The maximum of Latvian percentage was observed in 1941, when it was 83% in today's borders. The increase of Latvians can be explained with the emigration of almost all Germans from Latvia in 1939–1940. Also many Russians and Jews left Latvia just before German occupation in 1941.

The next census was organized in 1959. This census and the last three in 1970, 1979, and 1989 were organized by central officials of the Soviet government.

One of the most important Latvian problems in post WW II times, especially in the last decade, is the aggravation of the Latvian ethnic situation and the chance for Latvians to remain as a nation. The loss of people in the last war, in deportations and in emigrations advanced an unfavorable demographical situation for the Latvians. Moscow's government tried to dilute the annexed Baltic peoples by sending a stream of people from the USSR, especially to Latvia. Most of them were Russians. In the time from 1943 till 1989 the number of Latvians in Latvia decreased from 1.5 million to 1.4 million or by about 5%. There is no other nation in Europe, which still has smaller population, than before the war. On the other hand, the number of Russians during the same time grew more than 5 times, or from 168 000 to 900 000. Especially large increases in Russian population were between the years 1943 and 1959, or just after the war. The officers and soldiers of Soviet Army just stayed in Latvia after their demobilization. Therefore, the Latvian percentage in Latvia during the last 50 years has fallen from 82% to 52%. This caused a real threat for Latvians of becoming a minority in their own homeland.

93% of non-Latvians were Slavs, of which more than 77% were Russians. There are also Byelorussians, Ukrainians, and Poles, who live in Latvia, the large part of whom are assimilated by Russians. The number of Byelorussians, the second largest minority in Latvia, was growing steadily and reached 120 000. There were almost no Ukrainians before the war. Now Ukrainians are the third largest minority in Latvia and their number reached the maximum of 92 000 in 1989. The last Slavic minority –

Poles, has stabilized their number around 60 000. In the last two decades the number of Poles slightly decreased due to assimilation. Two other significant minorities in Latvia are Lithuanians and Jews. If Lithuanian's number was more or less stable about 35 000, then the number of Jews changed extremely. During the last war, those Jews, which remained in Latvia almost entirely were killed. After the war, a new wave of Jews emigrated to Latvia mostly from Russia, but since 1959 their number again decreased twice. Most Latvian Jews migrated to Israel, the U.S.A. and other western countries. They also have had a natural decrease of the population and loss to assimilation.

Representatives of more than 100 different nationalities are registered in Latvia, mostly reflecting the ethnic spectrum of the former USSR. Only one group should be mentioned – Livonians (Livs). Probably the smallest minority in Europe represented only by 136 persons is the autochthonous minority in the Northwestern part of Latvia. Livonians belongs to Finno-Ugric family of languages. Although, Livonian language is spoken only by less than 50 persons, mostly in retirement age, the Livonian Sunday school and children summer camp are organized. The governmental institution "Livod Randa" (Livonian Coast) was established two years ago to help preserve the ethnic identity of Livonians.

From 1989 census results we can make an insight into spatial distribution of Latvia's ethnic groups. The percentage of Latvians in 26 regions and 7 major cities of Latvia varies from 13% to 90%, and the mean is 64%. The Latvian percentage is the lowest in all of the largest cities, together with two Southeastern regions. There is no large city where Latvians are more than 50% of the population. On the other hand there are just two rural regions, on the very borderland with Byeloruss, with Latvian percentage slightly under 50%.

The highest Latvian percentage is in four North-Western rural regions, but the lowest in largest cities. In rural regions the percentage of Latvians decreases with direction to the South-East. The non-Latvians are settling mainly in the largest cities, most of all in Rīga. Therefore, the Latvian percentage in Latvia's rural areas has remained at a higher level, almost three fourths, while in the urban population it is below the half. There is no one rural region in Latvia where any other ethnic group than Latvians have the absolute majority. Three major port cities attracted most of non-latvians, as well as industries of peat, building material, and chemicals. The military bases of former USSR army still are forming special enclaves of nonlatvians in many cities and rural regions of Latvia.

The most mixed ethnic structure is formed in Latgale (the Eastern part of Latvia). Often there is a very indefinite and unsteady ethnic self-awareness for local inhabitants, which easily can be changed from Latvian or Byelorussian to Russian or Polish and the other way round. First Russians who migrated there one or two centuries ago, because they had economical and other privileges since the czar's rule. The lower

percentage of Latvians in Zemgale (the central part of Latvia, regions of Jelgava, Dobeles and Bauska) may be explained by the fact that in pre-soviet Latvia this was a region of prosperous peasants, a considerable number of whom were deported to Siberia or emigrated to the West. Therefore there remained a large number of cultivated but unoccupied farms. Moscow leaders directed Russians to occupy free spaces in Latvia.

The highest percentage of Latvians has remained in Kurzeme (the Western part of Latvia), especially in its Northern and Western regions and also in the North of Latgale and in the East of Vidzeme (the Northern part of Latvia).

The Latvian ethnic environment (with more Latvians) has been furthered by:

- 1) smaller mass-deportations and their consequences. The waves of deportations created free "ecological niches" for the migrants, which because of these favorable conditions, were directly filled;
- 2) being a larger distance from the capital Rīga;
- 3) the rather undeveloped system of transport, especially of railways;
- 4) the prevalence of collective farms ("kolhozi") over state farms ("sovhozi"), the last drawing more migrants; and
- 5) an original barrier against the migrants in several seaside regions where the restricted areas of the borderland zone.

The percentage of the second largest ethnic group of Latvia, Russians, varies from 5% to 58%. The highest five Russian percentages are in the larger cities. There is no rural region with a Russian majority in Latvia. There are just two major cities in Eastern part of Latvia – Rēzekne and Daugavpils with small Russian dominance (56% and 58%). It is impossible to draw the borders of a region in Latvia where Russians would be the majority. Although the Russian community makes considerable size, their settlement is not very concentrated in particular region. Just 10% of Latvia's Russians live in cities or regions, where they form majority. In comparison in Estonia about 1/3 of Russians are concentrated in areas where they are more than 50%. The geographical distribution of Russians in Latvia is more favorable for integration and so less conflicts are predicted.

Byelorussians have one rural region in Latvia, where they form 20%. In all other areas the percentage of Byelorussians is less than 10%. In more than half of the regions, Byelorussians are less than 3%. The concentration of Byelorussians is larger in the major cities and in the Southern and Central part of Latvia. Ukrainian percentages have small variance. The highest percentage of Ukrainians is in port cities and in the Central part of Latvia, but no more than 10%. Poles are distributed more equally, except for three maximum locations. The highest concentration of Poles is in the very South-East corner of Latvia. Before 1939 Poland was on the other side of the border. In the other parts of Latvia the distribution of Poles looks similar to

Byelorussians and Ukrainians. These three Slavic nationalities have positive settlement correlation with Russians.

Lithuanians have expressive settlement near border of Lithuania. The highest percentage of Lithuanians is in six rural regions near the border of Lithuania. Largest Latvia's river Daugava also play a role of natural barrier for Lithuanian settlement in the country. A very low Lithuanian concentration is in Eastern and Northern regions, because they are more distant from Lithuania. Lithuanians are the only one largest nationality in Latvia with a positive settlement correlation with Latvians.

The next largest nationality in Latvia – Jews have a very concentrated distribution. Almost all Latvian Jews live in urban areas. More than 85% are concentrated in the capital city Rīga. In Rīga also is the maximum of Jews percentage. Even within the city boundaries there is a concentration in the Central part of Rīga. If the average percentage of Jews in Rīga is 2%, then in some central districts of the city this percentage reaches more than 10%. In 20 locations the percentage of Jews is very small – less than 0.1%. The number of Jews is decreasing fast due to emigration mostly to U.S.A. and Israel and the negative natural increase.

Almost all Latvians were forced to learn Russian language in Soviet period, but just one out of five Russians was able to communicate in Latvian. Some fields of occupations were restricted and limited only to non-Latvians, such as navigation, aviation, military leadership. Most of other leading positions and posts also were occupied by Russians. Latvians were discriminated even in their living conditions. Most of new flats with all accommodations were build for Russians. Latvians mostly remained in old houses without hot water and sewer, without central heating and gas. Latvia's government can improve these consequences of the long discrimination of Latvians, by paying more attention to equalize living conditions of natives and immigrants, and by strengthening the status of Latvian language. Some of Latvia's Russians consider this process of loosing their privileges to better living and to Russian language dominance as the discrimination against their rights.

Only in the last three years, have the ethnic processes obtained the tendency to improvement. The number of Latvians is increasing slightly to 54%. The sources for such increase are:

- 1) Latvians now have higher birth rate, and natural increase than minorities;
- 2) immigration of population is now reduced to a minimum, so that the balance of migration now is towards emigration, and almost all of the emigrants are non-Latvians; and
- 3) the process of Latvian assimilation by Russians was reduced.

Almost 45% of pupils are being taught in other than Latvian as the language of instruction in the schools in 1993. Most of them are using Russian as the language of instruction. The schools of other minorities than Russian, such as Jewish, Polish,

Estonian, and Ukrainian were renewed only after Latvia obtained the independence. More than 800 pupils are attending schools of these minorities. The Sunday's schools, supported by government, are organized for Armenian, Azerbaijan, Byelorussian, Georgian, German, Gypsies, Lithuanian, Livonian, Polish, Tatar, Ukrainian, and Uzbek minorities in Latvia, mainly in Riga. In Southeastern part of Latvia, where strong Latvian assimilation process by Russians started, most of Latvian schools were closed during last 50 years. In the last three years in this region were renewed more than 15 Latvian schools, but there still are more than 30 municipalities with only Russian schools.

In the last three years more than 100 000 non-Latvians voluntarily re-emigrated to their native countries. This forms about 10% of all non-Latvian population in the country. Latvian government and municipalities are paying the compensations to re-emigrants for their rights to rent and live in cheap state flats. Approximately half of nonlatvians do not consider Latvia as their homeland, but perhaps many of potential reemigrants would like to change the direction of emigration from the East to the West.

In the future the Latvian percentage should increase up to 57% – 60% in the year of 2000. The percentage of Russians can stabilize around 1/4, and all other minorities, except for Gypsies, will gradually decrease.

Latvians proved their ability for peaceful resolution of conflicts. No one was killed by Latvians during the struggle for independence, although there were Latvian blood made by Russian communists.

Even though Latvia obtained its independence only two years ago, there are trends for stabilizing. I do hope that all national and political problems will receive their peaceful and democratic realization.

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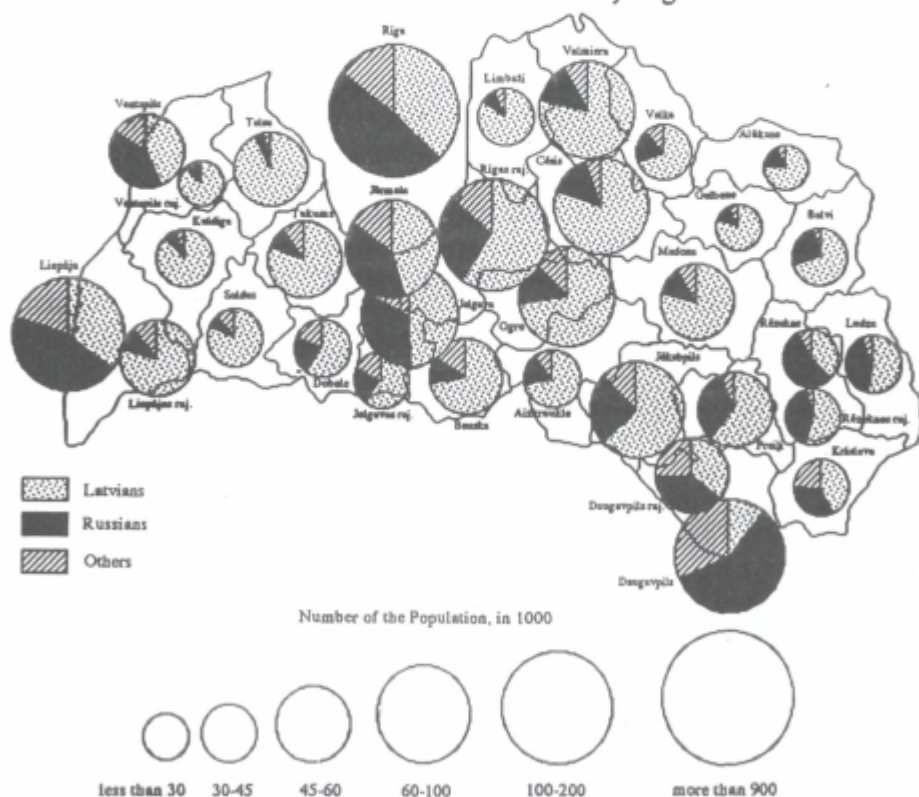
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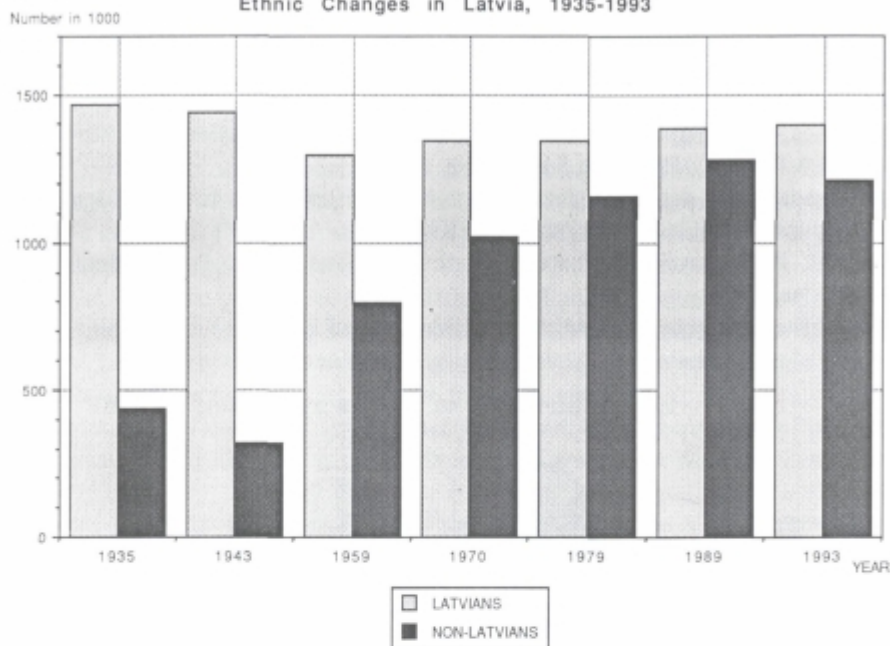
### Ethnic Structure of Latvia by regions 1989



Source: Population Census from 1989. year

Scale 1:2,500,000

Ethnic Changes in Latvia, 1935-1993



Flats by age and family types in Rīga, 1989

