



MIME

Mobility and Inclusion
in Multilingual Europe

The Formal and Informal Norms underlying the Politics of Language in Latvia

PhD Project

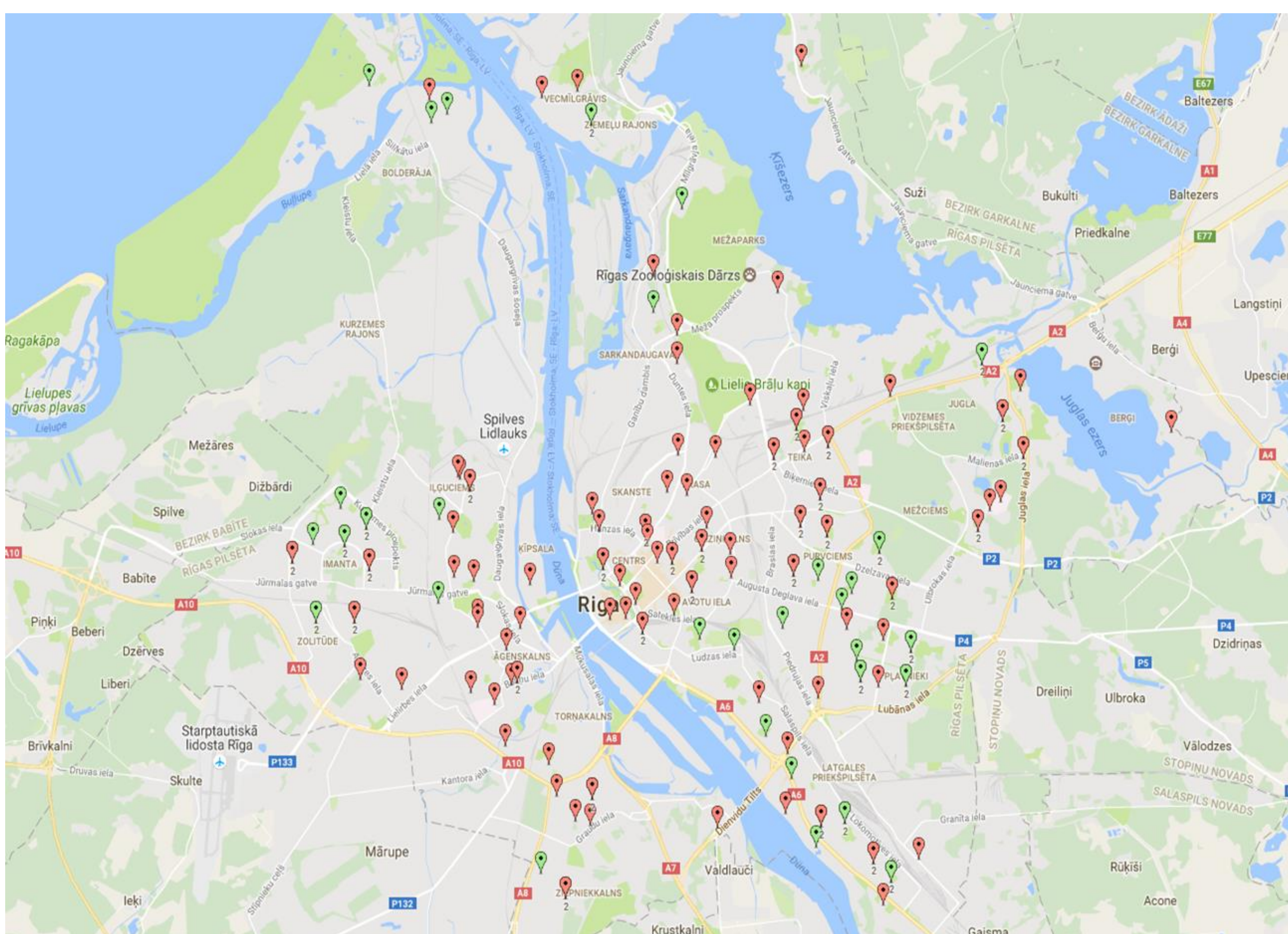
Topic

Since the restoration of independence, speed and scope of language policy reforms in Latvia have frequently been the subject of disputes. The government has issued many policy papers and action plans with the aim of revernacularising the Latvian language in contexts in which Russian was dominant and easing the division of the society along linguistic lines. For example, the then Minister of Culture, Žaneta Jaunzeme-Grende, stated in 2012: “The Action Plan proposes concrete activities, which are to be supplemented and adjusted, **so that in 2018 there is a strong democratic participation and national belonging community in Latvia, united by the Latvian language** [...]” (Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012–2018, p. 4) However, conflicts are still apparent in the society and between the Latvian government, pro-Russian opposition parties and organisations as well as external entities, notably Russia.

Illustration:

The Referendum on Russian as Second Official Language: Voting Behaviour in Riga

The referendum on Russian as a second official language in 2012 was preceded by a re-politicisation of language practices and an emotional debate on both the Latvian-speaking and the Russophone side. While the reform was rejected, the majority of voters in eastern Latvia (Latgale) and in Riga’s neighbourhoods where the Russian language is prevalent was clearly in favour.



Map of Riga with polling stations: red flag: opposed to Russian becoming second language; green flag: in favour of Russian as second official language (data: Central Election Commission, map: batchgeo.com, own visualisation)

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Research Questions

Why didn’t the Latvian government meet its language policy target of fully revernacularising Latvian?

What formal and informal norms characterise the language situation in administrative, economic and cultural contexts in Latvia, and particularly in Riga?

Which informal norms lead to deviating policy results?

What actors influence the language situation in Latvia and particularly in Riga?

Approach

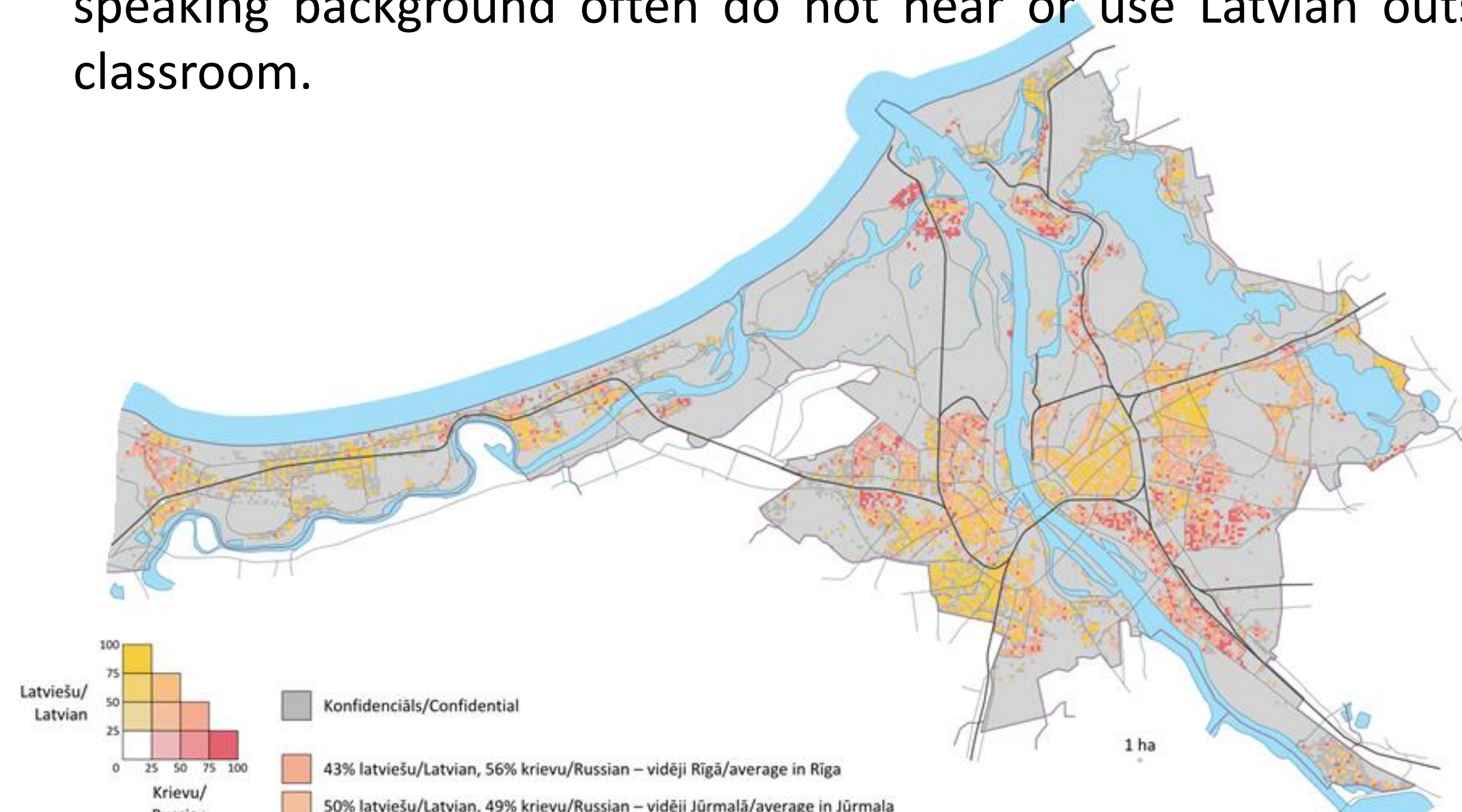
I approach the implementation problems in Latvia’s language planning through an analysis of the interplay between formal and informal norms relevant to language use in the political, economic and cultural sphere as well as the possibilities of central actors to manipulate the norms. Formal norms are derived from the legal framework. By informal norms I refer to socially shared rules that are communicated and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels (Helmke/Levitsky 2004: 727, see also Wheatley 2013). The research conducted follows a case study design building on document analysis and expert interviews.

My hypothesis is that the failure of fully revernacularising Latvian is a consequence of:

- (1) conflicts between formal and informal norms influencing language use in economic, administrative and cultural contexts.

The limited influence of formal norms on Latvia’s language situation is a consequence of:

- (2) a lack of consistency between language policy and economic planning. Individuals and local authorities tend to neglect language policy in presence of more pressing economical needs;
- (3) the fact that almost exclusive responsibility for the implementation was put on the school system. Consequently, students with a Russian-speaking background often do not hear or use Latvian outside the classroom.



Share of resident population in Riga and Jurmala who use Latvian or Russian as main language at home, data from 2011 (source: www.csb.gov.lv/dati/datu-vizualizacija-42748.html)

References

- Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012–2018, available online: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/guidelines-on-national-identity-civil-society-and-integration-policy-20122018>.
- Helmke, Gretchen; Levitsky, Steven (2004): Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics. A Research Agenda. In Perspectives on Politics 2 (04), 725–740. DOI: 10.1017/S1537592704040472.
- Wheatley, Jonathan (2013): Informal and Formal Institutions in the Former Soviet Union. In: Christian Giordano und Nicolas Hayoz (ed.): Informality in Eastern Europe. Structures, Political Cultures and Social Practices. Frankfurt: Peter Lang (Interdisciplinary Studies on Central and Eastern Europe, 11), 319–337.

