

Modern Opportunities to Develop the Identity of Historical Lands in Latvia

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Summary of the Study: throughout history, in the historical regions of Latvia, which are historically formed parts of Latvia characterized by a unique cultural environment, the common identity of its inhabitants has been Latvianness, which is open to interaction with ethnic minorities. The Latvians constitute a prominent division of the group of peoples known as the Balts whose ancestors came from the south in the early 2nd millennium BC and around 1800 BC, gradually entered areas inhabited by Finno-Ugric (Baltic-Finnic) tribes. The lands of the Balts and Baltic Finns could be distinguished from 1600 BC. The Baltic Sea coastal area of Northern Kurzeme on the side of the Gulf of Riga is the Livonian Coast (Livonian: *Līvõd Rānda*, Latvian: *Lībiešu krasts*). The Livs lived in the coastal zone of Vidzeme /the Middle Land/ and the northern part of the Courland Peninsula. The West Baltic tribe Cours or Curonians inhabited Kurzeme (Latin: *Curonia*, *Curlandia*, German: *Kurland*, Livonian: *Kurāmō*) in the western part of Latvia. The East Baltic tribe Latgalians, or Lettigallians called Latvians inhabited the eastern part of Latvia or Latgale (Latin: *Lettgallia*, Latgalian: *Latgola*, Russian: *Лотыгольская земля*, *Лотыгола*, German: *Lettgallen*) north of the Daugava River. The Cours with the Latgalians created the Semigallian tribe belonged to the Eastern Baltic language group. The Semigallians inhabited Zemgale (Latin: *Semigallia*, German: *Semgallen*, *Semegallen lant*, Polish: *Semigalia*, Lithuanian: *Žiemgala*, Livonian: *Zemgāl*) south of the Daugava in the southern part of Latvia. The Selonians or Upper people inhabited the southeastern part of Latvia or Sēlija (Latin: *Selonia*), earlier *Sēla*, *Sēlene Land* (Latin: *terra Selonia*, *terra, que Selen dicitur*, German: *Sēlen lant*) called *Augšzeme* (Lithuanian: *Aukšzemė*) or *Highland*. **Research goal:** analysis of the cultural environment in historical lands of Latvia to preserve the identity of ethnic indigenous people. **Research problem:** opportunities to develop the identity of historical Latvian regions today have not been sufficiently studied. **Novelty:** analysis of the impact of the Law on Historical Regions of Latvia (entry into force on 01.07.2021) on the development of historical regions in Latvia. **Methods:** analysis of documents, cartographic material (Map of Latvia with the boundaries of historical lands, 2020), and published literature studies (Local Government Law, 2022; Law on Historical Regions of Latvia, 2021; Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas, 2020; Official Language Law, 1999; On Free Development of Latvia's National and Ethnic Groups and Their Right to Cultural Autonomy, 1991; The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, 1922).

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Introduction

The Latvian nation was formed on the cultural and linguistic base of indigenous peoples of the Cours, Latgalians, Selonians, and Semigallians, and the native population of Livonians or Livs. Latvian tribes and Livs formerly inhabited the northern and central parts of Latvia named Vidzeme (Livonian: *Vidūmō*, Lithuanian: *Vidžemė*, Polish: *Liwonia*, Estonian: *Läti Liivimaa*, German: *Zentral-Livland*). The Balts were divided into the Western, Eastern, and Dnieper Balts. The Cours who belonged to East Prussian culture inhabited the Curonian Spit and most of the Courland Peninsula. In the 1st century AD, coming from the southwest and south, the Semigallians superior in military and cultural terms appeared near the Gulf of Rīga and moved Finnish tribes to the north. In the Mude River Basin's area, members of the Latgalians were traceable archaeologically safe since the 6th–7th centuries. The eastern part of Latgalian lands was mentioned as Latigola. The western part was called Letija (Latin: *Letitia*) in the 13th-century Latin texts. The Selonians managed Selonia, the association of castle districts on the Daugava left bank. Indigenous peoples had developed their states by the late 12th century, or at least the process of state formation was nearing completion. Trade routes connecting Northern Europe with areas to the southeast formed a network of road tracing. It left an impact on economic growth and local people's well-being today. In the 12th century, Latvian tribes had a sufficiently high level of political culture and a well-developed and strictly organized national life. There was no united Latvian nation in the 12th and 13th centuries. The Latvian nation was formed based on the culture and language of the Cours, Latgalians, Selonians, and Semigallians, as well as the ancient inhabitants of Livs. Now, one of the important issues is to create a connection between the human past in different cultural-historical regions with unique environments, different features of Latvianness, traditions, types of language, and the development of modern Latvia.

Each historical Latvian region has distinctive features of Latvianness, traditions, language varieties, and a unique cultural-historical environment. As a result of the unification of the Latvian nation and the formation of national self-awareness, the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed on 18 November 1918 by uniting the historical Latvian regions of Latgale, Kurzeme, Sēlija, Vidzeme, and Zemgale. Unified and indivisible Latvia within the borders established by international treaties is one of the inviolable elements of the constitutional identity of the Latvian State, which guarantees the existence and sustainability of the Latvian nation. The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia adopted on 15 February 1922 and entered into force on 7 November 1922 says: 'The State of Latvia, proclaimed on 18 November 1918, has been established by uniting historical Latvian regions and based on the unwavering will of the Latvian nation to have its State and its inalienable right of self-determination to guarantee the existence and development of the Latvian nation, its language, and culture throughout the centuries, to ensure freedom and promote the welfare of the people of Latvia and each individual'.

The people of Latvia did not recognize occupation regimes, resisted them, and regained their freedom by restoring national independence on 4 May 1990 based on the continuity of the State. Latvian and Liv traditions, Latvian folk wisdom, the Latvian language, and universal human and Christian values shape the identity of

Latvia in the European cultural space. The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia forms language policy and affirms the rights of ethnic minorities to preserve and develop their languages in Latvia (Constitutional Assembly 1922). The foundations of a cohesive society are loyalty to Latvia, the Latvian language as the only official language, freedom, equality, solidarity, justice, honesty, work ethic, and family. On Free Development of Latvia's National and Ethnic Groups and Their Right to Cultural Autonomy entered into force on 19 March 1991. This law says that the Latvian nation, ancient people Livs, and national and ethnic groups reside in the Republic of Latvia (Parliament 1991). In 1994, the Law on Municipalities was adopted. The Official Language Law entered into force on 1 September 2000. Its purpose is to ensure the maintenance, protection, and development of the Latvian language, and the preservation of the cultural and historic heritage of the Latvian nation. There are three dialects in Latvian: the Livonian dialect, High Latvian, and the Middle dialect. To this day, the differences between the southern part of Kurzeme, where the natives speak the Middle dialect, and the northern part, where the natives speak a fragment of the Livonian dialect, have remained. The indigenous people of Sēlija still today speak the High Latvian dialect. The State shall ensure the maintenance, protection, and development of the Liv language and Latgalian written language as a historical variant of the Latvian language. The Official Language Law accept the Liv language as 'the language of the indigenous population'. All other languages are considered foreign (Parliament 1999).

In 2018, 39 out of 110 counties and 2 out of 9 cities of republican importance no longer met the previously established criteria for the number of municipality residents. The government determined to reduce the number of municipalities and planned to develop a new administrative territory and settlement law to ensure more efficient management. Balanced development of territories requires the creation of new administrative regions. In 2019, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development developed a document for administrative-territorial reform, according to it financially independent municipalities will emerge, which will be able to solve not only issues related to infrastructure and buildings but will also allow providing social services. Architects and professional urban planners were not invited to develop administrative-territorial reform. Organizing a major reform requires gaining an evidence-based conviction about its benefits and harms and their balance. The council of the Latvian Academy of Sciences analyzed the possible most important benefits and sought answers to many questions. Director of the Institute of Latvian History of the University of Latvia Guntis Zemītis explained that boundaries of cultural and historical regions have been formed over time. There is a deep cultural layer beneath them. Neither wars nor deportations have been able to destroy the linguistic heritage left by ancient peoples. The dialect will not disappear, whatever the boundaries of the counties. The state language will be Latvian, and the dialect will be kept alive by tradition. It is not good to divide small counties, which have formed as cultural and historical sites and are different in tradition, but not in dialect. This would lead to the destruction of the uniqueness of such regions. Of course, it is good if administrative borders coincide with the historical ones, but a planning region is not quite the same as a cultural-historical county. Guntis Zemītis think administrative-territorial reform will deform the historical Latvian regions of

Sēlija and Zemgale the most. Scientists recommended postponing the implementation of administrative-territorial reform.

On 10 June 2020, the Saeima, which is the parliament of the Republic of Latvia, adopted the Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas in its final reading and accepted the proposal of the President of Latvia (2019–2023) Egils Levits that the ownership of cities and parishes in Latvian historical lands (Latvian: *Latviešu vēsturiskās zemes*) or cultural regions of Latvia (Latvian: *Latvijas kultūrvēsturiskie novadi*) – Vidzeme, Latgale, Kurzeme, Zemgale, and Sēlija (Figure 1) will regulate by a separate law to strength common identity among residents and preserve and sustainably develop the cultural-historical environment, belonging of towns and rural territories to historical Latvian lands.

Figure 1. Geographer Jānis Turlajs, Historian Guntis Zemītis, Demographer, Historian Ilmārs Mežs. Map of Latvia with Historical Latvian Regions and its Boundaries, 2020 (Turlajs et al. 2020)



The Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas entered into force on 23 June 2020. It defines the historical Latvian regions of Vidzeme, Latgale, Kurzeme, Zemgale, and Sēlija. The Preamble of the law includes historical aspects of the formation of the Latvian nation and emphasizes the diversity of Latvian identity and cultural space of historical Latvian lands. The Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas determines a new territorial division of Latvia, the status of populated areas and their keeping records, does not provide for the establishment of multi-level local governments and prescribes procedures for modifying borders and the establishment of centers of administrative territories and territorial units and supports local communities in preserving and developing their cultural and historical identity. It aims to strengthen the identity of the population and their belonging to historical Latvian lands. Therefore, it is necessary to create prerequisites for everyone to form a closer connection with one of the historical

Latvian lands and belong to them while ensuring the joint and successful development of all of Latvia and each historical land. In the President's opinion, a horizontal policy and cooperation of society, the state, and local governments are important for achieving the goals of this law. A plan will be created to develop historical regions and cultural spaces (Parliament 2020).

The Creation of a New Administrative-Territorial Division of Latvia

The commonwealth of the Latvian nation and the preservation and development of the Liv identity, culture, and language must be supported at the national level. Each community belonging to a historical region of Latvia and promoting its sustainability has the right and obligation to nurture and develop its cultural and historical environment and common identity to preserve and pass it on to future generations. The State and local governments must facilitate favorable socio-economic circumstances for the existence and growth of local communities, which maintain the identity of historical regions and cultural spaces in their daily lives. Historical Latvian regions have borders marked by the belonging of local communities. This must be taken into account in matters of the State. President Egils Levits prepared a draft law on Latvian cultural and historical regions to realize that the diversity of Latvianness is not self-evident. The draft law determined the role and responsibilities of the state and local governments regarding the sustainable development of the Liv and Latgalian identity. The territorial identity of modern Latgale can be traced back to the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries. The indigenous people of Latgale still speak the Latgalian language, which is an Eastern Baltic language of the Indo-European language family. It is important to think not only at the ethnographic but also at the level of administration and planning about preserving what is characteristic of each historical region. The execution of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia is also necessary. Necessary to achieve a real fulfillment of the Official Language Law. It defines the state's obligations regarding the preservation and development of the Latgalian language.

By 1 January 2021, the Cabinet of Ministers developed a draft law to create new administrative regions in Vidzeme, Latgale, Kurzeme, and Zemgale. It provides for the transfer to 42 municipalities, many of which were in the territories of former districts. The need for administrative-territorial reform is justified by expected benefits such as the average income of the united municipality, calculated per inhabitant, being higher than before. The funds available to local governments will concentrate on offering higher quality services and implementing larger projects. Productivity in the public sector will increase. There will be more resources for the modernization of the old infrastructure and the construction of the new one. Combining counties can serve as a platform for introducing positive changes to improve the education system, social protection, health care and road infrastructure. Innovation will reduce red tape. Administrative-territorial reform must become a turning point in the development of Latvia. Counties will be united to make them stronger. A new division of counties will ensure greater economic equality. Not all deputies of the Saeima believed that this prepared compromise option would be able

to guarantee it. Revision of county borders proudly called administrative-territorial reform is a proposal artificially created at the desk. Many of the consequences of the careless drawing of borders are visible today in the world. Such geographical curiosities are the most frequent causes of endless conflicts. In this case, educated Rīga residents need a self-satisfying explanation. They often do not understand or do not want to know why so many in the countryside do not accept this reform and consider their satisfactory version of the truth to be the truth. The Law on Historical Regions of Latvia was submitted for approval to the Saeima.

People opposed the municipal reform, which was planned to bring self-sufficient municipalities under a merger. Protests were organized. Participants of protest actions support improvement processes in the state and municipalities but this reform is undemocratic, thoughtless, and economically unjustified. The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia states that Latvia is an independent democratic republic. The deputies who unconditionally pushed forward poorly prepared administrative-territorial reform violated Chapter 1. Residents did not give up and submitted a claim to the Constitutional Court. Competent architects and urban planners were not involved in territorial planning processes, and instead, the Constitutional Court indicated that each county needed a development center. Now, there is no need for professional urban planners, and a requirement is to follow the instructions of the Constitutional Court. President Egils Levits announced the law to perform administrative-territorial reform, despite the call of local government leaders to the President to do the opposite. The Law on Historical Regions of Latvia, which regulates the borders of administrative regions, was adopted on 16 June 2021. It is a political decision not based on serious scientific research and made from a 'position of strength'. From 1 July 2021, long-standing and controversial administrative-territorial reform, reducing the number of municipalities, provides for determining the ownership of each parish and city to one of the historical Latvian regions of Vidzeme, Latgale, Kurzeme, Zemgale, and Sēlija, and also deals with small cultural spaces (Parliament 2021). Local Government Law entered into force on 1 January 2023. It regulates the operation of local governments, determines autonomous functions of the local government, as well as the procedures for implementation of delegated functions and voluntary initiatives, to ensure democratic, legal, efficient, sustainable, open, and publicly accessible administration within the administrative territory of each local government and balanced access to local government services (Parliament 2022).

The Implementation of Administrative-Territorial Reform in Historical Latvian Regions

It is necessary to promote learning of the Latgalian and Liv languages and to use place names in these languages in the historical environment and informative space. In February 2023, the first indication in the Liv language was opened with the participation of the President. On the Livonian Coast, the installation of village signs began at the end of 2023. Indications in the Liv language will be visible not only when visiting Liv villages, but also when driving along the large Kolkas–

Ventspils highway, on which a sign announcing the arrival on the Livonian Coast is already visible. Step by step installing signs in the Liv language will continue on national roads. The Vidzeme Liv Center will be strengthened in 2024 and 2025 to identify, preserve and reconstruct the intangible cultural heritage of the Livs in Vidzeme. Liv events and experience trips to cultural heritage promoters will unite the Livs and create prerequisites for the healthy development of the entire Liv community and to implementation of ideas. New opportunities are being sought to popularize the contemporary culture and traditions on the Livonian Coast and to create interest in the manifestations of the Livonian cultural heritage in traditions, modern Liv culture, art and music.

Changes are taking place in Latgale, where place names in the Latgalian language have appeared. Parishes are united to create larger administrative units. People are concerned about road infrastructure, availability of services and equal representation of residents of current parishes in newly formed counties. Parishes are located in rural areas. They have no independent decision-making power and budget. Fewer funds are allocated to the countryside, as more is invested in centers and cities. The countryside has a surplus principle.

Conclusions

Today, there are opportunities to preserve the identity of historical lands in Latvia. The Cabinet of Ministers adopted several laws, including the Law on Historical Regions of Latvia, and they complement each other. The main goal of administrative-territorial reform is to promote positive changes, balancing regional development, the availability of quality municipal services regardless of the residence place and reducing the inequality gap among municipalities. However, national problems are strengthened by the law, if a deep and comprehensive analysis of the situation is not carried out and a low-quality law is developed spontaneously. This is a circumstance that can seriously hinder the balanced development of territories.

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