Taking the Russia out of the Soviet: Nation Building through Federal Language Laws in Post-Soviet Latvia

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This project asks how Latvian language laws have changed since Latvia gained independence in 1991. Previous research examined how and where language appears, if and how countries follow language laws, and how speakers of language feel about speakers of other languages; this research expands to the types of language laws countries pass, in what sectors, and touches on the motivations behind passing and increasing the number of language laws. This research relies on Cultural Constructivism Theory to define how the government of Latvia intentionally constructs national identity and regulates how residents of the country may use language (language being inherently tied to culture). This project looks at publicly available, state-translated laws from the website likumi.lv to find legal efforts to regulate language use between the years of 1991 and 2024. The laws span various socio-political sectors: "Administrative Procedure; Administrative Offense Proceedings; Civil Law"; "Education, Science, Sport"; "Constitutional Law; State Language, State Symbols"; "Media, Advertising"; "Citizenship, Migration"; "Religion, Church"; and, "Transportation, Communication." This project finds laws from the sector "Education, Science, Sport" most commonly influence language use, specifically between the years 2018 and 2022. When discussing the implications of expanding language landscape research into the motivation of nation building, countries should consider how language use can shape culture and construct the idea of a national identity, reflecting growing trends of nationalism across the globe.

Keywords: Post-Soviet, nation building, language policy

Kansas Undergraduate Journal of International Studies, 2026, 2(1).
https://journals.ku.edu/kujis
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All the cars on the road couldn't muddy the layers and layers of snow covering the highway, but the pathways through the local park had been cleared so residents could walk downtown and school children could play. As my host mother and I neared the park's official entrance, she pointed at a bulletin board covered with fliers for local plays, concerts, markets, and fairs. "All of those posters are in Latvian," she explained, "if you try to hang a poster with Russian on it, the police will come and tear it down." I took it with a grain of salt. We walked on to the local university, where I would be taking classes, but not with local students—my program was for foreigners. Local classes must be taught in Latvian, and I didn't speak the language.

The Latvian people are proud of the perseverance of the Latvian language, culture, and history. They have retained their traditions despite a long history of foreign imperial occupation. Modern Latvian law is built on these old traditions. Kalnins's (2015) book describes the period in Latvia after the First World War when both Germany and Russia ceded Latvia to independent (and modern) borders in 1920 after the fall of their respective empires. During this interwar period, "art, music, architecture, literature and the sciences" boomed, sparking celebrations of indigenous culture in the newly unoccupied Latvian state. The state established individual ownership of land, a liberal economy, liberal democracy, ethnic citizenship rights, and even the constitution the country would return to after regaining independence with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Kalnins, 2015, p. 162). The development of the nation during the interwar period became the basis for the modern Latvian state. Latvia's taste of independence during the interwar period established the borders, system of government, economy, and cultural pride that returned to shape Latvian legislation in the modern day.

Citizenship and language policies changed again when the Soviet Union annexed Latvia in 1939. No longer independent, Latvia was subject to Soviet law, which attempted to impose supremacy of Russian language, culture, and nationality. During the Soviet period, nationality, ethnicity, and residency were independent facets of identity; Soviet passports marked individual nationality independent of ethnicity while conferring general Soviet citizenship, and in the capital of Latvia, residency depended on nationality (Loader, 2017). Not only residency, but Babich (Бабич) et al. (2019) describes how "a migratory influx of Russian-speaking populations from other parts of the Soviet Union...greatly increased the portion of Russian-speaking residents in [Latvia]," shifting the language landscape of the region. Under Soviet occupation, while Soviet authorities permitted the use of Latvian in everyday life, Russian became the language of education, science, civil administration, business, and international communication (Бабич et al., 2019, p. 236). Soviet language laws structured how contemporary Latvian language laws could bolster official language use. While interwar independence built up pride in indigenous culture, the period of Soviet occupation structured how laws

could regulate language and culture in the future. Modern Latvian language laws permit the use of foreign languages in everyday speech but require official language use in most public spheres, just as Soviet law outlined Russian language use.

Latvia regained independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The state reimplemented many interwar policies, including reinstituting Latvian as the official language. Latvian, still the language of everyday communication, also became the language of education, science, civil administration, business, and international communication, just as Russian had been during the Soviet period. Kalnins (2015) describes a "hastened… modernisation and Westernisation" of Latvia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Latvia modeled voting rights, citizenship reform, and government restructuring on a basis of assimilating Latvians into Europe and the Western world; Latvia joined the North Atlantic Trade Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), the Eurozone, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and adopted English as the language of international communication (Kalnins, 2015, p. 225). For non-Latvians, many former Soviet, Russian-speaking residents not only feel left out of Latvian society but have become legally stateless due to the Latvian language requirements to gain and retain residency status, citizenship, and to find employment, (Бабич et al., 2019; Venkov, 2018). Latvia took a sudden turn towards Europe in the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union, distancing itself culturally and politically from Soviet power and Russian dominance. Language laws, naturally, have changed to reflect this shift in political dynamics.

This research aims to determine how Latvian language laws have changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Latvia rebuilds as an independent nation, language use is a core component in reshaping national culture and identity. The question is then in the wording, penalties, requirements, and limitations in the federal language laws the Latvian government (*Saeima*) uses to intentionally shape the new, national culture. The answer to this question relies on Cultural Constructivism Theory (CCT), the idea people actively perform, not passively inherit, culture, where changes in language reflect culture and cultural shifts. Utilizing a top-down framework, this analysis treats shifts in language landscape as the government's intentional decision to influence language use. To determine these intentional shifts in performance of culture, federal language laws dictating the norms and regulations for language use describe how Latvian residents are to practice culture. Previous research largely examines how governments carry out language policy—research does not cover the various policies that may exist in the first place, nor why governments may implement such laws. Understanding how and why governments shape national identity through language use help political scientists navigate the changing geopolitical landscape and rising levels of nationalism. This may provide political scientists

with a clearer picture of nation building and an understanding of how to navigate nation building policies.

This paper argues that Latvian language laws have become increasingly more controlling over time. As international events threaten the small nation, the Latvian legislature, the *Saeima,* has focused on shaping a national Latvian identity independent of Soviet Russian. Laws create more opportunities for Latvian language use while limiting opportunities for non-Latvian foreign languages. The following literature review describes language policy compliance, language landscapes, and attitudinal surveys. The research methods section has a detailed description of the analysis of national laws of the following categories: Transportation, Communication; Media, Advertising; Education, Science, Sport; Citizenship, Migration; Administrative Processes and Civil Law; State Symbols; and, Religious Organizations. Then, the analysis section explores how language is written into culture and history, official vs nonofficial language use, and trends in categories of new laws over time, focusing on spikes of new laws in 2013, 2018, and 2022. Finally, I discuss how this research expands literature beyond existing policies, policy compliance, and language landscapes into the field of wider policies governing language use. The discussion also examines how national elections and international events may threaten Latvia, causing the need to use language laws to strengthen culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Landscapes – Bottom-Up and Top-Down

Previous research has utilized the "language landscape" model to analyze the influence of politics on language use and vice versa. A "language landscape" is the model of analyzing the presence of language on the ground, such as on street signs or storefronts, sometimes in comparison to official language policies. The phenomenon of institutional politics on everyday language use is known as "top-down language change." Researchers in Pristina, Kosovo, investigated if the amount of Albanian on private signage compared to the amount of Serbian on public, governmental signs (Demaj & Vandenbroucke, 2016). Similarly, Manchurina and Sansonova (2022), in Yakutsk, in the Sakha Republic of Russia, compared the percentage of the Sakha language present on official signage to the amount of Sakha missing from official signage. The researchers also compared the amount of Sakha to the amount of Russian on official signs (Manchurina & Samsonova, 2022). While previous literature investigated the representation of language on the ground, current literature lacks data of institutional language landscaping outside of public signage. Little work exists on how governments choose to represent a language. My research on language use in Latvia seeks to expand beyond signage to find areas where the Latvian government seeks to control language use.

While traditional language landscape analysis relies on street-visible signage, researchers have also utilized digital media to investigate the use of common languages. The effect of everyday language on institutional policies is known as "bottom-up language change." In the digital age, common parlance has a large presence on social media, news websites, and online shops, so bottom-up language change can appear on the internet. In Sliashynskaya's (2018) article, the researcher analyzed the homepages of two national news websites, focusing on the representation of Belarus's two national languages: Russian and Belarusian. She analyzed the placement of headings, the use of different fonts, and lexical translation variations between the Belarussian and Russian versions of the same article. Not only could she compare when and where each language appeared but also the biased sociopolitical contexts the variations between languages appeared in (Sliashynskaya, 2018). My research into Latvian language laws uses similar contextual analysis on how language landscapes vary between different sociopolitical contexts. Most current literature only focuses on the concrete time and place of written language, so considering bottom-up and top-down shifts in language landscapes expands the current understanding of language politics.

While bottom-up analysis looks at how everyday language use affects institutional language, researchers have used top-down analysis to consider how institutional policies impact the everyday language landscape. Most top-down research analyzes the success or failure of implementing official signage in the national language(s). Both top-down and bottom-up language change can occur simultaneously in one language landscape, but their effects are not equal. Golubeva (2011) considers how top-down and bottom-up change can co-occur in education. In the case of Russian mode-of-instruction schools in Latvia and Estonia, the titular state still requires teachers to adhere to state curricula, regardless of the language of instruction. Russian teachers, however, often feel the curricula to be biased, modify the lessons or express dissent directly to students, impacting the linguistic, historical, and cultural education of the next generation of students (Golubeva, 2011). This article on Latvian language policies includes the increasing number of education language policies (the state now requires Latvian mode of instruction at all levels of education). My study, similar to Golubeva's, considers that language change can occur both bottom-up and top-down. Both bottom-up and top-down language change are necessary to change the language landscape as a whole.

Previous researchers theorized a language can take sociocultural predominance because of national language policies. The top-down implementation of language policies in a multilingual society is often neither equitable nor representative of the "bottom" language landscape. In regions where a non-national language is most common in the everyday language landscape, governmental institutions often underrepresent this language in national legislation. In Russia, official languages, in addition to Russian, vary by re-

gion, meaning the Yakut languages of Sakha should be predominant in the Sakha Republic, but lack of representation on official signage decreases the prestigiousness of the Yakut languages (Manchurina & Samsonova, 2022, p. 137). Similarly, Demaj and Vandenbroucke (2016) concluded legal protections for minority languages can artificially inflate the dominance and prestige of the minority languages over more common languages. Sliashynskaya (2018) concluded that even when official policy favoring one language does not exist, such as in Belarus, the lack of policy upholds the status quo left over from the Soviet era when Russian was predominant and neglected the native Belarussian language. This study expands the scope of existing research by analyzing language legislature, not just policy effect, in Latvia. While previous literature has examined particular language landscapes, research is lacking in the specific methods in top-down language change efforts. My research focuses on the policies creating the uneven language environments.

Nation Building

Previous researchers questioned the extent language use defines the sense of belonging to a nation. The researchers questioned whether speaking a national language would increase a person's sense of belonging to the nation. They also questioned whether one person can belong to more than one nation, such as to both Ukraine and Russia, or if use of a certain language can detract from national belonging. In Ukraine, Zeller (2022) asked speakers of Ukrainian and Russian to compare the histories and cultures of Ukraine and Russian and describe their statehood and independence. In Latvia, Birka (2016) asked Russian speakers to describe any presumptions of Latvian speakers and their sense of belonging to Latvia and/or Russia. In Belarus, Sliashynskaya (2018) analyzed translation bias in news articles to uncover the political connotations Belarusian and Russian carry towards government, history, and folk culture. This study on Latvian language politics also questions the role speaking Latvian plays towards a citizen's sense of national belonging in Latvia. As the Latvian national government continues to regulate language use in the public sphere, this research questions how the language laws impact ideas of national identity.

Researchers have also applied the idea of "top-down" language change to "top-down" cultural (sociopolitical) change. As institutional policies can change language use, they can also change cultural norms and social conventions. Birka (2016) studied the impact of top-down pro-Latvian language policies on non-Latvian minorities in Latvia through a longitudinal, attitudinal study of Russian-speaking and Latvian speaking youth. Over the course of six years, the researcher tracked changes of feelings of belonging of Russian-speaking diaspora to the larger Latvian culture. She considered how exclusive policies were often linked to feelings of exclusion, but support from foreign Russian media aided stronger community relationships within the Russian-speaking diaspora (Birka, 2016). My research on Latvian lan-

guage policies also utilizes the overlap of language and culture to categorize the legal elements of Latvian nation building because language and culture are closely interrelated. Therefore, this paper on Latvian language policy assumes changing national language policy reflects changing ideas of national identity.

Existing research on language change accounts for both top-down change and sociopolitical shifts. As such, my research on Latvian language laws fits the standard of top-down (institutional implementation) language change. This project also relies on the assumption that, because language change and cultural change are so closely related, change in language guarantees change in the culture and vice versa. Existing literature on language landscapes relies on bottom-up research and is lacking in top-down research; so, this paper focuses on top-down research. Current research on top-down language change is limited to the rate of success of policy implementation or the representation of the actual language landscape in institutional policies; this research analyzes the motivation behind implementing top-down language change. Other researchers have yet to look at the reasons politicians implement top-down language changes aiming to shift, not reflect, the existing language landscape; this paper intends to discuss how global political dynamics shape the language landscape of a decolonizing country. This paper on Latvian language laws aims to connect national identity and the implementation of new language policies. As language is a tool of power, utilizing language to rebuild national identity may help other nations effectively mitigate foreign power within national borders.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Cultural Constructivism Theory

The argumentation of this paper relies on Cultural Constructivism Theory (CCT) to shape nation building arguments. People do not inherit the practices of culture as much as they choose to perform the practices day-to-day and over time, and since culture is a practice, people can change culture over time, whether subconsciously or intentionally. A state can be the agent in constructing culture and cultural practices, especially through language use. Language is "a necessary touchstone" in defining the boundaries of a culture or nation, relying on "imposing homogeneity on the populations" under the top-down "sway of authorities possessed by the nationalist ideology" (Gellner, 1983, pp. 43-45). Language then becomes an identifying marker of the insider versus the outsider belonging to a nation (Hobsbawm, 1992). Language standardization has long served to "[advance]...political demands" by disseminating religious texts, political propaganda, and creating a literate class of people across Europe and the Middle East (Anderson, 1991, p. 75). CCT establishes a theoretical framework to explain how the state of Latvia can intentionally influence use of official versus foreign languages to shape

the national and cultural identity of Latvian residents. The language laws in this paper are the efforts of the government to shape language and therefore the intentional construction of national identity through culture.

Language assimilation is the constantly occurring process of people trying to blend in with the larger culture by adjusting their way of speaking. People try to assimilate into the mainstream culture by mimicking the more prestigious dialect over the variety of lower status. In a nation state, the language of the governing body is often the "prestige dialect." According to Frey (2013), social networks and economic change are the strongest factors for language shift. Strong social networks with more overlapping relationships lead to greater linguistic integration (assimilation); people with more relationships in a community speak more like other members of the community. Economic status, like higher social class, the prestigiousness of a job, the separation of a job from the speech community, and the presence of colonial powers all encourage language to shift from the standard dialect to a more prestigious variation (Frey, 2013). By measuring the linguistic changes in Latvian legislation, I was able to measure the top-down shift in social and national identity of Latvia according to national language laws. Analyzing Latvian language laws shows the sectors where Latvian lawmakers think attempts at constructing national culture may be more effective.

Methods

The data for this project consists of federal laws mentioning the use of language the Latvian government (Saeima) passed from the year 1991 through 2024 in both public and private legal sectors: "Administrative Procedure," "Administrative Offense Proceedings," "Civil Law," "Education, Science, Sport," "Constitutional Law," "State Language, State Symbols," "Media, Advertising," "Citizenship, Migration," "Religion, Church," and "Transportation, Communication." These laws can limit a foreign language to be used less than an official language or prohibit the use entirely. The laws more frequently require the use of the Latvian language in public and private settings and often require use of the official language in addition to the use of a foreign language. By controlling these cultural spheres, the *Saeima* writes into law the spheres where nation-building occurs. The data also provides the years the *Saeima* passed legislation on language use. This data is perfect for the project because the restrictions and requirements of the laws are the methods the *Saeima* uses to implement top-down language change, and, according to CCT, language constructs cultural identity, applicable in post-Soviet nation building. The restrictions and requirements of the laws show where and how the *Saeima* believes residents of Latvia should use language and practice culture. The years the *Saeima* passed the laws reveal when cultural adjustment, and therefore national building, was a political priority.

To collect data, I utilized a keyword search through public information from the website likumi.lv, a Latvian website with national laws available

in English and Latvian. When official translations were not available, I used Microsoft and Google translation services, cross-referencing the two to double-check accuracy. First, I used the site's given groupings, such as "Media, Advertising," to find relevant laws, like the "Electronic Communications Law" ("Tiesību aktu tēmas," 2025). Then, I copied and pasted the relevant articles and the dates the *Saeima* passed the laws (and any amendments) into a Microsoft Excel sheet with pages according to the groupings of laws on the website. Finally, I searched for the keywords "state," "language," "Latvian," "English," and "translate," among others, to find the articles addressing language use within the larger bills. As I compared federal legal standards to language and culture shift, a limited keyword approach ensured I found laws using freely available and legally accurate information. Additionally, the dates of implementation track the rate of shifting language and culture.

My analysis process compares the content of laws within the categories of laws as on the website likumi.lv. The site's relevant groupings, such as "Media, Advertising" and "Education, Science, Sport," provides the first round of themes to compare the content of laws already in groupings with others similar content ("Tiesību aktu tēmas," 2025). To analyze this data, I used the site's groups of laws to group the articles, section headings, and dates. I highlighted code words to compare how laws restrict and/or require language use in each given grouping; I compared the similarities across different groups to see the most common trends. I then graphed the dates each law was passed into a frequency bar graph to visualize the years cultural shift was more prominent. This method shows the similarities of how the *Saeima* implements top-down language change in various cultural spheres. The graph of the dates of the implementations of laws shows the years with higher numbers of laws passed, showing when top-down language change was more frequent.

Similarly, I compared the content of laws cross-categorically to find non-category specific trends. The analysis attempts to find out what sectors restrict versus require proficiency in Latvian. I also compared written versus spoken language restrictions and requirements to learn if written or spoken language is more commonly required or restricted. To analyze the data, I again transferred the laws, article numbers, section headings, and dates of the implementations of laws to an excel sheet. I used different colors to highlight code words between different methods of language restrictions and requirements across all of the categories to visualize where control of language use is more common. Analyzing general, cross-category trends reveal non-category specific changes in top-down language change across Latvia. This step does not limit the analysis to comparing laws within a single sphere like media or education.

ANALYSIS

Using Language to Strengthen National Identity

The legal foundation of Latvian society relies on the Latvian language as a cornerstone for politics, culture, and identity. The language is integral for having, building, and strengthening the modern Latvian identity. The preamble of Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (1922) describes the persistence and interconnectedness of Latvia's history, land, language, and cultures despite the occupying Nazi and Soviet regimes of the twentieth century. Because of the history of foreign occupation, the Constitution states, "loyalty to Latvia, the Latvian language as the only official language, freedom, equality, solidarity, justice, honesty, work ethic and family are the foundations of a cohesive society." The Constitution also states every citizen has the right to hold state office, and every state official must swear "to be loyal to Latvia, to strengthen its sovereignty and the Latvian language as the only official language" and will conduct government business in the Latvian language ("Latvijas Republikas Satversme," 1922). The Latvian Parliament (*Saeima*) strengthens the Latvian language by requiring use of the official language in all public spheres and limiting the role foreign languages may have. By attaching language to history and culture, strengthening the role language plays, the *Saeima* can reinforce national identity as inherently Latvian.

Latvian legislation prioritizes the use of official languages over foreign languages. In government proceedings, education, broadcasting, and other various public spheres, legislation requires the use of the Latvian language. The laws do not restrict the use of the official language nor require the use of any foreign language. While the Official Language Law (1999) requires translation from a foreign into an official language, except in cases of business with a foreign state, at no point does any law require translation from the official to a foreign language. Subtitles, stamps, packaging, and text information with both official and foreign languages must not present the official language "in its form or contents, [to] be smaller or narrower than the text in the foreign language" ("Valsts Valodas Likums," 1999). Throughout all project data, only one law requires proficiency in two foreign languages: the Director of the Inspectorate, a state administrator for personal data processing ("Fizisko personu datu," 2018). By integrating the official language into all spheres of public use, the *Saeima* requires Latvian language use for full participation in Latvian society; language and culture are inseparable. Then, Latvian would be the only language necessary to participate in Latvian society.

Even though it requires official language use, Latvian legislation does not prohibit nor criminalize the use of a foreign language. While the *Saeima* prioritizes use of the official language, there are no limits to the use of other languages. Even though legislation requires use of the official language,

foreign language use is entirely optional. The Official Language Law (1999) defines a foreign language as "any other language used in the Republic of Latvia, except the Liv language," and classifies Latgalian, a language to some in the region of Latgale, as a dialect of the official Latvian language. A person in professional and governmental positions may conduct business in a foreign language but must be able to conduct business in the official language as well ("Valsts Valodas Likums," 1999). Administrative penalties for improper language use target foreign languages without concurrent use of or translation into the official language ("Administratīvo sodu likums," 2020). The requirement to use the official language trumps any right to use a foreign language. The extra time and effort to translate foreign language text and speech discourages the use of non-official languages. Naturally, this penalty encourages workers to operate in the official language regardless of any ability to otherwise.

Latvian legislation requires people to speak the official language at work. By establishing Latvian as the working language, foreign languages stand in contrast as socio-politically less professional in business. State employees, public safety and health workers, and people working in the field of law must "be fluent in and use the official language" when fulfilling professional duties ("Valsts Valodas Likums," 1999). Specific positions like Forensic Expert and Director at the Academy of Justice require Latvian proficiency to qualify for the job ("Tieslietu akadēmijas likums," 2024; "Tiesu ekspertu likums," 2016). In the case a person not being proficient in Latvian, the law expects them to provide a translator at any event or meeting, except in civil proceedings, when the court will invite an interpreter on behalf of any summoned person ("Administratīvās atbildības likums," 2018). This legislation makes economic success dependent on Latvian proficiency. The necessity of the Latvian language for the individual reinforces the Latvian language as predominant in society.

Latvian legislation also regulates the official names of people, places, events, and things to reinforce a Latvian-centric identity. Just like language, names can likewise be Latvian or foreign. Similarly, names reflect Latvian identity, history, and culture. The committee Cabinet Regulations has executive authority over the "creation and use" of names of places, institutions, companies, events, streets, parks, public and government buildings, and schools ("Likums 'Par reglamentētajām,'" 2001; "Valsts valodas likums," 1999). The committee monitors the transliteration and translation of foreign personal names and surnames for foreign individuals working, attaining citizenship, or undergoing adoption; courts may change the names and surnames of adoptees if the name does not match the nationality of the adopters or if the judge declares the name of the adoptee hard to pronounce ("Valsts valodas likums," 1999; "Civillikums," 1937). Providing professional certification from a foreign institution or proof of family lineage with the foreign surname permits the use of foreign names under the Cabinet Regulations

of Official Language Law ("Valsts valodas likums," 1999; "Civillikums," 1937). Legislation regarding names does not ensure Latvian language use but Latvian identity for people, places, events, and institutions. The legislation pushes foreign things out of the Latvian space by dubbing everything as Latvian. The people, places, events, and institutions then receive a Latvian identity in accordance the culture surrounding the name.

International Language in Favor of the United Nations

When focusing on written language, Latvian legislation mandates the interpretation of text between English, the European language of international communication, and Latvian. Official laws often include translations in both English and Latvian. In professional, working spheres, Latvia supports written translation into a foreign language primarily in legal matters but does not provide similar exceptions for spoken Latvian. Twenty-eight of the laws in this project's data include provisions for the translation of laws or official reports into English from Latvian. However, not every law has an official translation into English, and many official translations, when available, expired in 2024, such as the Civil Law ("Civillikums," 1937). Most remaining laws on written translation focus on the translation of foreign language documents into Latvian, such as various Postal Conventions ("Likums 'Par Pasaules,'" 2022). Latvia displays favor towards the United Nations (UN) by adopting English as the language of international communication. The legislation recasts Latvia as on-par with the rest of Europe and the US as part of the democratic world by linking the official language with English.

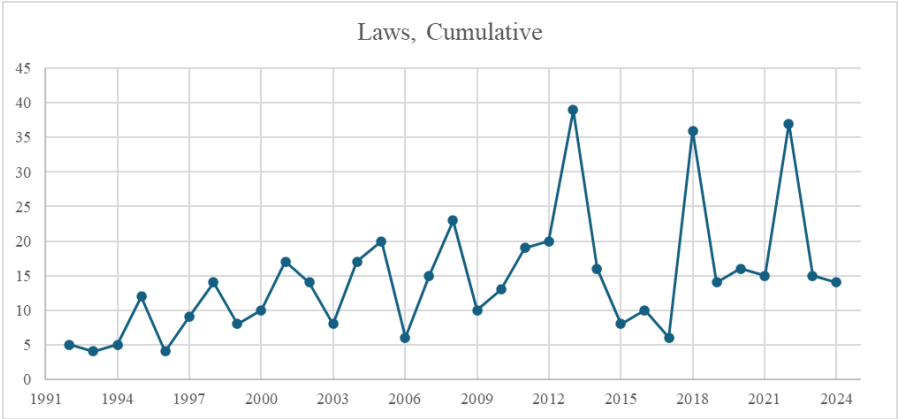
Legislation for international cooperation favors UN languages over post-Soviet languages. The *Saeima* acknowledges Arabic, Chinese, Russian, English, Spanish, and French. Legislation allows for UN language use and translation without penalty in cooperative international business. The UN languages are all "equally authentic" across aviation laws and conventions ("Par Protokolu par grozījumiem," 2025). In sports, for example, in the International Convention against Doping in Sport, while English is the main language of the convention, texts and appendices in all six UN languages are available and equal in content ("Likums 'Par Starptautisko,'" 2006). The international postal service publishes all documents in French, English, Arabic, and Spanish, and publishes "basic documents" in Chinese, German, Portuguese, and Russian ("Likums 'Par 2016,'" 2018; "Likums 'Par Pasaules,'" 2022). By aligning with UN allies, Latvia creates a national identity as a part of the "free" world. By giving the UN languages similar privileges to the official language, the legislation shows where priorities lie—away from the post-Soviet, pro-Russian legacy. Latvia favors UN languages and implements European democratic cultural values through international cooperative language measures.

German, because of long standing connection to Baltic history and culture, also holds exceptions in Latvian law, despite not having UN language

status. Latvian legislation grants many exceptions for the use of the German language in the same way the law has exceptions for UN languages. Postal service laws have extra provisions for German and Portuguese to appear in publications without extra charge or penalty ("Likums 'Par Pasaules,'" 2022). Similarly, under the Immigration Law, some visa and residence applications may appear in German without translation ("Imigrācijas likums," 2002). Additionally, in the railroad industry only, while Chinese and Russian are the working languages, workers may use English and German in international railroad communications ("Par Dzelzceļu sadarbības," 2004). The German language has exceptions similar to UN language exceptions within Latvian legislation thanks to shared history and culture, and therefore, identity, in Latvian law. The relationship between Germany and Latvia means that, by granting German language exceptions, language legislation has a pro-Latvian priority.

Timeline of New Laws and Amendments

The *Saeima* tends to pass new laws and/or amendments in multiple, shorter periods of time instead of steadily over a longer period of time. Political interest in language regulation is not regular but likely more frequent during times of both national and global conflict. Clusters of language regulations may signify time periods when identity regulation and promotion became more important, such as during national elections. Graph 1 shows the *Saeima* steadily passed new laws in all categories from the time of independence until approximately 2010. The *Saeima* then passed thirty-nine laws/amendments regarding language use in 2013, thirty-six in 2018, and thirty-seven in 2022 (see Graph 1). The spikes in the quantity of new laws align with Latvian national elections of new *Saeima* in 2014, 2018, and 2022 ("Saeima of the Republic," n.d.). Although people perform identity day-to-day, there are clusters of time when circumstances reinforce the political desire for a strong national identity. The *Saeima* may pass new legislation in preparation for, or in response to, major international events, policies, or national elections.



Graph 1: Frequency of new laws/amendments by year.

The very first spike of new laws between 2013 and 2015 is not reflective of a shift in language. Although the largest spike in language laws in Graph 1, the *Saeima* did not amend the content of language laws. Instead, language shift supported a shift in economics in favor of adopting the euro. Despite the graph showing thirty-nine new laws/amendments in 2013, twenty-four of the amendments come from preparation to adopt the euro as the national currency in 2014. Specifically, the twenty-four amendments to the Administrative Violations Law (1984) convert the fine for disrespect towards or improper use of the national language from the lat to the euro. The language regulations did not change in 2013—only the currency of the fines for committing the offenses changed ("Latvijas Administratīvo pārkāpumu," 1984). By adopting the euro, Latvia attached European monetary value to the use of the official language. The technical change to the language laws reflects a political shift from post-Soviet towards more Western economics. Even though the content of the laws does not change, the economic shift reinforces the penalty for violating preexisting language laws.

New laws/amendments actually regarding language use between 2013 and 2015 quantify official versus foreign language use in "Media, Advertising." These laws ensure foreign languages do not broadcast for more time than the official language. On-air television broadcasting and daytime music broadcasting must be in the Latvian language no less than forty percent of the total broadcast time ("Elektronisko plašsaziņas līdzekļu likums," 2010; "Radio un televīzijas likums," 1995). The Electronic Media Act also says all radio stations must choose to register as official language or foreign language stations if broadcasting fifty percent of the time or less in the official language. Programs must be in one language, with either a voice-over or subtitles in the official language, and all advertisements must be in the of-

ficial language ("Elektronisko plašsaziņas līdzekļu likums," 2010). Legislation on official language use quantifies not just production but reception. By making the Latvian language a component of entertainment, the laws treat the Latvian identity as a service or a luxury. The Latvian language is then more prestigious than non-official languages.

The *Saeima* passed many new laws/amendments between 2017 and 2019, moving to strengthen the role of the official language in civil "Administrative Procedure." The new laws/amendments define situations when people have to use the official language—both opportunity and obligation. In favor of ethnic and linguistic diversity and efficiency, the modern World Conventions restructured post office hiring procedures in accordance with EU standards ("Likums 'Par 2016,'" 2018). Additionally, in favor of foreign language rights, around 2018, all parties in Latvian court proceedings gained the right to an interpreter free of charge ("Administratīvās atbildības likums," 2018). However, the *Saeima* amended the Administrative Procedure Law to allow judges to halt proceedings for cassation cases with documents noncompliant with the Official Language Law ("Administratīvā procesa likums," 2001). From 2017 to 2019, the *Saeima* pushed to solidify existing cultural and linguistic norms as law, protecting Latvian culture against larger or more powerful nations that may threaten the state or identity. The legislation allows the state to actively persecute cultural violators.

The *Saeima* passed many new laws/amendments between 2018 and 2019, reinforcing the role of national languages in education. National minority languages and dialects, Livonian and Latgalian respectively, have the same protections and rights as the official language. Education laws continue to regulate foreign languages, however. The *Saeima* amended the Education Law (1998) to give schools the right to teach the languages of national minorities, such as Livonian or Latgalian. This same law, along with the General Education Law and International School Law, recognized accreditation and qualifications from international universities and law academies teaching in a non-Latvian language ("Starptautisko skolu likums," 2020; "Izglītības likums," 1998; "Vispārējās izglītības likums," 1999). The Education Law also initiated state language exams in general and vocational education institutes to keep a record of student proficiency in official and foreign languages ("Izglītības likums," 1998). Schools teach that national minority identities are also a part of the larger Latvian identity. While foreign language identities may have exceptions and therefore be technically permissible, minority identities are legally acceptable. The laws imply a minority identity is more acceptable than a foreign identity.

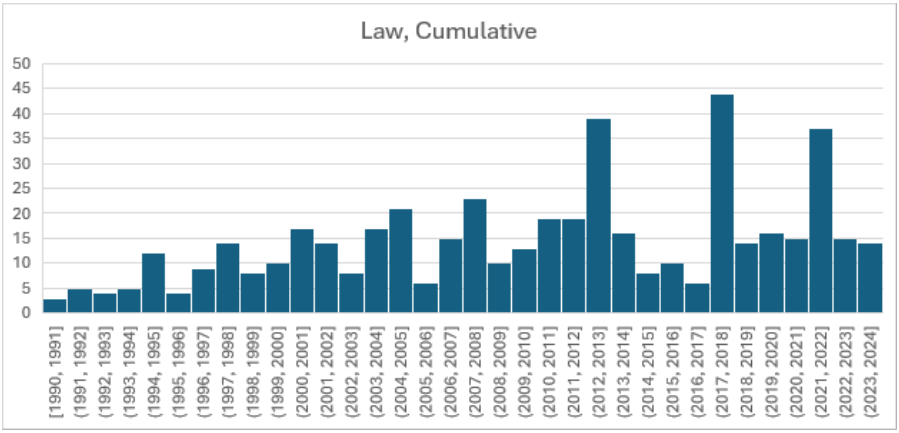
Another influx of "Education, Science, Sport" laws/amendments passed in 2022 and 2023. The laws not only enforce the use of the official language but instruct educators to build student pride in the language and state. The laws show the *Saeima* wants students to feel proud of the Latvian language. In 2022, amendments to the Education Law (1998) and General Education

Law (1999) established the certification of official language skills as a key goal of education at all levels from preschool to doctoral and modes from general to vocational. Under the Education Law (1998), beginning in 2023, teachers and head administrators under suspicion of not being proficient in or using the official language began to face suspension until able to pass a language proficiency test; failing the test results in termination. The law now states the importance of education is to instill "the moral, aesthetic, intellectual...values enshrined in and protected by the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, in particular such values as...the Latvian language, and the State of Latvia" ("Izglītības likums," 1998). From 2022 to 2023, the *Saeima* once again felt the need to strengthen the Latvian language and culture by writing cultural values into law. The laws utilize education to build up the official language and national identity. The laws stipulate educational institutes must teach students how to be Latvian, thus strengthening national identity.

While "Education, Science, Sport" laws aim to shape the character of people growing up in Latvia, "Citizenship, Migration" laws aim to shape the character of people new to or foreign in Latvia. Between the two categories, Latvian legislation targets the identity of every person living in Latvia, both native and non-native. Several 2023 amendments to the Immigration Law (2002) made proficiency in Latvian a requirement for Russian nationals to maintain permanent resident status. The amendments state, "the examination of the proficiency in the official language passed in the naturalisation process" may serve as a state language exam; however, the Citizenship Law prohibits dual citizenship through naturalization ("Imigrācijas likums," 2002; "Pilsonības likums," 1994). These amendments are the only amendments in this project to apply to one specific group of people, Russian nationals—a group ineligible to gain Latvian citizenship while possessing Russian citizenship ("Pilsonības likums," 1994). Even Russian nationals with no connection to the Russian government or foreign activity must comply with ideals of language and identity to maintain Latvian residency; remaining Russian is anti-Latvian. When identity is so reliant on nationality and vice versa, laws can then dictate not just what identity is, but what identity is not.

Laws/amendments in the "Education, Science, Sport" category passed in years most similar to the accumulative trend of all categories of laws. Changes in education laws may indicate change in other categories of laws, such as in "Media, Advertising." Graph 2 shows a general upward trend in the frequency of new laws by year, with nine new laws/amendments in 2018 and sixteen in 2022. The "Education, Science, Sport" laws account for approximately one quarter of new language laws/amendments in 2018, nearly half of all new laws/amendments in 2022, and about one fifth of all language laws total. However, most of the new laws/amendments specifically target education and science, and only one law, the International Convention against Doping in Sport (2006), regulates language use in sports. The *Saeima* teaches residents and citizens the official language and culture by building standards

of language and culture in "Education, Science, Sport" laws. Once a person has learned how to properly use language, the laws of other categories (for example: "Media, Advertising") enforce those standards.



Graph 2. Frequency of new Education, Science, Sport laws/amendments by year.

DISCUSSION

Expanding Research on Top-Down Change in National Identity

This research on Latvian language laws expands language research beyond physical signage, policy compliance, and attitudinal surveys. While previous research lacks work on the laws governing language in the first place, this paper explores various ways laws govern language use. Legal categories, such as "Transportation, Communication," "Media, Advertising," "Education, Science, Sport," show non-physical, socio-cultural, and political contexts of language governance. The laws regulate language not just on public signage (Manchurina & Samsonova, 2022; Pupavac, 2006) but businesses, institutions, events, and even people ("Likums 'Par reglamentētajām,'" 2001; "Valsts valodas likums," 1999). Analyzing language laws expands research beyond signage or written language; for example, Sliashynskaya (2018) and Maksimovtsova (2020) could expand from analyzing print news articles to differences in the languages of broadcast media. By expanding theory into the various laws governing language use, language research could extend into broadcast media, educational curricula, or citizenship requirements. As countries respond to changing global political dynamics, understanding the cultural shifts behind language laws can predict new legislation. With expanded language law research, researchers may yet understand how and why a state implements language laws—not just how well the writing of a language law is enforced.

Trends in the implementation of new laws, especially in the category "Education, Science, Sport," show evidence for top-down, constructed language change in Latvia. The *Saeima*, the "top" of the Latvian state, uses education as a mode of influence to consciously shape the language use of residents. Top-down language change refers to a smaller authority pushing language change onto a larger population. Cultural Constructivism Theory establishes the conscious performance of cultural characteristics—people learn, not inherit, cultural traits; the *Saeima* passes laws in an attempt to influence how the population of Latvia speaks (Laitin, 1998; Platt, 2024). Because the *Saeima* enforces the teaching of students in compliance with language laws, language laws in education explicitly teach students how to act in line with the national, cultural ideals. Top-down language change means the *Saeima* controls not just the state but broader Latvian language use. Language laws in education happen to be a very concrete example of how a state consciously constructs language and culture.

Latvian language laws support top-down Cultural Constructivism Theory. The *Saeima* governs language use to actively reshape the national identity. The *Saeima* reinforces cultural identity values by implementing new laws reinforcing official language use in specific cultural spheres. For example, by dictating in "Administrative Procedure" that state administrators must carry out all work and conversation in the official language, the *Saeima* implements Latvian at the "top" of the state, reflecting top-down language change in Frey (2013) and Gellner (1983). Changes in "Education, Science, Sport" laws reflect how language shift "[advances]…political demands" onto the resident population, transmitting the state's "moral, aesthetic, [and] intellectual" values of Latvian-ness (Anderson, 1991; "Izglītības likums," 1998). Finally, changes to "Citizenship, Migration" laws reflect the population belonging to the system of language, culture, and identity—a top-down rejection of resident Russian diaspora in 2022. By intentionally shaping language shift, the *Saeima* exclusively defines who can be Latvian and belong to the Latvian state. The *Saeima*, as head of the state, defines national ideals for the resident population to follow, supporting top-down Cultural Constructivism theory.

Implications of Timeline of New Laws and Amendments

The *Saeima* should sponsor official Russian language news and entertainment. Instead of limiting resources to the official language, providing resources in foreign languages could increase pro-Latvian support among non-Latvian speaking populations. While new laws and amendments in 2013 prepared Latvia to join the Eurozone in 2014, the *Saeima* passed more laws in "Media, Advertising" severely limiting foreign language use in all broadcast programs. Birka (2016) considered how exclusive policies led to feelings of exclusion whereas linguistic inclusion led to feelings of inclusion for Russian-speaking diaspora. Without broader European media available in the Russian language, Russian-speaking populations must turn towards

the Russian state for news. If Latvian news, entertainment, and services were also available in Russian, then the *Saeima* could foster pro-Latvian support among members of the Russian diaspora.

The *Saeima* should continue to expand and protect minority and foreign language rights in Latvia. State laws capitalize on uneven language landscapes to further nation building efforts, but Latvia could see increased international cooperation with continued acceptance of other languages. After the pro-Russia Harmony Party's majority in the 2018 election, new laws and amendments protected the right to use a national minority language (Liv or Latgalian) in education and expanded recognition of educational credentials from foreign language institutions (IPU Parline, 2018). Language laws often do not reflect a population's linguistic demographics, so residents speaking a non-majority language are often not represented in the linguistic landscape (Dumaj & Vandenbroucke, 2016; Manchurina & Samsonova, 2022; Pupavac, 2006; Sliashynskaya, 2018). Expanding national minority and foreign language rights, especially in education, would more accurately represent the languages of different populations living in Latvia. Improving representation of residents would also improve Latvia's pro-democratic, pro-European appearance in line with previously established political goals.

Governments should avoid implementing laws and amendments in retaliation against other political parties or in response to the actions of other nations. Political retaliation against a larger, abstract entity (for example: a political party or foreign state) fosters discrimination against resident minority populations. The 2022 spike in new "Education, Science, Sport" and "Citizenship, Migration" laws increasing requirements of official language use coincides with Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine; in defense against the Russian state, the *Saeima* passed new laws and amendments pushing Russian speakers out of the country. Following the research of Birka (2016) and Zeller (2022), these new laws and amendments would increase the "skeptical" feelings linguistic minority feel towards an unaccepting host country. However, their research found speakers of one language are not hostile, unlike a foreign state might be, to a setting where another language is more common (Birka, 2016, p. 219; Zeller 2022, p. 307). If the *Saeima* did not hold accountable or punish the diaspora of one country for the actions of the home country's state, Latvia could see increased national unity. By not isolating and condemning Russian diaspora, the diaspora would not turn to the Russian state for support. Instead, condemnation for the actions of the Russian state should fall on the Russian state.

CONCLUSION

National language laws build a Latvia for Latvians. The *Saeima* encourages the official Latvian language and culture above foreign languages and cultures. In a nation where the law holds being Latvian at the center of so-

ciopolitical ideals, a resident's identity and status of belonging must then also center around being Latvian, thus complying with the national identity of Latvian-ness. The interwar period established the economic and political foundation for pro-Latvian ideals, the Soviet period outlined the structure of national language laws, and the collapse of the Soviet Union pushed Latvia to look west towards Europe—away from Russia—to establish an identity as an independent nation. Pro-Latvian language laws westernize Latvian education, entertainment, citizenship, and administrative proceedings, all sectors that define the everyday life and upbringing of Latvian residents. Language laws are an effective tool for regulating cultural ideals and therefore national identity. Language use then becomes a powerful tool for decolonizing and reconstructing a national culture and identity, especially in a post-Soviet space, as this case study of Latvia demonstrates.

The Saeima has attempted to strengthen Latvian culture and identity by implementing an increasing number of controlling language laws over the years since 1991. During the times of national elections and major international events, the *Saeima* has passed more language laws in clusters. Because the law explicitly ties language to culture and history, new language laws strengthen the Latvian state and culture in the face of these foreign events. The Constitution and State Language Law echo the connection between language and culture, calling the Latvian language integral to the pride and functioning of the state. While foreign language use is never criminalized, requirements to use the official language limit foreign language use; laws in the "Citizenship, Migration" category limit the ability of a foreign people (Russian nationals) to live in Latvia. Laws are passed in clusters, specifically 2014, 2018, and 2022, in the face of national elections and international events. Increasing language laws and requiring pride in both the official language and the state-sanctioned national identity allows a state to implement more, stronger laws governing language and culture. As the US has just adopted English as an official language, we should be careful about socially and legally limiting education, job opportunities, news, legal proceedings, and residency, under the guise of a "united" national identity. Language laws, as shown in the case of Latvia, while strengthening a small and previously suppressed language, become suppressive when in favor of the dominant language. Language laws are the agent in socially limiting language in education, media, and populations at large.

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