



Regions of Latvia: Tradition, Change, Presentation

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The region is viewed as a geographically distinct intermediate organisational level between the local and the national level, having social and cultural associations. In examining the relationship between regions that have been established politically in the very recent past and the ‘cultural-historical regions’ we may highlight the developments in the 21st century in Latvia relating to various administrative reforms as providing a stimulating example for study from this perspective. From the ethnological viewpoint, too, the variation in formal regional changes offers a chance to study the significance of regionalism, and the sense of regional and local belonging in the milieu of regional and local communities: whether such a sense of belonging exists, and to what degree this sense of belonging is, or can be, influenced by political decisions.

In the first place, it should be pointed out that up to the end of the 20th century the term ‘region’ was practically not used in Latvian to refer to areas within Latvia, and instead was utilised in a geographical sense to describe large areas within foreign countries. In the research literature, the social space and everyday life, the term ‘novads’ was used, and remains in use.

A brief overview of the history of ‘regionalisation’ in Latvia

Regions can be identified on the basis of geographical, economic, social and other ties, but historically and partly also in the present-day situation the political (power) factor has generally predominated, i.e. the region as an area of legislative authority (state) during a particular historical period. As in other countries, the boundaries between regions in Latvia are not permanent, they are political constructions and/or cultural-historical constructs of a particular period.

Even during the 20th century, the number of regions distinguished in Latvia according to various criteria has also changed. The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (1922) does not mention regions as such, but does distinguish large areas: Vidzeme, Kurzeme, Zemgale and Latgale, which together formed the independent state of Latvia. This harked back to the political division of territory in previous

centuries: the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia (16th–18th cent.), the Provinces of Livland (Vidzeme) and Courland (Kurzeme) under Tsarist Russia (18th – early 20th cent.) and Latgale, an area separated from Livland (Vidzeme) in the 17th century. Even at the present day these are the three most pronounced images of regions in Latvia, which also occur as mental constructs in the narratives of residents of other regions of Latvia (especially the older generation). During the first period of Latvia's independence, Zemgale was separated from Kurzeme as an administrative area in its own right, and the late 20th century saw active strivings to distinguish Augšzeme/Sēlija as a potential region.

In Latvian ethnography, five '19th century historical-geographical areas' are identified (which can also be referred to as 'cultural-historical regions'): Augšzeme or Sēlija, Kurzeme, Vidzeme, Latgale and Zemgale. The identification of these regions was based on the areas populated in the 12th–13th century by the ancient Baltic ethnic groups (Couronians, Latgallians, Selonians and Semigallians, as well as the Livs, a Finnic group), and on evidence in 17th–19th century sources concerning the traditional and local cultural characteristics of the Latvian peasantry of the pre-industrial period, taking into account specific features that have come about in the course of historical development (C i m e r m a n i s 1999, 48). An important element of the recognition of cultural-historical regions is the existence of a sense of regional belonging in a large section of the population, handed down from one generation to the next along with cultural traditions. Very recently, the discourse of inherited tradition has become particularly topical in connection with the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Likewise, the Guidelines for the Cultural Policy of the Republic of Latvia, laid down in 2006, define these five culture-historical regions as historically developed territories distinguished by their own cultural identity, expressed in the unique cultural heritage and linguistic features characteristic of a particular area (*Valsts kultūrpolitikas vadlīnijas* 2006, 24).

Because regions are complex systems, small, unusual historical areas within them can become more vividly distinguished. In Latvia, these include the coastal areas of Kurzeme and Vidzeme, the Catholic areas of Central Kurzeme, Piebalga and Maliena within the Vidzeme region, etc., as well as the border areas between cultural-historical regions: the banks of the River Daugava, etc. The question of the regional consciousness of the inhabitants of these areas in earlier historical periods remains open and requires study. How deep is present-day regional identity? Can we speak of a regional society in contrast to more pronounced local societies? The view has also been expressed that during the 20th century, especially the second half of the century, along with the changing composition of the population (mass migration) the sense of regional and local belonging has changed and has even disappeared in some areas (C i m e r m a n i s 1999, 49; V a n a g a 2003, 48).

In the 21st century, politically established regions have once again come to the fore. Already in the run-up to accession to the European Union, under the Law on Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia (2002), five planning regions were distinguished in Latvia: Vidzeme, Kurzeme, Latgale, Zemgale and the new Riga

Region. The boundaries of the planning regions were established administratively in the late 1990s, based on the principle of economic expediency, without taking into account the cultural-historical division into regions. This means that along the boundary zones between the new, administratively established, formal regions there are municipalities (local communities) established in the course of another reform (the administrative-territorial reform), bringing marked changes to the traditions of cultural-historical regional identity or 'belonging'. This new regional division has dominated in the public space in Latvia for ten years now.

The presentation of regions in order to attract tourists

The recognisability of regions through their unusual or distinctive characteristics is important not only for the expressions of the regional belonging of the inhabitants of these areas themselves, but also for attracting tourists, an important mechanism for the economic development of regional and local communities. This is also one of the tasks of the new, formal planning regions.

Officially, the history of tourism as a branch of the economy goes back to 1929. In the 1930s, with the development of domestic tourism, the campaign "Travel around your native land" became especially popular, being given strong state support. Reinforced at this period were certain cultural stereotypes characterising the regions: rich Zemgale, hospitable Latgale, the Amberland Kurzeme, etc.

Since the restoration of Latvia's independence, tourism has boomed, although it has also experienced periods of decline. One of the most important events for professionals in the sphere of tourism is the international tourism tradeshow *Baltpour*, held in Riga since 1994 (III. 1.). It is a significant tourism event at the Baltic level, helping people to choose and arrange holidays. The tradeshow includes several thematic sectors: tourist routes in Latvia, tour agencies, national stands of foreign countries etc. The tradeshow is oriented more towards international tourism, but institutions representing Latvia's regions and counties are also present, with large or small stands. It is mainly the small town and rural municipalities that present themselves here. The range on offer at the tradeshow is an interesting



III. 1 View of the Latgale sector at the *Baltpour 2012* tradeshow
Photo: Lilita Vanaga

reflection of concepts, partly revealing how the above-mentioned changes in the traditional regional division are perceived.

The exhibition is divided into regional sectors (omitting Sēlija), with demonstrations of regional culture for the visitors (folklore ensembles, dance groups etc.). It is noticeable that the image or concept of the region is being shaped and presented in the spirit of the concept developed by Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1991, 224). Thus, regions and local communities themselves identify values that they wish to offer to foreign and domestic travellers. These values are exhibited for the needs of the market society. Of course, the exhibition material shows only those regional values that are seen as such by the people commissioning and creating the advertising material. Since tourist routes, booklets and the appearance of the stands are created mainly by people living in the respective regions, it is also possible to follow, from one exhibition to the next, continuity or change in traditional regional brands and regional/local self-identification.

Basic values presented to tourists by all regions:

1. Nature (mainly waters: the sea, rivers and lakes), the main motif being: a scenic, clean, serene, quiet location appropriate for relaxation. Most of what is advertised is 'green tourism', ecotourism. An approach utilised since the 19th century is applied: forming an associational link between landscape and culture by incorporating rural material culture into the landscape, along with local characteristics of economic and social life.

2. Architectural, artistic and historical monuments (castles, manors, parks, churches etc.).

3. The traditional cultural heritage. Although at least some of the staff running the stands of all the regions wear more or less appropriate folk dress, 'ethnographicality' does not dominate in the tourist routes on offer.

Does the range on offer in the exhibition show the significant traditional features of regional identity that theoretically underpin the boundaries of cultural-historical regions and local areas?

- The ancient ethnic roots of the regions are highlighted comparatively rarely, mostly in those parts of Vidzeme and Kurzeme formerly inhabited by the Livs, and this also comes across in the advertisements for replicas of archaeological artefacts. On the other hand, since the 1990s 'sacred sites' are being advertised, both sites with a historical basis (hill-forts, stones with historical significance), and 'newly-discovered' springs associated with a legend, 'monuments of ancient civilisations' etc.
- Characteristic branches and areas of economic activity. The programmes presented by local museums and local festivals include imitations of particular traditional rural activities; predominant are the products of particular craft workshops (pottery, weaving, basketry) and regional craft centres, along with offers to watch the artisans at work. An activity that was still traditional in the 20th century, namely marine and freshwater fishing and fish processing

as an element of local historical colour, is nowadays the exception rather than the norm in the offer to tourists.

- Regional variants of folk architecture are presented as a value by particular museums (Jēkabpils, Ludza, Ventspils etc.) through open-air ethnographic exhibitions. However, the majority are memorial museums dedicated to outstanding cultural figures, located on 19th–20th century farms, as well as particular population centres (groups of farms) under state protection, such as Slutišķi in Latgale, Vēveri in Vidzeme etc.
- Traditional cuisine: the tasting of local produce is coming to occupy an increasingly important place in the offer to tourists. For the most part, there are various kinds of cereal products, honey, herbal teas, cheese and beer, less commonly fish and home wine. The produce on display at the tradeshow reveals a tendency to trivialise the presentation of traditional produce (bread, gingerbread) in order to suit the tastes of potential customers.

There is variation in the degree of common emphasis on regional belonging in the way the exhibition is arranged. It is generally not emphasised in the printed material, with the exception of publications by regional tourist organisations, which reflect the boundary changes of recent years. The 2012 Latgale regional exhibition stood out in terms of having a unified concept. The Vidzeme sector (a cultural-historical region divided into the Vidzeme and Riga Planning Regions) conceptually retained its earlier traditional territoriality.

At the same time, ethnographic values are consistently chosen as local community brands by such local areas as Lielvārde, Vecpiebalga and Jaunpiebalga in Vidzeme. The self-identification and recognisability of these areas at the national scale has been promoted during a long period (III. 2.). Thus, since the late 19th century Piebalga has been widely known as a historic centre for crafts and trade, described in classic Latvian literature (*The Time of the Surveyors* by Reinis and Matīss Kaudzīte), and the impressive buildings of the peasant farms, most notably the threshing barns, have obtained symbolic significance. Lielvārde, meanwhile, is connected with the epic *Lāčplēsis* or ‘Bear-Slayer’ by the Latvian classic Andrejs Pumpurs and with the patterned belts woven in this general area, which drew attention from the



III. 2 The brochure “Choose Piebalga”. Published by the municipal authority of Jaunpiebalga County, 2012

1970s, being viewed as reflecting ancient Latvian wisdom. Thus, the features symbolising these areas are based on a longer tradition.

The creation of the planning regions has placed the region of Zemgale in the most unbalanced position between tradition and the new regional boundaries (Ill. 3.). Areas on the right bank of the Daugava, which had always been considered as belonging to Vidzeme, or in some cases to Latgale, as well as most of Sēlija/



III. 3 Advertising for crafts and art centres in Zemgale and Northern Lithuania. 2012

Augšzeme, now fall within the Zemgale region, according to the formal division. As indicated by a survey of the staff running these stands, each resident individually chooses their personal sense of belonging to a cultural-historical region.

Likewise, the data from ethnographic fieldwork in the late 20th and 21st century, the regional studies literature published in the last 20 years and other sources indicate the long continuity of ‘invisible’ community boundaries, at least in the minds of long-time residents and in the oral tradition. Of the various kinds of social identity relating to territoriality, the residents of regions attribute greater significance to local and national identity. Most probably, this parallel (official and unofficial) regional and local sense of belonging will last for a long time to come. It is possible to create an artificial territorial image or public local identity, but there is a need for stability and an awareness of common values over a longer time-span.

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Latvijas reģioni: tradīcija, pokytis, pristatymas

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinēs sāvokos: *reģions, reģioninē tapatybē, vietinē tapatybē, turizmas.*

Nagrinējant sāttykius tarp reģionu, kurie buvo politiškai nustatyti netolimoje praecityje, ir kultūrinu-istoriniu reģionu reģions yra suprantamas kaip geografiškai atskiras, tarpinis tarp vietinio ir nacionalinio, organizacinis lygmuo su socialinēm is ir kultūrinēm is bendrijomis. Latvijas etnografijoje skiriamos penkios XIX amžiaus istorinēs-geografinēs sritys (jos gali būti taip pat vadinamos kultūriniais-istoriniais reģionais): Augšzemē, arba Sēlija, Kurzemē, Vidzemē, Latgala ir Žemgala. Rengiantis stoti į Europos Sąjungą pagal Latvijas Respublikos reģioninēs plētros įstatymą (2002) Latvija buvo suskirstyta į penkis reģionus: Vidzemē, Kurzemē, Latgalą, Žemgalą ir naujajį Rygos reģioną. Šiu reģionu ribos administraciškai nustatytos XX a. dešimtojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje, remiantis ekonominio tikslingumo principu ir neatsižvelgiant į kultūrinu-istorinį paskirstymą.

Tarptautinē turizmo paroda Balttour Rygoje yra įdomus sāvokų atspindys, atskleidžiantis, kaip suvokiami pasikeitimai tradiciniame reģioniniame padalijime. Reģiono vaizdas pateikiamas norimu būdu, nurodant, kaip reģioninēs ir vietinēs bendruomenēs žiūri į savo vertybes, kurias siūlo užsienio ir šalies keliautojams. Pagrindinēs vertybēs, pristatomos turistams visų reģionu, yra graži gamta, architektūra, meniniai ir istoriniai paminklai ir tradicinis kultūrinis paveldas. Siūlomuose turistiniuose maršrutuose nėra etnografiškumo, nors paroda pristato reģioninēs tapatybēs tradicinius bruožus, kurie teoriškai patvirtina kultūrinēs-istorinēs reģionu ribas. Etnografinēs vertybēs pasirenkamos kaip vietinēs bendruomenēs ženklas.

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In examining the relationship between regions that have been established politically in the very recent past and the ‘cultural-historical regions’, a region is viewed as a geographically distinct intermediate organisational level between the local and the national, with social and cultural associations. In Latvian ethnography, five ‘19th century historical-geographical areas’ are identified (which can also be referred to as ‘cultural-historical regions’): Augšzeme or Sēlija, Kurzeme, Vidzeme, Latgale and Zemgale. During preparations to accession to the European Union, under the Law on Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia (2002), five planning regions were distinguished in Latvia: Vidzeme, Kurzeme, Latgale, Zemgale and the new Riga Region. The boundaries of these regions were established

administratively in the late 1990s, based on the principle of economic expediency, without taking into account the cultural-historical division into regions.

The international tourism tradeshow *Baltpour* in Riga is an interesting reflection of concepts, partly revealing how the changes in the traditional regional division are perceived. The image of the region is being presented in the desired manner, indicating how the regions and local communities view their values that they wish to offer to foreign and domestic travellers. Basic values presented to tourists by all regions include beautiful nature, architectural, artistic and historical monuments, as well as the traditional cultural heritage. 'Ethnographicality' does not dominate in the tourist routes on offer; though the exhibition shows significant traditional features of regional identity that theoretically underpin the boundaries of cultural-historical regions. Ethnographic values are most consistently chosen as local community brands by peculiar local areas.

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