

## BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL DICHOTOMIES IN STUDYING ETHNIC RESIDENTIAL GEOGRAPHIES IN RIGA

### MAZĀKUMTAUTĪBU ĢEOGRĀFIJA RĪGĀ: SKATS ĀRPUS IERASTĀ DALĪJUMA

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#### **Abstract**

Ethnic residential geographies are spatially complex, and there has been strong academic interest in immigrant residential segregation in urban Europe. In Latvia, the nature of immigration has changed in recent years, and one of the most visible features has been the emergence of previously underrepresented ethnic groups choosing the city of Riga as their place of residence. At the same time, Riga has had a very high proportion of ethnic minorities for more than 60 years, due to the immigration, industrialisation and militarisation policies pursued under the Soviet occupation. The distinctive historical context of the capital of Latvia has resulted in the formation of a multifaceted urban landscape, wherein long-established ethnic minority communities and emergent immigrant groups coexist. Therefore, in this paper we will examine the changes in the share of the largest ethnic groups in Riga over the past decade. Additionally, we will present a somewhat unconventional analysis, going beyond the traditional divides in order to assess the geographical distribution of emergent ethnic minorities. We use customised data from the last two censuses, in 2011 and 2021, to analyse the city-wide distribution of the major ethnic groups and the changing distribution of smaller ethnic groups in urban neighbourhoods. The findings indicate a decline in the overall population of all major ethnic groups in the city, although in certain neighbourhoods – and across the city as a whole – the proportion of Latvians is on the rise. Meanwhile, more significant changes have been observed among the emergent ethnic groups. The evidence from the inner city indicates the presence of fast-growing minority groups, such as Indians.

**Keywords:** *ethnic minorities, population change, census, urban neighbourhood*

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**Introduction**

The demographic profile of the European urban population is undergoing transformation due to negative natural growth and increasing immigration (Amran et al., 2019). Immigration is the key driver of population change in the EU and has reached unprecedented levels; it is characterised by diversification in terms of the countries of origin and motivations for migration, which has significantly altered migration dynamics across the region (Van Mol & de Valk, 2016). Consequently, Europe's contemporary ethnic landscape is shaped by a combination of steady historical and varied new migration patterns (King & Okólski, 2019). Metropolitan areas exhibit the highest concentrations of immigrants (Benassi et al., 2020), leading to considerable changes in their ethnic composition (Johnston et al., 2015; Catney, 2017). While this rise in ethnic diversity in urban neighbourhoods can pose risks of socio-spatial inequalities, it does not inherently lead to such outcomes. Instead, increasing ethnic diversity is often associated with desegregation (Harris, 2023) and the ability to maintain stable levels of neighbourhood multi-ethnicity (Catney et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the evolving ethnic residential geographies can bring about certain risks of ethnic residential segregation. This multifaceted phenomenon is driven by several factors, particularly socioeconomic disadvantages that significantly impact residential choices and social cohesion (Manley et al., 2015; Sturgis et al., 2014). Consequently, ethnic residential segregation tends to be more pronounced than ethnic workplace segregation (Garlick et al., 2023). Additionally, discrimination, self-segregation, minority group size, overall urban ethnic diversity, country-specific differences (Forrest & Johnston, 2001; Johnston et al., 2007), and the practical and emotional need for a community (Stillwell & Phillips, 2006) play an important role in determining residential outcomes.

The dynamics and trends of ethnic composition vary significantly between countries and cities and are influenced by regional and international contexts. Therefore, examining specific cases is essential in order to gain a deeper understanding of these unique patterns. Cities differ in their immigration histories, ethnic compositions, and economic opportunities, leading to distinct spatial outcomes. Despite the general trend of diminishing spatial divisions between ethnic groups, ethnic minorities are still frequently concentrated in specific urban zones, such as deprived inner-city areas (Stillwell & Phillips, 2006). Additionally, migrants from third countries often face higher levels of segregation, particularly in countries with more recent immigration

histories (Benassi et al., 2020). Significant shifts in migration patterns in Central and Eastern European cities have led to increased foreign-born populations, resulting in major socio-spatial changes for ethnic groups, marked by ethnic-group-specific concentration patterns and growing spatial variability (Špačková et al., 2016).

In Latvia, the nature of immigration has changed in recent years, and one of the most visible features has been the emergence of previously underrepresented ethnic groups choosing the city of Riga as their place of residence. As Riga experiences modest increases in immigration and the arrival of new ethnic groups, there is a mounting necessity to conduct a more comprehensive examination of the evolving ethnic composition of Riga's neighbourhoods and the underlying factors driving these changes. In this paper, we will therefore examine the changes in the proportion of the largest ethnic groups in Riga over the past decade. Furthermore, we will present a somewhat unconventional analysis by examining the number and geographical distribution of the emergent ethnic minorities. This research paper goes beyond the traditional approach to examining ethnic residential geographies in Riga, elucidating the dynamic and heterogeneous ethnic landscape, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary demographic and socioeconomic factors.

### **Data and methods**

This study employs quantitative methods to observe and analyse the residential geographies of ethnic groups in Riga. The data were derived from the most recent two censuses, namely in 2011 and 2021, with the objective of analysing the city-wide distribution of major ethnic groups across urban neighbourhoods, and the changing distribution of fast-growing smaller ethnic groups. The Latvian census employs a primarily self-report approach in classifying ethnic groups within predefined categories. Additionally, variables such as country of birth, previous place of residence in the event of migration, citizenship, or the language spoken at home or mother tongue (the last in 2011) are typically employed in the examination of immigration patterns. Our analysis draws on customised data based on the self-reported variable from the census. The selected self-reported variable is based on a classifier comprising over 300 distinct ethnicities, which can be selected (Regulations on the Classification of Ethnicities, 2016). The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia employs this classifier for the purpose of coding data pertaining to ethnicities. Unfortunately, this classification only allows for

the selection of one ethnicity and does not provide for the selection of mixed ethnic ancestry. Furthermore, the census also offers the option of selecting “unknown” and “not selected” ethnicity. It is noteworthy that the number of cases classified as of “unknown” or “not selected” ethnicity has increased over the past decade, with a total of over 40,000 such entries documented in the 2021 census. This study presents a descriptive analysis of the changes that have occurred over the past decade in the distribution of the major ethnic groups and, subsequently, their geographical patterns across urban neighbourhoods. Subsequently, a description of the smaller ethnic groups is provided, with the larger or more traditional ethnic minorities previously discussed excluded.

## **Results**

### ***Understanding the Changing Ethnic Composition of Riga’s Neighbourhoods***

Riga, with its extensive historical background and strategic maritime location, has consistently served as a nexus of diverse cultures and ethnicities, facilitating the convergence of numerous cultural and ethnic groups. The city’s ethnic composition is notable for the prevalence of an aggregated group of ethnic minorities, which constitute over half of the city’s population. While ethnic Latvians form the largest single group, they do so alongside a substantial population of ethnic Russians, Belarussians, Ukrainians and Poles, reflecting a long history of migration, mainly influenced by Soviet-era immigration, industrialisation and militarisation policies. The ethnic composition of the city is further complicated by the spatial distribution of major ethnic groups across neighbourhoods. A comprehensive examination of Riga’s urban neighbourhoods reveals significant variations in ethnic composition across different zones. Such variations illustrate the city’s dynamic and evolving ethnic landscape, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary demographic and socioeconomic variables. Over the decade studied, the demographic landscape of Latvia, and particularly its capital city Riga, experienced an overall population decline and underwent transformations in its ethnic composition (Table 1). Despite its central role as a hub of the urban system and the primary centre for economic activity, Riga experienced population decline driven by negative natural growth, further exacerbated by negative net migration. Although a brief period of positive internal net migration occurred between 2013 and 2016 due to local policies on real estate tax and a discount

programme for urban dwellers, this was followed by an exodus to the suburbs, amplified by counter-urbanisation effects during the COVID-19 pandemic (Krumins et al., 2021). An examination of the relative changes in ethnic group sizes reveals that Russians and other traditional ethnic minority groups experienced the most substantial declines, whereas the Latvian population decreased only slightly. In contrast, non-traditional ethnic minorities demonstrated significant growth, reaching almost 28%.

**Table 1. Components of population change and relative ethnic group change in Riga from 2011 to 2021** (authors' calculations based on data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia)

Components of population change	Natural change	-26.5k
	Net migration	-20.7k
Relative ethnic group change	Latvians	-3.4%
	Russians	-16.1%
	Other traditional*	-13.4%
	Non-traditional**	27.8%
	Not selected/unknown	484.3%
	Riga city, total	-5.7%

\* Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, Estonians, Jews, Roma, Armenians, Tatars, Moldovans

\*\* All other ethnic groups, excluding Latvians, Russians, other traditional and not selected/unknown

Consequently, between 2011 and 2021, international net migration in Riga underwent a transition, shifting from a markedly negative to a slightly positive number (Figure 1). This shift was accompanied by a gradual decline in emigration and an increase in immigration, except for in 2020, which was likely influenced by pandemic-related movement restrictions. Notably, 2021 marked the first time in a decade that Riga experienced positive international net migration. This shift in international migration patterns aligns with the growth of non-traditional ethnic minority groups, illustrating the evolving demographic profile and ethnic geographies of the city and pointing to an increasingly diverse social and cultural fabric in the future.

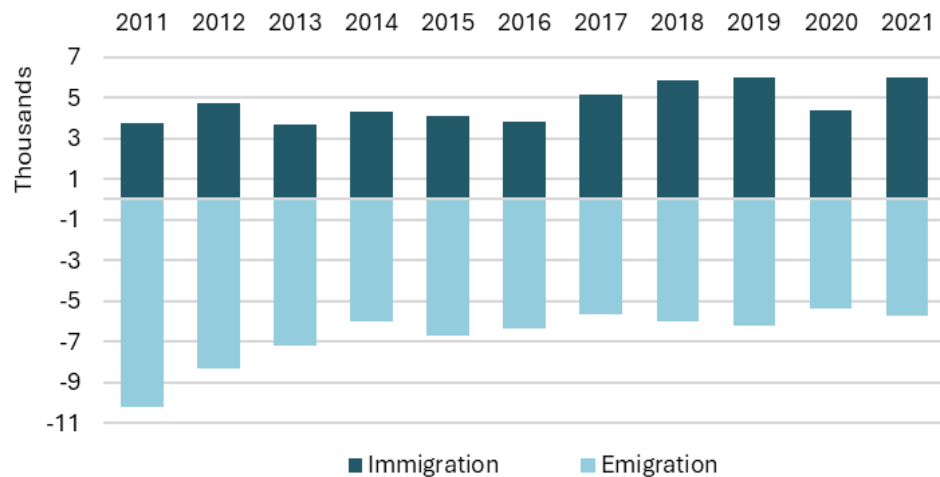


Figure 1. **Dynamics of international migration in Riga from 2011 to 2021** (authors' figure based on data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia)

Figure 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the ethnic composition in Riga for 2011 and 2021, focusing on the top 12 ethnicities and excluding residents with “not selected” or “unknown” ethnic affiliation. During this period, the share of Latvians, who constituted just under half of the city’s population, increased slightly. Conversely, Russians, the largest ethnic minority group, saw a decrease of over four percentage points. Other traditional ethnic minorities, including Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Armenians and Tatars, declined in absolute numbers, although their relative shares remained relatively stable.

Despite these shifts, the overall composition of the top ethnic groups has remained largely consistent. However, there were notable changes in the lowest positions in the top 12: in 2021, Moldovans and Azeris were replaced by Uzbeks and Indians. This change highlights a broader trend of declining traditional ethnic minority populations and the rise of emergent ethnic groups, suggesting a new gradual transformation in Riga’s ethnic landscape.

The urban morphology of Riga can be delineated into three urban zones: the inner-city neighbourhoods, the Soviet-era large housing estates, and the outer-city neighbourhoods (Figure 3). Analysing ethnic minority representation across these zones reveals distinct patterns. Soviet-era large housing estates generally have populations which are more than 50% ethnic minority, primarily due to the concentration of long-established traditional ethnic minorities in these neighbourhoods. Inner-city

neighbourhoods typically exhibit a 30%–50% ethnic minority share, whereas outer-city neighbourhoods in most cases show less than 30% ethnic minority representation.

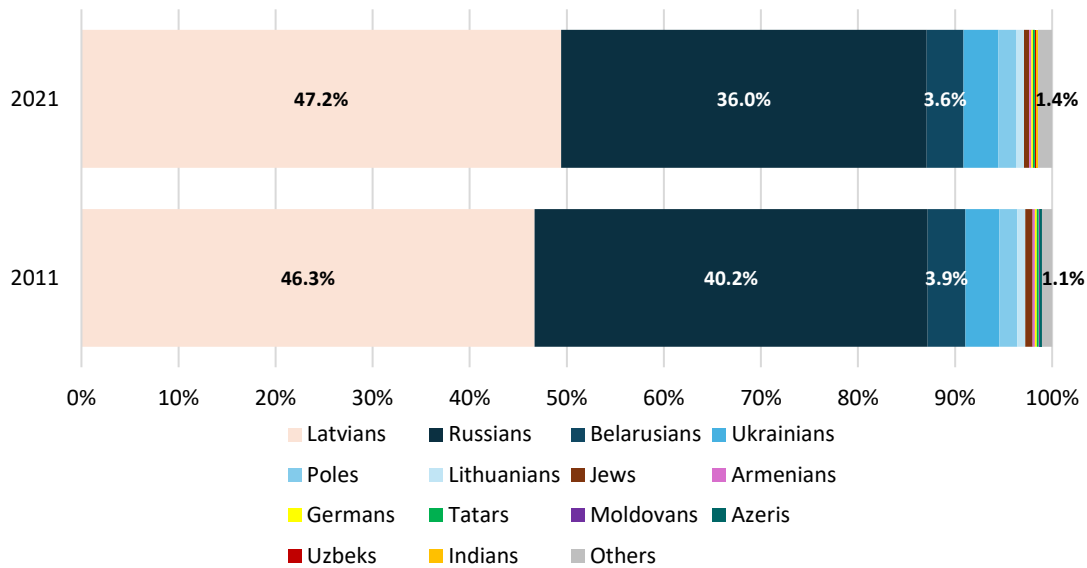


Figure 2. **Ethnic composition in Riga in 2011 and 2021** (authors' figure based on data from Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia)

A comparative analysis of data from 2011 and 2021 indicates that the ethnic minority share in Soviet-era large housing estates has been decreasing. This trend aligns with the general decline in the population of traditional ethnic minorities across the city. In outer-city neighbourhoods, the ethnic minority share has remained relatively stable, with only a few neighbourhoods showing an increase in ethnic minority density. In the inner city, the ethnic minority share has also remained stable in most neighbourhoods, but a decline can be observed in the eastern neighbourhoods of Brasa and Grīziņkalns, as well as the neighbourhood of Andrejsala-Pētersala, characterised by a majority of Soviet-era large housing estates and thus a larger traditional ethnic minority share. This decline is also due to the overall decline in the traditional ethnic minority population and the neighbourhood's socioeconomic transformations, which surpass those of other Soviet-era large housing estates (Balode 2023), likely influenced by the neighbourhood's proximity to the city centre. The inner-city neighbourhood of Skanste stands out as an exception, showing an increase in the share of ethnic minorities, which coincides with the widespread new-built gentrification of the neighbourhood and its status as the neighbourhood with the fastest population growth rate in the city.

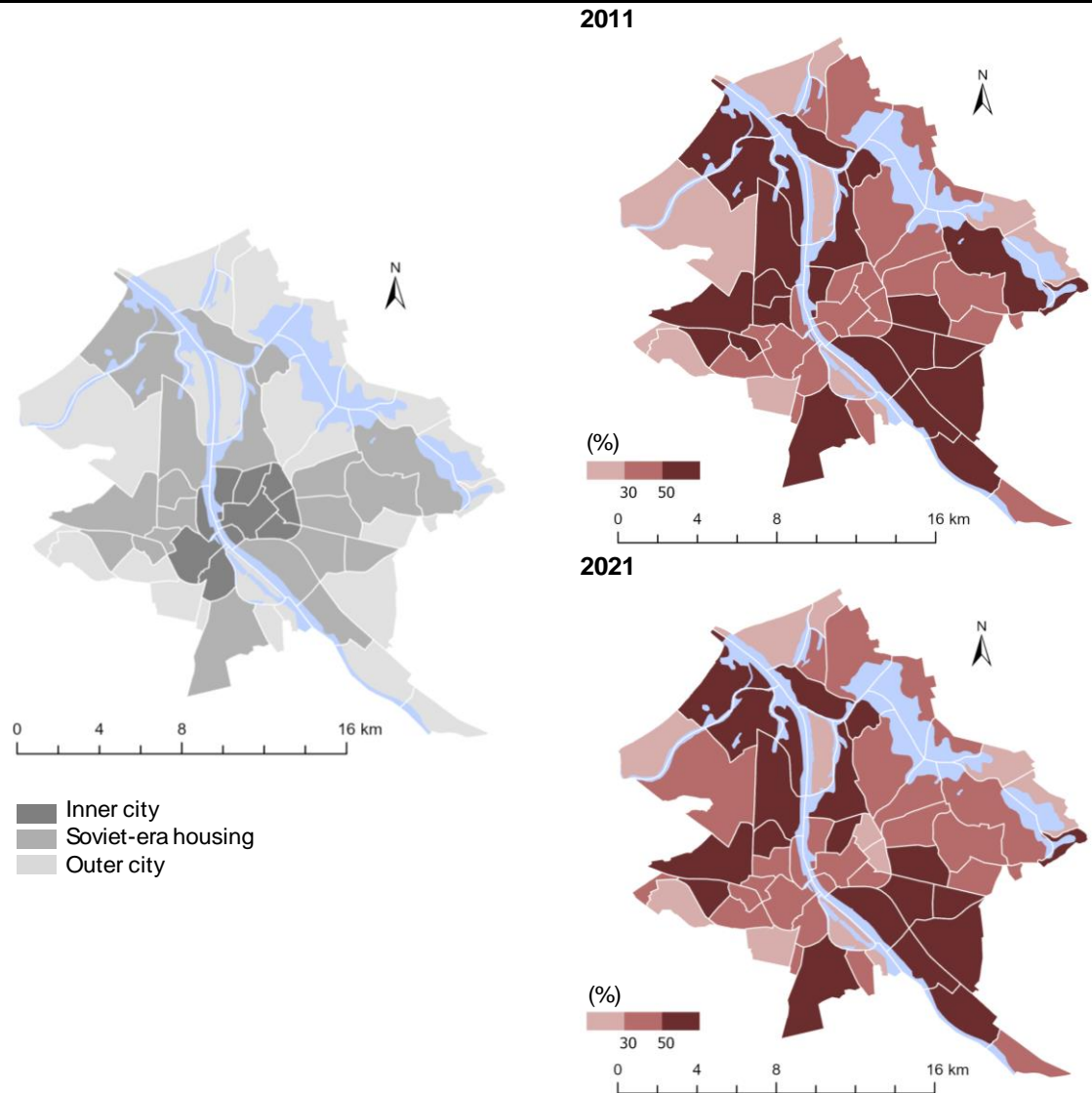


Figure 3. Urban zones (left) and share of ethnic minorities at neighbourhood level in 2011 and 2021 (right) in Riga (authors' figure based on data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia)

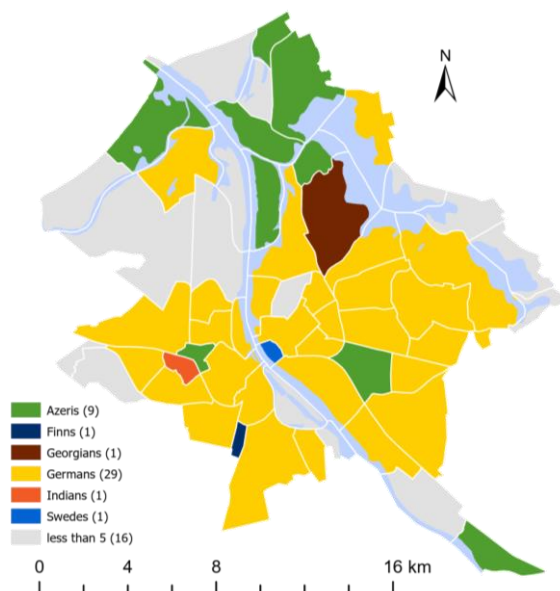
*How have the local geographies of ethnicity evolved over time?*

When looking at smaller ethnic minority groups, we focused on those ethnicities that do not belong to the major ethnic groups. Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of the largest ethnic groups beyond the traditional ethnic minority groups, namely Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, Estonians, Jews, Roma, Armenians, Tatars and Moldovans, across the neighbourhoods of Riga. Neighbourhoods with fewer than five residents from the non-traditional ethnic groups were excluded from the analysis. In 2011, Germans were the group most widely dispersed across the city, constituting the



largest non-traditional ethnic group in 29 neighbourhoods, followed by Azeris, who were concentrated in the northern neighbourhoods. Additionally, Finns, Swedes, Georgians and Indians formed the largest non-traditional ethnic group in one neighbourhood each.

**2011**



**2021**

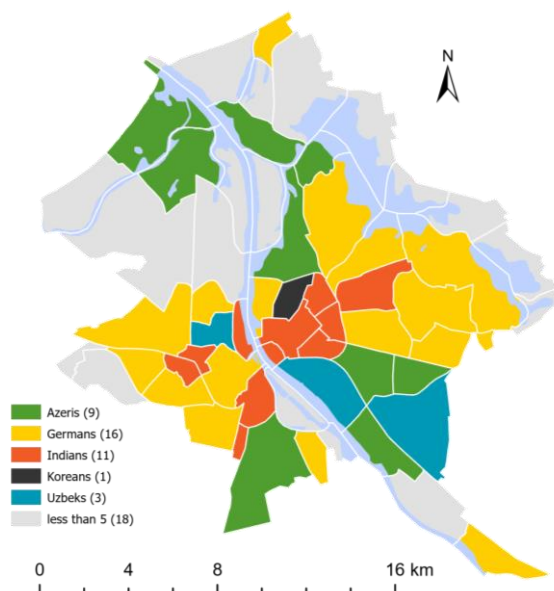


Figure 4. **The largest non-traditional ethnic groups at neighbourhood level in Riga in 2011 and 2021** (authors' figure based on data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia)

In 2021, significant changes can be observed. Although Germans remained the most widely dispersed ethnic group, the number of neighbourhoods where they were the largest non-traditional ethnic group almost halved. Their presence diminished, particularly in the inner city. The distribution of Azeris became more segmented, with notable concentrations in both northern and southern neighbourhoods. Other previously represented groups, such as Finns, Swedes and Georgians, no longer appeared on the map – the exception being Indians. Indians expanded their presence significantly, becoming the largest non-traditional ethnic group in 11 neighbourhoods, primarily within the inner city, as well as in proximity to higher education institutions. Newcomers such as Uzbeks and Koreans emerged, forming the largest non-traditional ethnic group in three neighbourhoods and one neighbourhood respectively. These emergent ethnic groups were largely concentrated in areas where the proportion of Latvians has been increasing and the overall proportion of ethnic minorities, largely constituted by the

long-established Russian-speaking community, was lower than the city average (Figure 3).

This shift indicates a dynamic transformation of Riga's ethnic landscape. While fewer ethnic groups are represented on the map compared to 2011, newly emergent groups are spreading across larger areas than previously. The increase in neighbourhoods where Indians are the largest non-traditional ethnic group and the emergence of Uzbek and Korean communities point towards new migration trends and possibly economic and educational opportunities attracting these groups to specific urban zones that provide a suitable environment for their preferred lifestyle and ethnic community presence. The patterns observed between 2011 and 2021 reflect broader trends in migration, economic shifts, and social integration processes that are shaping the contemporary urban environment.

### **Conclusion**

In Riga, the residential geographies of traditional ethnic minorities are the subject of thorough research and well-established knowledge, while the emergence of new ethnic groups represents a novel phenomenon that is redefining urban spaces. The new migration dynamics are reshaping local geographies and introducing new socio-spatial dynamics. The population of Riga experienced a decline between 2011 and 2021 due to a combination of factors, including natural decrease, suburbanisation, counter-urbanisation and emigration. This decline was most pronounced among traditional ethnic minority populations, particularly in Soviet-era large housing estates, which had historically been dominated by ethnic Russians and other long-established ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, by the end of the decade, international net migration had undergone a gradual transformation, resulting in an increase in immigration and the emergence of new ethnic groups. This contributed to the diversification of Riga's urban landscape.

Spatial analysis reveals that emergent non-traditional ethnic groups expanded over the course of the decade. Indians, for example, became the non-traditional ethnic majority in 11 neighbourhoods, illustrating the expanding influence of smaller groups in shaping the city's ethnic composition and spatial organisation. This was particularly observed in inner-city areas where factors like lifestyle and economic opportunities and fragmented gentrification play a significant role, as well as in areas in proximity to

higher education institutions. Studying smaller ethnic groups is important as these demographic shifts reflect broader trends in post-socialist cities, where economic opportunities and international migration are transforming urban neighbourhoods and turning them into attractive destinations for immigrants. Understanding the spatial dynamics of smaller ethnic groups is crucial in informing policies on social integration, housing, and urban planning. Their growing presence highlights the need for a nuanced approach to managing ethnic diversity and its spatial implications on the city's social and cultural environment.

Further research is required to examine the residential patterns of non-traditional ethnic groups at a more granular level and to investigate the long-term impacts on potential spatial inequalities as emergent ethnic groups encounter distinctive challenges in establishing networks and accessing resources, which may differ from those faced by established ethnic minorities. Addressing these dynamics will be crucial as these ethnic groups exert an increasing influence on Riga's urban fabric in years to come.

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### **Kopsavilkums**

Eiropas lielajās pilsētās imigrācija pāris pēdējo desmitgadu laikā ir mainījusi iedzīvotāju etnisko sastāvu. Tāpēc pieaug interese par pētījumiem, kas skaidro dzīvesvietas izvēles ģeogrāfiskās atšķirības dažādu tautību iedzīvotājiem. Arī Latvijā starpvalstu migrācijas saldo pāris pēdējo gadu laikā tuvojas nulles atzīmei. Iepriekš raksturīgā iedzīvotāju emigrācija mazinās, bet imigrācijā parādās jaunas iezīmes un Latviju, bet īpaši galvaspilsētu Rīgu, dzīvei izvēlas mums mazāk zināmu tautību iedzīvotāji. Vienlaikus Rīgā kopumā un atsevišķās pilsētas apkaimēs ilgu laiku ir bijis augsts mazākumtautību īpatsvars, ko noteica padomju okupācijas periodā īstenotā imigrācijas, industrializācijas un militarizācijas politika. Tas sekmējis to, ka Latvijā un Rīgā ir liels krievu, baltkrievu un ukraiņu tautības iedzīvotāju īpatsvars. Tāpēc šajā rakstā mēs aplūkosim lielāko tautību skaita un izvietojuma pārmaiņas Rīgā un tās apkaimēs, mēģinot palūkoties ārpus ierastā mazākumtautību dalījuma. Izmantojot 2011. un 2021. gada tautas skaitīšanas datus, mēs noskaidrojām izmaiņas gan lielāko tautību sadalījumā, gan arī straujāk augošās etniskās grupas un to izvietojumu pilsētas apkaimēs. Pētījuma rezultāti atklāj,

ka visu lielāko tautību skaits pilsētā samazinās, bet atsevišķās apkaimēs un pilsētā kopumā pieaug latviešu īpatsvars. Tikmēr mazo etnisko grupu vidū aplūkotajā desmitgadē notikušas ievērojamākas pārmaiņas un pilsētas centrā vērojama straujāk augošo mazākumtautību izplatība, piemēram, indiešu tautības pārstāvju klātbūtne.

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