



LEŅMŌ IĻĻISKŪOL
LĪVŌD
INSTITŪT



Collection and Use of Indigenous Livonian Place Names in Latvia

Valts Ernštreits

University of Latvia Livonian Institute

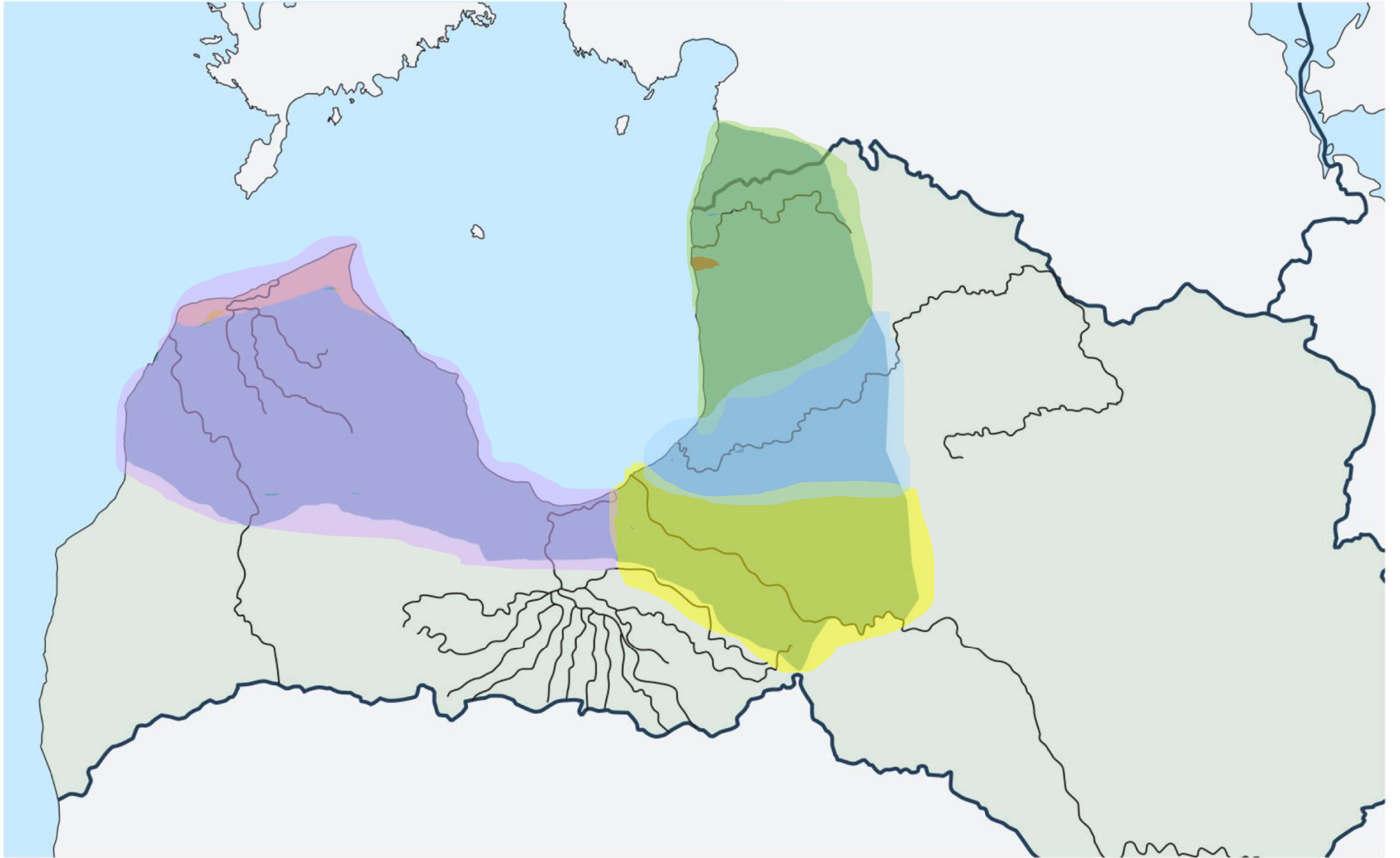


State Research programme «Developing Livonian Language Resources and Research to Support Learning and Use»

Livonians

- **Livonians are indigenous people of Latvia**, Livonian is a Finnic language.
- **Livonians formed as ethnicity over 1000 years ago** and used to inhabit large parts of contemporary Latvia.
- **Livonians have participated in consolidation of Latvians** leaving significant footprint in Latvian language, culture and identity.
- At the same time **Livonians have preserved their language and heritage up until today.**





Lībiešu krasts

0 5 km

- Oviši/ Paņikmō Lībiešu zvejniekiem latviskie un lībiskie nosaukumi
- Lībiešu krasta josla

BALTIJAS
JŪRA



* Kolka bāka

Kolkasrags
Lībiešu kultūras centrs
Kolka/ Kūolka

Mazirbe/ Irē
Lībiešu lautas nams
Slīteres nacionālais parks

Talsus novads

Ventspils novads

Rīgas
jūras
līcis



Legal framework: general

- **Livonian status** as Latvia's indigenous nation **is set by the law** “On Free Development of Latvia's National and Ethnic Groups and Their Right to Cultural Autonomy” (1991), “Official Language Law” (1999), “Law on Latvian Historical Lands” (2021)
- According to Official language law **Latvia has 3 domestic languages with officially status: 1) state language Latvian, 2) variety of state language – Latgalian written language, 3) indigenous Livonian language; and minority languages.** Traditional minorities are generally considered Lithuanian, Estonian, Polish, Jewish, Roma, Belorussian and Russian. From historical perspective – German.



Legal framework: place names

- Article 18 of the State Language Law (1999) states that: “In the Republic of Latvia **names of places are to be made and used in the state language**”, with an exception: “(4) **In the area of the Livonian Coast names of places**, as well as the names of agencies, community organisations, businesses, and events in this area **are created and used also in Livonian**”.
- The Place Name Information Guidelines (2012) state that “**place names in the territories historically inhabited by the Livonians are also to be in Livonian and must correspond to Livonian language norms**”.



Legal framework: place names

Law of Latvian Historical Lands (2021), 4. Obligations of state and municipal institutions:

- (7) State and respective municipalities ensure preservation of the identity and cultural-historical environment of Latvia's indigenous people – Livonians (..) including (..) introduction and usage in the environment place names in Livonian.



Collection and research

With few exceptions place names have generally been collected as part of creation of lexicographical collections and publications.

- A broader collection of place names has taken place in 1960s by Livonian language activist Pētõr Damberg
- 2020–2023 – Fundamental and Applied Research Project “Documenting and Mapping Livonian Place Names and Creating an Official Place Name Register”, No. LZP-2019/1-0240
- Since 2024 – byproduct of other research projects and initiatives, as well as standardisation and need-based development




Collection and research

- Database of Livonian place names available at **Livonian.tech** (1566 place names)

01 Words 02 Places 03 Learning materials English Login

Places

Livonian Enter keyword... Search



A map of the Livonian region showing various place names in blue text. The map covers the area from the Baltic Sea to the east and from the Gulf of Riga to the south. Labeled places include Kuresār, Pārnov, Vijandi, Tartu, Kīnõ, Piškisalāts, Sūr mer, Rūnõ, Limbaž, Vānta, Piški mer, Toraid, Piltõn, Sasmaga, Kuldīg, Kāndab, Letmõ, Skrundõ, Dūobõl, Ikskita, Liepõ, Krustpil, Ladgal, Māmõl, Leišmõ, Kaun, Viln, and Kensberg. The Baltic Sea is labeled to the west and south.

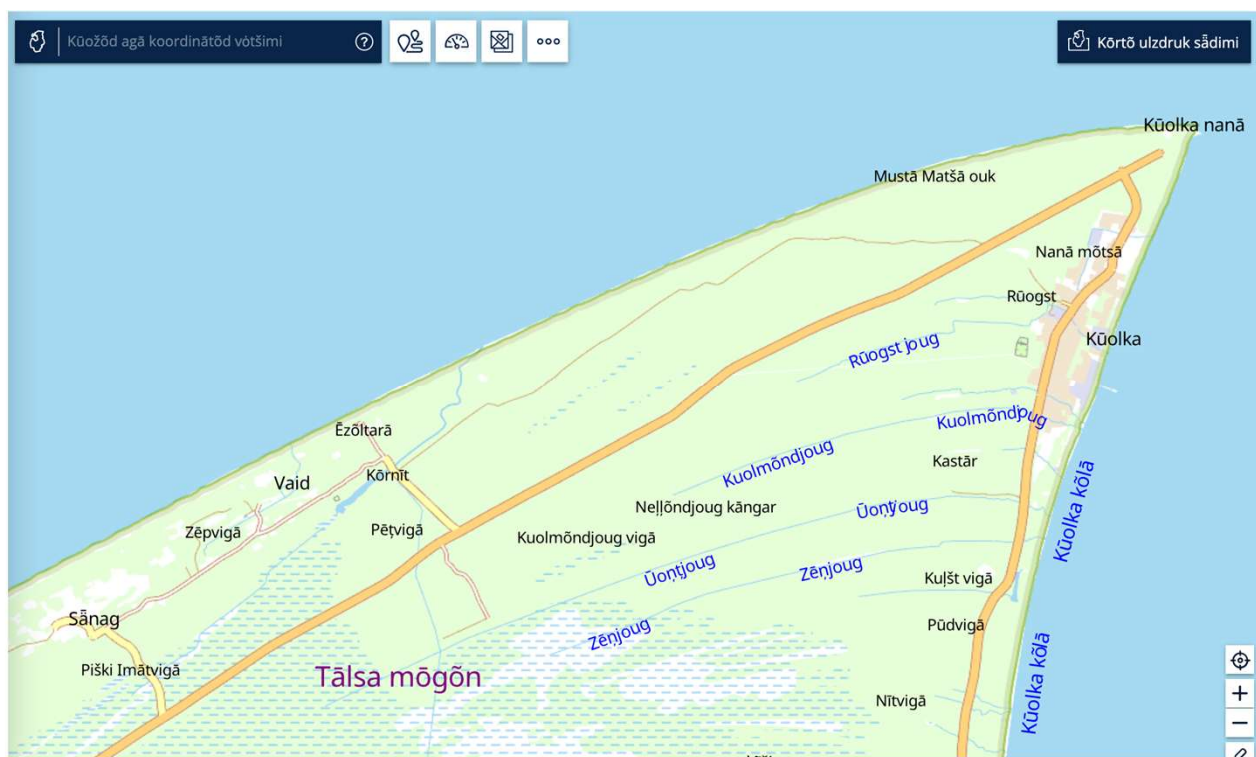
LIVONIAN / Places 01 Words 02 Places 03 Learning materials English Login

Livonian al* Search

- **Alāb** (Alāb) place name (sēta) 247
Sēta celta ap 1925. gadu, tajā pašā laikā dots vārds. Alabi saistīti ar lībiešu Breinkopfu dzimtu. Tur 1930. gados dzīvoja tālbraucēja stūrmaņa Didriķa Breinkopfa vecākais dēls, lībietis Alfrēds Breinkopfs, ar ģimeni. Alfrēds bija mācītājs jūrskolā, tomēr par jūras braucēju nekļuva. Viņš uzcēla Alabu māju un strādāja uz dzelzceļa. Ģimene 1944. gadā devās bēgļu gaitās un vēlāk nokļuva Kanādā.
↑ Sīkrōg
- **Alāb** (Alāb) place name (sēta) 247
Kōrand nim Kuoštrōgõl. Sētas nosaukums Košragā.
Māja celta pēc 1. pasaules kara. 1935. gadā tajā dzīvoja lībiete Ģerde Skadiņa (dz. Gūtmane, 1858), kas bija arī lībiešu folkloras teicēja. 1980. gados mājas vairs nebija.
↑ Kuoštrōg
- **Alāb** (Alāb) place name (sēta) 247
Kōrand nim Pitrōgõl, pandõd immõr 1925. āigast. Sētas nosaukums Pitragā, ielikts ap 1925. gadu.
1935. gada tautskaites sarakstā Pitragā ir Vitolu sēta, kurā tolaik dzīvoja lībiete Rozenbergs Zete (dz. Zariņa, 1882) ar dēlu Rozenbergu Edgaru (dz. 1913).

Collection and research

- Livonian place names also available on a special layer of **BalticMaps.eu** along with Livonian interface



LETMŌ IĻĪSKŪOL
LĪVŌD
INSTITŪT



Use of Livonian place names

- First bilingual (Latvian/Livonian sign installed at the border of Talsi municipality on February 20th 2023.



LETMŌ IĻĪSKŪOL
LĪVŌD
INSTITŪT



Use of Livonian place names

- Extensive changing and installation of bilingual signage on the Livonian Coast launched since the end of 2023 and is ongoing.



LETMŌ IĻĪSKŪOL
LĪVŌD
INSTITŪT



Use of Livonian place names

- Bilingual signage installed on state-owned roads (2023–2025); municipal roads in Ventspils county followed (2025).

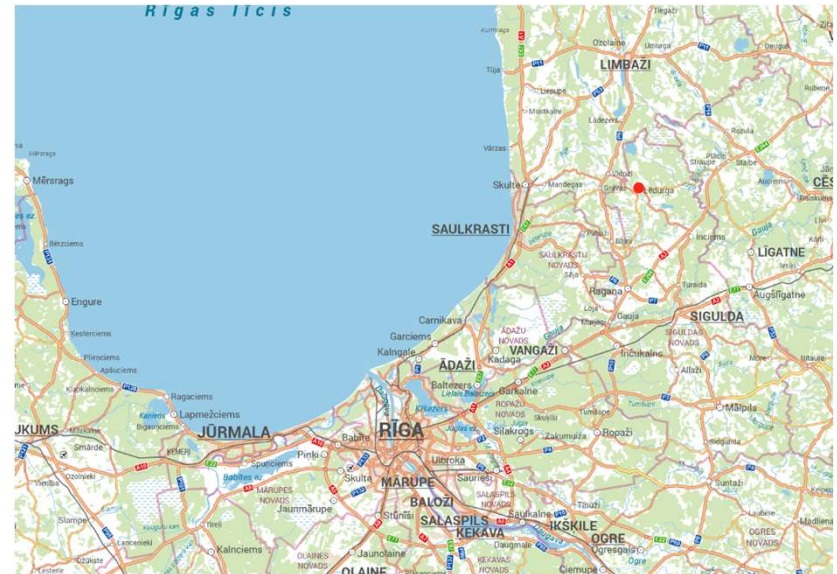


LETMŌ IĻĪSKŪOL
LĪVŌD
INSTITŪT



Use of Livonian place names

- First bilingual sign installed by Sigulda county in Vidzeme Livonian areas (2025).



LETMŌ IĻĪSKŪOL
LĪVŌD
INSTITŪT



Use of Livonian place names: challenges

- **Livonian standard language is based on Courland Livonian, which differs from Vidzeme Livonian, also by orthography** (lvC *Pivākilā* versus lvV *Püög* ‘Svētciems’; lvC *Siepākilā* versus *Sepķul* ‘Pāle’, lvC *Limbaž* versus lvV *Lemmistnīn* ‘Limbaži’; lvC *Aḡā joug* ~ LvV ***Aḡjoug*** ‘Aḡe river’)
- **Livonian Language Commission (2024)** as potential handler of issues. Recommendation decision – **referring to the Livonian Coast usage of place names in Livonian preferred instead of Latvian names** (already applied to some Estonian sources).



Use of Livonian names: new challenges

- In 2025 **review of legislation** to remove obstacles for Livonian language use (including geographical names) initiated by the Board of development on Latvian Historical Lands, State Chancellory and Parliament – considers legal regulation of language use; use of special characters in state-administered data systems (*õ, ȭ, ä, ǟ, đ, ʃ* etc)
- Principles for introduction of new place names in the Livonian Coast (Livonian>Latvian; e.g. Liv *Īlmaval* > Lt *Īlmavali* pro Lt *Pasaules gaisma*).
- **Need for creation of additional registries identified** for 1) place names in Livonian and Latgalian outside the areas; 2) official names of organisations and institutions in Livonian and Latgalian (e.g. University of Latvia).





LEŅMŌ IĻĻISKŪOL
LĪVŌD
INSTITŪT



Thank you! | Tienū!





LEŅMŌ IĻĻISKŪOL
LĪVŌD
INSTITŪT



Brief on International Work Regarding Indigenous Place Names

Valts Ernštreits

University of Latvia Livonian Institute



State Research programme «Developing Livonian Language
Resources and Research to Support Learning and Use»

UNGEGN and Indigenous place names

UNGEGN Strategy 4: Culture, heritage and language recognition

UNGEGN Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage:

- “...Recognize that **geographical names are a source of identity...and support indigenous, regional and/or minority group’s language revitalization and preservation...**”

UNGEGN Focus Group on Indigenous Geographical Names:

- “Aims to support **international promotion and recognition of Indigenous and minority language geographical names**” and support Member States in associated naming practices.



UN Alignment

- Article 13 of **UNDRIP** specifically refers to place names:
 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and **to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.**
 2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.



UN Alignment

- UNGEGN members and communities are actively supporting Indigenous place names and languages – Strategic Plan priority, working group on cultural heritage, focus group on Indigenous geographical names.
- UNGEGN Decision 4/2025/17 established a liaison to facilitate alignment with UNPFII, IDIL, UNESCO, recognizing the ties between language and place names
- **Collaboration is already taking place** (e.g. global survey); presentation on UNGEGN focus group on Indigenous geographical names planned on next IDIL meeting on 12th May.
- Opportunities for possible future alignment: **UNPFII / UNGEGN 2027**





LEŅMŌ IĻĻISKŪOL
LĪVŌD
INSTITŪT



Thank you! | Tienū!

