

Freedom in the World 2016 - Latvia

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Freedom Status: Free

Aggregate Score: 86

Freedom Rating: 2.0

Political Rights: 2

Civil Liberties: 2

Quick Facts

Capital: Riga

Population: 1,978,454

GDP/capita: \$16,037.80

Press Freedom Status: Free

Net Freedom Status: N/A

OVERVIEW

In December 2015, Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma of the Unity party resigned, following serious internal strife among the parties that comprised Latvia's governing coalition. At the year's end, the governing parties had not nominated a new prime minister. Separately, in June the Latvian parliament elected a new president, Raimonds Vējonis, of the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS). He previously served as defense minister and environment minister.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine continued to exacerbate the existing social and political divide between the country's ethnic Latvians and its sizable ethnic Russian minority. The division was also aggravated by resilient socioeconomic inequality between the groups, with unemployment higher among ethnic Russians than ethnic Latvians.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 35 / 40 (+1)

A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12

The Latvian constitution provides for a unicameral, 100-seat parliament, whose members are elected to four-year terms. The parliament elects the president in a secret-ballot vote; the president serves up to two four-year terms. The prime minister is nominated by the president and approved by the parliament. Recent parliamentary elections have generally been considered free and fair. However, there were reports of vote buying during the 2014 parliamentary elections, resulting in the initiation of seven criminal investigations; at least five people were subsequently convicted in the fall of 2015.

The 2014 parliamentary elections saw a victory by the ruling, conservative coalition, which is comprised of the Unity party, ZZS, and the nationalist National Alliance. Together the three parties took 58 percent of the vote. Harmony Center, which represents the interests of Latvia's ethnic Russians as an alliance of the Socialist Party (LSP) and the Social Democratic Party (TSP), took 23 percent of the vote, compared to 28 percent in 2010. However, it still won more votes than any other single party, with one more seat in the legislature than second-place finisher Unity. Harmony is chaired by Riga's mayor, Nils Ušakovs.

Straujuma, of Unity, was confirmed as prime minister in early 2014 and remained in the post following parliamentary elections later that year. However, in December 2015, she announced her resignation, due to disagreements among coalition partners and a lack of support from Unity. Her successor had not been nominated at year's end.

In June 2015, ZZS, backed by Unity, nominated defense minister and former environment minister Vējonis to the presidency. (The incumbent, Andris Bērziņš of ZZS, had announced in April that he would not seek another term.) Voting lasted five rounds and tested the stability of the coalition government, as Vējonis's main competitor, Egils Levits, a judge for the European Court of Justice, was nominated by the National Alliance.

There has been ongoing debate on electoral reforms. In late 2014, parliament gave its initial support for direct presidential elections, referring the proposal to a parliamentary committee for further discussion. The change would require a constitutional amendment, a procedure requiring the support of two-thirds of the parliament. In February 2015, lawmakers dismissed a proposed amendment to hold presidential elections through open balloting in the parliament, rather than via the current secret ballot procedure.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 14 / 16

Latvia's political parties organize and compete freely. Latvian political candidates cannot run as independents, and those who belonged to communist or pro-Soviet organizations after 1991 may not hold public office. Harmony Center and its predecessors, mostly supported by Latvia's Russian-speaking population, have never been invited to participate in a coalition government.

Residents who do not hold Latvian citizenship may not vote (including in local elections), hold public office, work in government offices, or establish political parties. Approximately 12 percent of Latvia's residents are noncitizens; most are ethnic Russians.

Under 2013 changes to Latvia's citizenship law, Latvian nationals and their descendants who emigrated to other current European Union (EU) member states due to Nazi or Soviet occupation can have dual citizenship if they can speak the Latvian language and prove that they or their

ancestors lived in Latvia. Another amendment states that children of noncitizens born after August 1991 can gain Latvian citizenship if they reside in Latvia permanently and have never acquired citizenship in another state.

C. Functioning of Government: 9 / 12 (+1)

Corruption remains a problem. Latvia's Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) is tasked with fighting corruption, and it and other authorities pursued several high-profile cases in 2015. In August, Uģis Magonis, head of the state-owned Latvian railway company, was detained in connection with an alleged bribery scheme worth nearly €500,000 (\$560,000), involving a train-construction contract. In October, the Latvian Economic Police requested that the prosecutor's office begin an investigation against the Riga port authority chief, Leonīds Loginovs, as well as his deputy, for abusing their positions. In December, KNAB issued a fine against Health Minister Guntis Belēvičs for ruling in a disciplinary case in which he had a conflict of interest. Long running criminal corruption proceedings against the so-called oligarchs Aivars Lembergs and Ainārs Šlesers have stalled; in September, the general prosecutor referred the case against them back to the KNAB for further investigation. The effectiveness of KNAB itself, especially in dealing with foreign bribery, was questioned in an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report released in October, which raised "serious concerns" about the bureau's operations. The report also noted long-standing suspicions of money laundering in Latvia's financial sector.

Levels of administrative corruption have declined somewhat in recent years. Public transparency and accountability has also improved. Reforms enacted in 2012 introduced state funding of political parties and restrictions on overall party and preelection spending. In addition to these measures, in 2012, parliament amended the process to appoint judges, the prosecutor general, the KNAB director, and other positions, introducing an open vote. In 2013, the public procurement system was made more open and centralized. Latvia was ranked 40 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 51 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 15 / 16

The constitution protects freedom of the press. While Latvian media outlets publicize a wide range of political views in both Latvian and Russian, government offices and courts sometimes interfere with media outlets' and reporters' work. Libel remains a criminal offense. Past attacks against journalists, including the 2010 murder of Grigorijs Nemcovs – the publisher of *Million*, a Russian-language newspaper focusing on political corruption – remain unsolved.

Financial pressures have prompted changes in ownership or in senior editorial staff at numerous media outlets in recent years. Some outlets have been forced to merge or dramatically cut costs. In recent year, the media sector has seen the increased influence of private and state-controlled Russian media. In July 2015, parliament dismissed Ainārs Dimants, the head of the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEMMC), which both regulates broadcasting and runs public broadcasting. The move was criticized by President Vējonis, representatives of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and other actors as a politically motivated attempt to interfere with the autonomy of the NEMMC. A court overturned Dimants's dismissal in December.

Legislation introduced in 2013 banned the display of Soviet and Nazi symbols at public events. The government does not restrict the internet or monitor private online communications without obtaining the proper legal authority.

Freedom of religion is generally respected. However, in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis, social pressure on Muslims has increased. Some politicians have suggested that Latvia should not accept Muslim refugees because perceived differences in values will prevent them from integrating into Latvian society. In September, the Riga police interfered with a group of Muslims praying in one of city's courtyards, and fined the Latvian Islamic Cultural Center for holding an event without permission from the relevant authorities.

In June 2015, parliament adopted a law, initiated by Harmony Center, mandating that schools provide children a "moral education" that coincides with the values of the constitution, including traditional views of marriage and family life.

Academic freedom is generally respected. Private discussion is open and free.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are protected by law, and the government generally respects these rights in practice. The government does not restrict the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Workers may establish trade unions, strike, and engage in collective bargaining.

F. Rule of Law: 12 / 16

While judicial independence is generally respected, inefficiency, politicization, and corruption continue to be problems, and many citizens distrust both the police and the courts, according to recent polling by Transparency International. Lengthy pretrial detention remains a concern, and law enforcement officials have allegedly abused prisoners. Prisons continue to suffer from overcrowding, and many detainees have poor access to health care.

Roma face discrimination, as do LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. Latvian laws do not offer protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. In March 2015, several dozen people held a protest in Riga against a planned LGBT pride event. Under heavy security, the event took place peacefully in June.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 12 / 16

Citizens and noncitizens may travel freely within the country and internationally. Latvia in recent years has implemented some reforms to improve the environment for businesses and workers, though corruption represents a major impediment to many business activities.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men, but often face employment and wage discrimination. Domestic violence is not frequently reported, and police do not always take meaningful action when it is. Same-sex marriage was banned in 2005.

Income inequality in Latvia is high, and the welfare system is inadequate. According to Eurostat, around 31 percent of Latvia's population was at risk of social exclusion or poverty in 2015, one of the highest rates in the EU. Unemployment is higher among ethnic Russians than ethnic Latvians. Poor economic conditions and high unemployment have prompted many young, highly educated people to leave Latvia. While the country's 2011 census showed that Latvia lost some 13 percent of its population between 2000 and 2011, emigration has slowed somewhat in recent years.

The U.S. State Department has praised Latvia for prosecuting cases of sham marriages that leave women vulnerable to sex or labor trafficking, saying its efforts helped raise awareness of the issue across Europe. However, the department found efforts to prevent other forms of human trafficking lacking, noting that there has not been a labor trafficking investigation in Latvia since 2009, nor were there any sex trafficking convictions in Latvia in 2015.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year