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2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Latvia

LATVIA (Tier 2)

The Government of Latvia does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period; therefore, Latvia remained on Tier 2. These efforts included prosecuting significantly more traffickers, identifying and providing services to more trafficking victims, and allocating more funding to two NGOs assisting victims in the state-funded, NGO-run assistance program. Additionally, the government amended the criminal procedure law to increase protections for child victims of crime during the judicial process, including trafficking. They also limited repetitive interviews and involved a psychologist to prevent re-traumatization. Furthermore, the government participated in several international projects and programs, including an awareness campaign targeting Ukrainians living in Latvia, a population vulnerable to trafficking. The government and contracted NGOs provided anti-trafficking awareness campaigns and trainings for police and judges in regions throughout Latvia. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Courts did not convict any traffickers under the trafficking statute. The Police did not proactively investigate trafficking crimes or screen for trafficking indicators. Finally, the government remained without a centralized National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which observers reported at times hindered coordination among stakeholders and the provision of assistance to all potential victims.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Increase countrywide efforts, especially outside Riga, to investigate trafficking crimes and prosecute and convict traffickers under the trafficking statute (Section 154-1 of the criminal law) rather than for crimes with lesser penalties.
- Proactively identify trafficking victims by screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, including children in institutions, migrant workers, asylum-seekers, and third country nationals.
- Increase the availability of long-term protection services – including housing, counseling, and economic assistance – for all trafficking victims, including those who have completed the state-funded assistance program by partnering with civil society service providers.
- Ensure all victims know their rights, the services available to them, the implications of being formally identified as a trafficking victim, and subsequent possibilities for state protection.
- Increase anti-trafficking training for law enforcement, particularly regional police officers, on victim-centered and trauma-informed techniques, collecting evidence, and understanding all forms of trafficking and psychological coercion.
- Develop and implement a centralized NRM to include guidance on identification, referral, and information exchange among stakeholders.
- Broaden legislative parameters to allow all potential foreign victims, regardless of whether authorities classify them as formally identified trafficking victims, sufficient time in country to consider assisting authorities in criminal proceedings.
- Expand efforts to educate officials involved in judicial proceedings, particularly prosecutors and judges, on all forms of trafficking and the application of anti-trafficking laws.
- Increase law enforcement personnel trained to effectively investigate trafficking cases.
- Establish an accessible and efficient mechanism for applying and receiving victim compensation and train legal professionals on its use.
- Appoint an independent national rapporteur to monitor and assess anti-trafficking activities and policies.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.

Sections 154-1 and 154-2 of Latvia's criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of up to eight years' imprisonment for crimes involving adult victims and between three

and 12 years' imprisonment for crimes involving child victims. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. Judges and prosecutors had the power to reclassify cases from Section 154-1 to other crimes. Prosecutors could charge trafficking crimes under Section 164, which criminalized exploiting vulnerability or using deceit to involve individuals in commercial sex; Section 165, which criminalized benefiting from the "prostitution" of others; and Section 165-1, which criminalized the transfer of individuals for the purposes of sexual exploitation. All these provisions prescribed penalties of up to five years' imprisonment, community service, or a fine. The penalties were increased if the crimes involved children or other aggravating circumstances. Law enforcement officials reportedly often investigated and charged suspected traffickers for these crimes, rather than trafficking, which required a higher standard of proof.

In 2024, authorities investigated two new trafficking cases (both labor trafficking, including one forced criminality) under Section 154-1, compared with three investigations in 2023 and nine in 2022. Authorities prosecuted 13 defendants under Section 154-1, a significant increase from four in 2023. Courts did not convict any traffickers using Section 154-1, a notable decrease from five convictions in 2023. Under Section 165-1, authorities investigated four cases, prosecuted four defendants, and did not convict any perpetrators. By comparison, in 2023, authorities investigated zero cases, prosecuted zero defendants, and convicted four perpetrators. Additionally, authorities investigated two cases under Section 164, prosecuted three defendants, and convicted one perpetrator who received a suspended sentence. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes. Latvian authorities continued to cooperate with European counterparts in 2024 on an extradition, judicial assistance requests, and trafficking-related investigations, including a joint operation with Poland, Czech Republic, and Ukraine to combat use of Ukrainian nationals in commercial sex.

The Directorate for Combating Serious and Serial Organized Crime investigated regional, inter-regional, and transnational organized criminal groups engaged in human trafficking and sex crimes against children. The Riga Regional Police also investigated sex crimes against children, including sex trafficking. Regional offices could initiate trafficking investigations that did not include organized crime; each regional office had one contact person for human trafficking. The State Police also maintained a dedicated cyber-security unit and cooperated with a Latvian organization promoting a safer internet to detect online sex trafficking. The Multidisciplinary Prosecutor's Office and the Riga District Court Prosecutor's Office maintained responsibility for prosecuting trafficking crimes; however, both offices worked on other types of cases in addition to trafficking. The government abolished the Multidisciplinary Prosecutor's

Office in October 2024, transferring prosecutors who had previously worked on human trafficking cases to a variety of regional and specialized trafficking units. The Riga East Prosecutor's office was responsible for prosecutorial functions under Article 154.1, Article 165.1, and Article 165.1, while the Riga Court District Prosecutor's Office coordinated prosecutions under 154.1. NGOs reported police outside of Riga had limited resources to investigate trafficking crimes and difficulty identifying victims. Further, trafficking cases often involve financial crimes, such as money laundering, which at times resulted in assignment to the economic unit, rather than the human trafficking unit.

Limited resources within law enforcement, lengthy trials, and knowledge gaps impeded progress. The State Police continued to operate with limited staff, affecting pre-trial criminal proceedings, including for trafficking cases. Furthermore, previous reforms in the court structure and the turnover of judges continued to affect judicial proceedings, resulting in prolonged trials in some criminal cases, including trafficking cases. Reports persisted that police, prosecutors, and judges retained a limited understanding of trafficking, and judges lacked qualifications and experience in reviewing trafficking cases. Experts noted the need for more training for authorities, particularly on applying anti-trafficking laws, working with victims, and understanding psychological coercion. The government provided a range of trafficking-related trainings and seminars for police, border guards, social workers, prosecutors, and judges, including on types of trafficking, financial investigations, online investigations, and challenges associated with investigations and prosecutions.

PROTECTION

The government increased victim protection efforts.

In 2024, the government identified 38 trafficking victims (16 sex trafficking and 22 labor trafficking), an increase from 22 victims identified in 2023. Authorities identified at least 26 foreign nationals and nine Latvian citizens, of which traffickers exploited four in country and five abroad. Authorities identified four child trafficking victims, compared to one in 2023. Cabinet Regulation No. 889 established procedures for identifying trafficking victims and their eligibility to receive state-funded assistance. Police, prosecutors, or an NGO-led panel of experts could formally identify victims; based on that decision, authorities then referred victims to the state-funded assistance program. The government remained without a centralized NRM. As part of the previous NAP, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) was responsible for developing an NRM to define coordination of anti-trafficking efforts and include exchange of information among stakeholders on victim identification, protection, and referral to services. The government previously suspended development of an NRM due to lack of overall support and belief that the current system worked well.

Nevertheless, NGOs reported law enforcement institutions had limited capacity to identify victims, particularly labor trafficking victims, among vulnerable groups, including foreign nationals and individuals in commercial sex. The State Border Guard (SBG) maintained procedures for the identification and referral of potential victims among asylum-seekers and migrants and conducted training on applying those procedures. In recent years, Latvia experienced a surge in illegal migration flows, facilitated and often directed by Belarusian authorities. In 2023, the government amended the law providing harsher penalties for individuals crossing the border illegally. An international institution expressed concern that the amendments effectively authorized “pushbacks.” According to this organization, such “pushbacks” involved a practice that potentially increased a person’s vulnerability to trafficking, exacerbated distrust of foreign officials, and inhibited reporting of any exploitation experienced. The government reported SBG authorities utilized procedures for identifying trafficking victims among foreigners allowed to enter Latvia on humanitarian grounds but often struggled to identify potential victims.

The government continued to contract two NGOs to assist victims in the state-funded, NGO-run assistance program, providing €200,993 (\$209,149) in 2024, a notable increase from €153,924 (\$160,170) in 2023. All 38 victims identified in 2024 received assistance from the 180-day state-funded assistance program, which offered victims counseling, housing, legal representation, medical and psychological assistance, psycho-social support, and reintegration services. State-funded, NGO-run shelters were available to trafficking victims throughout the country; however, the government did not operate any trafficking-specific shelters and provided most victims accommodations in apartments or co-operative hotels. NGOs believed, given the small number of victims identified, this was the most optimal system as it allowed services to be customized to the victims’ needs, particularly victims from vulnerable groups, such as individuals in commercial sex or experiencing addictions or homelessness. NGOs continued to note the need for long-term assistance, such as housing, for victims after completion of the state-funded program. Government regulations regarding assistance to trafficking victims limited state-funded services to six months, although victims whose cases went to trial received assistance – mostly legal counseling – for the duration of the legal proceedings. Victims who cooperated with law enforcement received 150 state-funded legal or psychological consultations for up to one year after they completed the state-funded assistance program. For child trafficking victims, the government provided an additional 10 psychologist consultations or up to 60 days of state-funded rehabilitation in addition to the state-funded assistance program.

Identifying child trafficking victims remained a challenge for authorities, who identified six child victims in the past three years. Government

officials acknowledged that children living in state institutions, such as orphanages, were vulnerable to sex trafficking; however, officials did not comprehensively screen this population for trafficking. Observers maintained trafficking was underreported and stated further education of staff at state institutions could lead to increased understanding of risks and identification of child victims. Recognizing this need, for the fourth consecutive year, the Ombudsman's Office informed children at state institutions about trafficking and trained legal professionals and psychologists on identifying child trafficking victims and recognizing trafficking indicators. Experts called for an improved child protection system to increase the identification of and assistance for child victims, particularly children with behavioral conditions and in state institutions. The Ministry of Welfare continued the use of the Barnahus interviewing method – a coordinated, multidisciplinary, child-sensitive approach to preventing re-traumatization during investigations and court proceedings – to respond to child witnesses and victims of violence, including trafficking, throughout the country. In 2024, the government amended the criminal procedure law to increase protections for child victims of crime during the judicial process, including trafficking. They also limited repetitive interviews and involved a psychologist to prevent re-traumatization.

Latvian law allowed formally identified foreign victims with no legal residence to receive residence permits. In 2024, the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs issued two temporary residence permits to a trafficking victim. Latvian law also allowed a 30-day reflection period to trafficking victims. Experts expressed concern that the right to a reflection period was conditional on formal identification and recommended amending legislation to broaden the parameters and allow all potential foreign victims, regardless of whether they claimed formal status as trafficking victims, sufficient time to consider assisting authorities in criminal proceedings. Experts also expressed concern that officials did not adequately inform victims from vulnerable groups of their rights, services available to them, implications of being formally identified as a trafficking victim, or subsequent possibilities for state protection. To protect victims and witnesses who agreed to provide testimony, Latvian courts could apply legal provisions, such as closed court hearings. Additionally, courts had digital video capabilities and audio recording equipment to protect victims and witnesses from trafficker-victim confrontation. However, experts reported traffickers continued to intimidate victims, and authorities provided uneven levels of protection during court proceedings. The government provided legal aid to victims who participated in criminal proceedings. Trafficking victims were eligible to receive restitution from traffickers in a criminal case, file a civil suit against traffickers, and receive compensation from the government. However, the government could deduct any debts owed to the state from compensation amounts. In 2024, four victims received state compensation, totaling €5,040 (\$5,244). While victims could file for

compensation from traffickers, some experts expressed concerns that access to compensation remained sporadic with a complex application process that often required legal assistance.

PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts.

The MOI functioned as the national coordinator for preventing human trafficking, ensured strategic planning and evaluation of government policy, and led the anti-trafficking interagency working group. The government continued to implement its expired 2021-2023 NAP. The government continued to develop a new NAP, which remained pending at the end of the reporting period. Most funding for anti-trafficking activities came from the national budget, but the government did not report the total amount spent in 2024. Despite the MOI's role of national coordination, experts recommended the government appoint an independent national rapporteur to monitor and assess anti-trafficking activities and policies and propose independent opinions on issues. The government conducted several awareness campaigns on trafficking issues and maintained public facing websites with trafficking information. In 2024, the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, working in conjunction with an NGO and a digital marketing agency, conducted a two-week campaign to prevent Ukrainian civilians living in Latvia from becoming victims of human trafficking. The government funded NGO-run hotlines to report trafficking crime and assist victims; the hotlines reported calls resulted in three referrals to the state-funded social assistance program. Child protection services maintained a helpline and website with information about safety measures for child victims of abuse, including trafficking. Government representatives continued to participate in the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) anti-trafficking task force, working to strengthen and improve anti-trafficking policies in the region, consolidate expertise from the national level with the international level, and exchange information on efforts and best practices. Through the CBSS task force, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania participated in a project aimed at strengthening the capacity of NGO professionals to assist and identify trafficking and improve the cooperation of NGOs in the Baltic States; the project involved national studies, the publication of an e-booklet, and a training event.

Latvian labor law required employers to regulate working conditions for employees posted abroad. The law also prohibited recruitment fees; however, recruitment agencies often imposed legally permissible fees for document preparation. In 2024, the government monitored the activities of licensed employment agencies and canceled 61 licenses for agencies in violation (81 in 2023). The law required employers to provide a written contract and minimum wage to employees or face penalties. Labor regulations required agencies to provide job-related information to

employees in a language they understood. Through an information campaign, multiple ministries and NGOs provided information in foreign languages on labor trafficking to foreigners planning to work in Latvia. In 2024, the Ombudsperson, in cooperation with the MOI and Procurement Supervision bureau developed guidelines for preventing labor trafficking in public procurement and conducted a seminar for authorities that issue tenders and their contractors. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Latvia, and traffickers exploit victims from Latvia abroad. Vulnerable groups include single women with limited education, children from disadvantaged families, students, individuals in commercial sex, and unemployed adults. Traffickers exploit Latvian women and girls in sex trafficking in Latvia and other European countries. Women from Eastern Europe and Central Asia are at risk of sex trafficking in Latvia. Latvian women coerced into brokered marriages in Western Europe are vulnerable to sex trafficking, domestic servitude, and forced labor; the husbands in the brokered marriages are often third country nationals from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan who use the marriages to obtain EU residency benefits. Many of these women have mental health conditions or once lived in state institutions. Police report a growing number of children being recruited for sham marriages or commercial sex, from disadvantaged families, or those with mental health conditions. Children in state institutions, including orphanages, are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. According to an international organization study, approximately 20 percent of children are targeted online. Traffickers recruit Latvian men and women to work in Germany and Poland and, once there, confiscate their identity documents, refuse to sign employment contracts, and withhold wages. Reports indicate incidents of forced labor in fish-processing companies with employers placing misleading job advertisements on the internet to recruit victims and then failing to provide employment contracts, restricting their mobility, and withholding salaries or overtime pay. Labor trafficking cases involving foreign nationals from Tajikistan and India increased in 2024. However, NGOs note labor trafficking remains underreported because institutions do not know how to identify victims, especially among third-country nationals. Guest workers, particularly men, from India, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine, most of whom arrive in Latvia legally with *Schengen* or student visas and mainly work in the agriculture, construction, food, forestry, and hospitality industries, are also vulnerable to labor trafficking. The State Labor Inspectorate reports increasing numbers of undocumented workers in the construction and transportation industries, including taxi drivers from Uzbekistan and

Tajikistan, are at risk of trafficking. Traffickers increasingly use the internet, social media, and instant messaging applications to recruit women from Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine for commercial sex in Latvia. Migrants from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia at the Latvia-Belarus border are vulnerable to trafficking. Separately, undocumented migrants from Algeria, Pakistan, Russia, and Vietnam, including potential trafficking victims, transit Latvia en route to Western Europe. Reports indicate a rise in traffickers exploiting individuals who were homeless or experiencing mental health conditions or addiction, particularly in forced begging or forced criminal activity in Western Europe. Nearly 50,000 Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russia-Ukraine war have arrived in Latvia; this population remains highly vulnerable to trafficking.

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