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Freedom House (Author)

Nations in Transit 2024 - Latvia

Consolidated Democracy

80

/ 100

Democracy Percentage 79.76 / 100

Democracy Score 5.79 / 7

Last Year's Democracy Percentage & Status

80 / 100 Consolidated Democracy

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic. [See the methodology.](#)

Author

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Score Changes in 2024

- No changes in 2024.

Executive Summary

In 2023, much of the decision-making taking place in Latvia was still deeply influenced by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Latvia's foreign policy, as outlined in the annual foreign policy report, places primary emphasis on ongoing endeavors to assist Ukraine through military, humanitarian, and diplomatic means.¹ From the onset of the invasion, Latvia has been at the forefront of nations supporting Ukraine, allocated funding exceeding 1 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).² According to the latest Eurobarometer survey, conducted in the

autumn of 2023, Latvian residents see the war in Ukraine as the most important problem facing the European Union (EU).³

However, the war in Ukraine has also been the main driving force of internal affairs, from the reintroduction of compulsory military service in Latvia, to consolidating the media space on national security grounds, to prioritizing military spending over regional development, to a renewed focus on Latvian language as a means of belonging and expressing loyalty. Worries around the loyalty of Russian-speakers, and how to address those fears, will be evident in almost all sections of the report. These suspicion was recently affirmed for many Latvians when a member of European Parliament (MEP) from Latvia was outed as a Russian intelligence agent.⁴ Though developments in 2023 have not warranted score changes, there remain many issues to monitor in the coming year, arguably most important among them the questions around Russian-speakers' integration, resulting measures from the Latvian side, Russian-speakers' reactions, and Russia's involvement on behalf of the Russian-speaking diaspora will be the most significant.

The Russian-speaking populace in Latvia is sizable, estimated at nearly 30 percent of the population.⁵ As a result of the war in Ukraine, data is showing growing ethnic tensions between speakers of Latvian and Russian, with 37 per cent of Russian speakers surveyed in April 2023 saying that in their own personal experience the attitude of Latvians toward the Russian-speaking population has significantly worsened, up from 19 percent in 2022.⁶ A 2023 study on Russian speakers' civic engagement found that the most effective tool for alleviating ethnic tensions is constructive dialogue between speakers of Latvian and Russian, whether it addressed wider societal issues or problems affecting their municipality or neighborhood.⁷ However, the recently approved government action plan of 2024 makes no mention of specifically addressing social cohesion issues or promoting dialogue. It proposes a "Latvian and inclusive Latvia," by focusing on integration through a Latvian-language environment.⁸ However, the swift transition—with little to no consultation with Russian-speakers—to an all-Latvian language environment, from a country that had previously permitted two linguistic bubbles to coexist, is giving propaganda opportunities to Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin has called these Latvian measures "de-Russification" efforts and has issued warnings of "repercussions" in response to Latvia's approach toward its Russian-speaking minority.⁹ As such, in the coming year ethnic tensions and how Russia will take advantage of the growing uneasiness between Latvia's two major linguistic groups will be an important issue to watch.

Further, the issue of illegal migration is becoming more acute. In 2023, 13,863 individuals were stopped from illegally crossing the Latvian-Belarusian border—more than double 2022's figure of 5,286 thwarted illegal crossing attempts—and 428 were granted entry for humanitarian

reasons.¹⁰ The war in Ukraine, coupled with the increase in illegal migration, has forced Latvia to adopt amendments to the State Border Law and the State Border Guard Law, which effectively allow "pushbacks" in which migrants who have crossed the border are collectively forced back over and limit the right of individuals to seek asylum if they have crossed the border in an irregular manner.¹¹ The Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner,¹² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),¹³ and Amnesty International¹⁴ have all criticized these amendments as violating international human rights law. However, the European Commission has defended Latvia's decision based on the EU's need to protect its border in the current security environment.¹⁵

The economic situation leaves much to be desired. According to the 2023 Central Statistics Bureau (CSB) population survey, 22.5 percent of the population were at risk of poverty in 2022, showing no improvement from 2021.¹⁶ Inflation was high in 2023, and GDP growth miniscule.¹⁷ The high price of resources used for energy, increases in production costs, and weakening demand in foreign markets all negatively impacted the Latvian economy. Energy independence was a major priority for Latvia in 2023, as Latvia stopped importing Russian natural gas and oil, and is in the final phase of disconnecting from the Russian electricity network. Though the economy reoriented itself away from Russia in theory, increasing trade volume with Central Asian countries has raised suspicions of efforts by the business sector to circumvent sanctions.¹⁸ Fatigue with the war in Ukraine, in combination with economic hardships and responses by the business sector to the current environment, are issues to watch in 2024.

More positively, 2023 also saw the Saeima (parliament) finally establish civil unions through a series of legislative amendments, providing social and economic protection for unmarried and same-sex couples.¹⁹ The legislation is nearly 20 years in the making, as the Saeima has repeatedly seen various civil partnership laws introduced and rejected over the past two decades. The civil society sector, and specifically Latvia's LGBT+ movement, is owed much praise for its tenacity and for finding effective means of working with legislators.²⁰ Civil society also showed its growing capacity for self-organization and effecting change through a widely publicized protest dubbed "Democracy Is More Fragile than Porcelain," which opposed a Russian oligarch's influence in the municipality of Ogre, and a trade union protest that united 19,000 teachers in demanding higher salaries. Further, civil society and the government of Latvia have found innovative ways of working together. For example, since February 21, 2023, cars confiscated by Latvian authorities from drunk drivers are handed over to a nongovernmental organization (NGO) for delivery to the Ukrainian front.²¹ However, the representation of Latvia's Russian-speaking minority in civil society and its inclusion in dialogue regarding changes directly affecting their future wellbeing remains a shortcoming in the country's continuing democratic consolidation.

Finally, important developments in the effectiveness and public perception of anticorruption measures improved the situation around Latvia's fight against corruption in 2023. Several important pieces of legislation finally entered into force in 2023, such as the Law on Disclosure of Interest Representation—15 years in the making—which aimed to increase transparency in lobbying.²² The Latvian public's perception of corruption and anticorruption measures also improved slightly in 2023.²³ Several other amended laws, convictions secured in long-running corruption cases, and a high number of opened corruption investigations give reason for optimism that Latvia is on the right path towards tackling corruption. However, there remains much to do, and the sheer number of ongoing corruption investigations inhibits an actual score change in 2023.

At-A-Glance

National governance of Latvia is democratic and stable, with the first center-left government since the regaining of independence. Elections are free and fair. Civil society sector has achieved notable progress on LGBT+ issues with legislative amendments allowing for civil unions and has found new innovative ways of cooperating with the government in the context of the war in Ukraine. The media sector operates freely; however, publicly funded media for Russian speakers is becoming scarce. Local democratic governance has struggled with budgeting issues and mismanagement. Equality in the eyes of the law is safeguarded by the country's judiciary, but public trust in the judicial and court systems is below the EU average. New legislation and secured convictions in important corruption cases lend a positive perspective in an area where much remains to be done.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches. 6.00 / 7.00

- On September 15, the longest-serving prime minister in the history of democratic Latvia left office.²⁴ Krišjānis Kariņš of the New Unity party had served as prime minister since 2019, winning reelection to a second term in 2022. Besides the center-right New Unity, his second government coalition had included the centrist United List alliance and the right-wing National Alliance.²⁵ In announcing his resignation in August, Kariņš alleged that New Unity's coalition partners were obstructing initiatives aimed at promoting economic growth.²⁶
- Problems can be traced back to the disagreements over the state budget for 2023, which was significantly delayed due to the coalition's inability to settle on priorities.²⁷ Fractures within the coalition were also evident during the presidential elections of May 2023; after members were unable to agree upon supporting the incumbent

President Egils Levits, Levits withdrew from the contest and the United List put forward its own candidate.²⁸

- To rectify the situation, New Unity put forward as its presidential candidate the popular, veteran minister of foreign affairs, Edgars Rinkēvičs.²⁹ However, his candidacy was not supported by the two other parties in the governing coalition. On May 31, he was elected with support from two opposition parties, laying bear the disunity in the Latvian government.³⁰ He was the first openly gay head of state to serve in any EU country.³¹ Shortly after his election, survey data showed that he was regarded favorably by 48 percent of Latvia's population, while 40 percent expressed a negative view. Opinions about Rinkēvičs are highly polarized along language and income lines, with the greatest support among high-earning Latvian speakers.³²
- Following Kariņš's resignation, the Saeima on September 15 voted, 52–39, to approve a new government led by Evika Siliņa of New Unity, who became the second female Latvian prime minister. The new governing coalition joined New Unity with the centrist Union of Farmers and Greens (ZZS) and the center-left Progressives.³³ Unfortunately, the ZZS has questionable links with the Latvian oligarch Aivars Lembergs (see Corruption). The new government of Latvia has been hailed as the first center-left government since Latvia regained its independence in 1991 amid the fall of the Soviet Union.³⁴
- The year has undeniably been a difficult one for Latvian politicians. The lingering effects of Russia's war in Ukraine continued to permeate everything from the economic situation to immigration and language policy to defense sector preparations.
- On April 5, with amendments to the Law on State Defense Service, the Saeima approved the reintroduction of compulsory military service in Latvia.³⁵
- In 2023, amendments to Latvia's Immigration Law enacted by the Saeima as a means of strengthening national security in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 came into force. These amendments mandated that individuals who had previously held Latvian citizenship or noncitizen status—which had been bestowed on former Soviet citizens including many ethnic Russians, who had arrived in Latvia during the Soviet era—but had since acquired Russian citizenship must pass an official Latvian language test by September 1, 2023, in order to maintain their residency permits in Latvia.³⁶ This requirement affected approximately 17,000 individuals.³⁷
- The administration of the language exams required for extending residency permits sparked significant controversy. In July, a video taken in the Latvian city of Daugavpils, which circulated widely on

social media and later aired on Russian media channels, depicted a 74-year-old woman being carried upstairs to take the exam to secure her residency.³⁸ As of December 2023, data from the Latvian Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs suggests that 1,167 Russian citizens who have failed to comply with the new law face expulsion from Latvia.³⁹ The legal amendments have been challenged in Latvia's Constitutional Court (see Judicial Framework and Independence).

- As of September 1, some schools that had previously conducted classes in Russian were required to switch entirely to teaching in the official state language of Latvian. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this transition had been envisioned as gradual. However, in 2022, hastily enacted amendments to the Education Law and to the General Education Law mandated a faster transition to exclusive instruction in Latvian by 2025. Implementing this shift will prove challenging within the limited timeframe, especially for certain schools where many teachers lack sufficient proficiency in the Latvian language.⁴⁰
- The government's new National Security Concept of Latvia mandates that, starting in 2026, public service media funding will be allocated exclusively to content in Latvian and "languages belonging to the European cultural space."⁴¹ Consequently, this decision will leave Russian speakers without a dependable source of news and information in Russian, putting them at risk of misinformation. However, Minister of Culture Agnese Logina of the Progressives has expressed a desire to move cautiously on the issue in order to prioritize the information needs of society, including by refraining from setting specific deadlines.⁴² The situation remains one to monitor closely in the years ahead.
- During its last session of the year on December 21, the Saeima approved amendments to the Law on State Administration requiring employees of state institutions to demonstrate loyalty to the Republic of Latvia and its constitution. Those found to be publicly expressing opinions or taking actions deemed "disloyal" can face dismissal.⁴³ In practice, the law is primarily aimed at individuals expressing support for Russia in its conflict with Ukraine and, potentially, those opposing Latvian as Latvia's sole official language. The application of this law remains to be seen, with challenges in the Constitutional Court likely.
- Despite these challenges, not all developments are disheartening. In its brief tenure thus far, Siliņa's new government has managed to put forward some long-awaited initiatives aimed at promoting equality, human rights, and democracy.
- On November 9, the Saeima enacted a series of administrative measures granting legal recognition to partnerships beyond traditional marriage, including those between same-sex couples. These measures allow for the registration of civil unions and provide

certain shared entitlements to social security, pensions, and medical benefits, with the amendments set to take effect on July 1, 2024.⁴⁴ The move represents a long overdue acknowledgment of the status of same-sex couples and signifies a step towards greater tolerance for LGBT+ individuals. Opponents attempted to trigger a referendum that could overturn the amendments, but their signature-collection campaign failed to gather the necessary support, falling significantly short of the required signatures.⁴⁵

- On November 30, the Saeima endorsed the legislation needed to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention.⁴⁶ Despite years of political obstacles stemming from misinformation about its scope and purpose, support for the convention in Latvia gained momentum following the tragic murder of a woman in the city of Jēkabpils by her former husband on April 16 after months of intimidation. When Siliņa's new government took power in September, it was spurred to action by the shortcomings in Latvia's approach to domestic violence (see Judicial Framework and Independence).
- A lack of trust in governing institutions throughout Latvian society undergird the year's political turmoil and tough decisions. According to survey data from the 2023 Eurobarometer, only 25 percent of respondents expressed trust in the Saeima, while 30 percent trusted the government. Both scores are below the EU average of 33 percent of respondents trusting their parliaments 32 percent trusting their national government.⁴⁷ By Latvia's historical standards, 2023's score is middling. Back in 2002, Latvia displayed its highest levels of trust, with nearly 48 percent of surveyed respondents expressing trust in the Saeima, and a little over 51 percent expressed trust in the government. The current situation, however, is an improvement over the low point of 2009, when only 4.5 percent of surveyed respondents trusted the Saeima, and about 7 percent trusted the government.⁴⁸

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process. 6.25 / 7.00

- The most significant scandal involving an elected official revolves around recently leaked emails confirming that Tatjana Zdanoka, a current Latvian member of the European Parliament, had worked as an agent for Russian intelligence from at least 2004 until 2017, during which time she had been serving as an MEP.⁴⁹ While not entirely surprising given her openly pro-Russian political stance—she is cochair of the Latvian Russian Union (LKS) party—this revelation exacerbates Latvian concerns about Russian-speakers' loyalty and Russia's influence.

- At the beginning of 2023, the Constitutional Protection Bureau (SAB) noted in a report that although it had not detected direct interference by Russia in Latvia's 2022 parliamentary elections, Russian propaganda had reached a substantial portion of Latvian society.⁵⁰
- For Stability!, a party first elected to the Saeima in 2022 that received support from Latvia's Russian-speaking minority, has faced heightened scrutiny for its perceived pro-Russian stance throughout 2023.⁵¹ The party received a warning from the State Security Service (VDD) for giving interviews and statements to information sources controlled by individuals under international sanctions and which were used for propaganda.⁵²
- The Central Election Commission (CVK) garnered attention regarding its screening process for parliamentary candidates, particularly concerning Glorija Grevcova, a deputy elected from the For Stability! party. Shortly after Grevcova's election in 2022, it emerged that she had provided the CVK with false information regarding her education and employment. CVK asserted that its role is limited to checking candidates' criminal records, and that verifying their education and employment information is outside its remit.⁵³ Following a criminal investigation by the State Police, Grevcova was eventually charged and found guilty in March 2023, receiving a sentence of 160 hours of community service.⁵⁴
- This scandal highlights questions surrounding the role and effectiveness of the Central Election Commission, which has been beset by funding shortages and corruption scandals, including the detention of its former head by the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) at the end of 2022.⁵⁵ In February, the Saeima approved Kristīne Saulīte as the new chairperson of the Central Election Commission. Saulīte inherited an institution in need of reorganization and modernization. However, proposals to place the institution under the control of a ministry or the Saeima to facilitate its reorganization and modernization raise concerns about compromising its political neutrality.⁵⁶ With the elections to the European Parliament set for June 2024 looming, much remains to be addressed and monitored over the next year.

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

6.00 /
7.00

- A report monitoring the NGO sector in 2023 published by the civil society umbrella group Civic Alliance—Latvia (CAL) suggests that civil society in Latvia is consolidating, with fewer new NGOs established year-over-year. Of the 25,600 registered NGOs, only half are active

and submit a yearly tax report to the State Revenue Service (SRS). The financial activity of the civil society sector is also decreasing; the vast majority of NGOs have no employees and only one viable source of funding.⁵⁷

- However, the war in Ukraine gave a new purpose to the Latvian civil society sector and significantly increased the involvement of citizens in donating to Ukraine through various civil society initiatives. Statistics from the beginning of 2023 suggest that 56 percent of Latvia's inhabitants had already donated to charities working to support Ukraine.⁵⁸ The data collected by the Cabinet of Ministers indicates that as of February 2024, more than €30 million (\$32.4 million) in donations have been collected for Ukraine through the Latvian nongovernmental sector.⁵⁹
- The war has also prompted some innovative collaborations between the government and the nongovernment sector.⁶⁰ For example, the Agendum foundation, under the guidance of Reinis Pozņaks—who the NGO European Movement—Latvia in 2022 had named its European of the Year for Latvia—has thus far delivered 1,600 donated cars to Ukraine.⁶¹ Agendum has partnered with the government of Latvia, and as of 2023 is delivering cars confiscated from drunk drivers by the Latvian authorities to Ukraine to help the war effort.⁶²
- LGBT+ rights groups have reason to celebrate this year, with the election of President Rinkēvičs as the first openly gay head of state and the amendments to eight laws establishing civil unions in Latvia. Latvian LGBT+ groups have long championed the right to same-sex partnership recognition.
- Civil society and labor unions of Latvia also demonstrated their capacity to self-organize and promote their messages throughout Latvian society. In the spring of 2023, a scandal surrounding the potential exhibition of a Russian oligarch's porcelain collection, prompted some of the most well-known civil society actors to come together in April to stage a protest called "Democracy Is More Fragile than Porcelain," which received wide media coverage.⁶³ Also that month, the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees (LIZDA) organized a three-day strike and march, attracting as many as 19,000 participants.⁶⁴
- ManaBalss.lv, the leading civil society organization (CSO) promoting direct digital democracy, had another very successful year, receiving 344 citizen initiatives for evaluation and starting the process of signature collection for 164 initiatives. In the past year, the organization boasts eight citizen initiatives which have prompted legislative changes.⁶⁵
- The war in Ukraine has stirred ethnic tensions in Latvia, with populations on both sides of the linguistic divide saying that relations

between the two groups have worsened as a result of the war in Ukraine.⁶⁶ With the ongoing legislative changes, and what has even been dubbed Latvia's offensive against Russian culture,⁶⁷ civil society engagement by Russian-speakers is conspicuously absent. The Latvian government has sped up the process of transitioning transition minority-language schools to teaching in the official state language (see National Democratic Governance). While the issue has previously drawn significant number of protestors, a protest in August only drew 30 people.⁶⁸ A recently conducted study on civil society participation among Russian-speakers has drawn the conclusion that they feel apathy, disbelief that their voice matters, and a lack of conviction that they can impact government decisions.⁶⁹

- On January 11, 2024, the Saeima passed the Law on Handling Real Estate, Which Is Necessary for the Prevention of Threats to National Security, which essentially allows for the transfer of the so-called Moscow House in Riga, Latvia's capital, to the ownership of the Latvian state.⁷⁰ For years the building has served as the headquarters for Russia's so-called compatriot policy and hosted various Russian-language-focused NGOs. Until recently, it was still the registered address for several NGOs such as Commonwealth, an association representing Latvia's Russian-speaking minority, and the Russian Society in Latvia.⁷¹
- These developments call into question the sustainability of the Russian-speaking civil society sector. It is understandable that Latvia is trying to limit the direct influence of Russia in civil society in Latvia in the context of the war in Ukraine.⁷² However, with the stark changes taking place in relation to language usage and immigration policy, consultations with Russian-speaking CSOs are more important than ever for a truly democratic society.⁷³

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; 6.00 / the operation of a financially viable and independent private 7.00 press; and the functioning of the public media.

- In 2023, much like the rest of Latvian society, the media landscape in Latvia was profoundly influenced by events unfolding in Ukraine.
- In March, the Saeima gave its support to a planned merger of public broadcasters Latvian Television and Latvian Radio.⁷⁴ The concept had initially surfaced for discussion back in 2009. However, it wasn't until 2023, when national security was invoked to justify the importance of establishing a unified public service media institution in Latvia, along with bolstering its content and financial capabilities, that the merger could finally come to fruition.⁷⁵
- Consolidation is also taking place in the language content of publicly funded media. On September 28, the Saeima approved the National

Security Concept stipulating that as of January 1, 2026, content produced on public media platforms must be exclusively in Latvian and "languages associated with the European cultural sphere."⁷⁶ This decision essentially spells the end of publicly funded TV and radio broadcasts in Russian.

- The National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP), an independent supervisory body, took on a new role amid the war, taking action against Russian propaganda and closely monitoring any perceived support for Russia. Since the 2022 invasion, several Russian-language news outlets have relocated to Latvia. One such broadcaster, TV Rain, had its broadcasting license revoked by NEPLP for depicting Crimea as part of Russia and referring to the Russian armed forces as "our army."⁷⁷ Another incident saw the internet news portal TVnet fined by NEPLP for alleged misuse of the term "deportation," a fine that TVnet is challenging in court on free expression grounds.⁷⁸
- NEPLP's stringent actions led seven media organizations to express a lack of confidence in the council, accusing it of interfering with media content and imposing disproportionate restrictions on media activity, and collectively requesting the Saeima to dissolve the council.⁷⁹ There is a growing apprehension among journalists and interviewees regarding their choice of words.
- A 2023 study on media perception conducted by the Latvian public media ombudsman found that the Latvian public lacks a clear understanding of the distinction between public media and state media. Particularly within the Russian-speaking community, the prevailing view is that public media is state-controlled and mirrors the government's narratives.⁸⁰ Consequently, trust in public media is dwindling in 2023, with only 42 percent of respondents expressing trust, 37 percent expressing distrust, and a further 9 percent abstaining from following news developments on public service media. Notably, a mere 22 percent of Russian-speakers in Latvia trust public service media.⁸¹
- These issues are echoed in the 2023 rating of Latvia by Reporters Without Borders, which assesses the journalism environment in the country as "satisfactory." While the report acknowledges the country's safe and relatively free work environment for journalists, it raises concerns about the lack of access to trustworthy and diverse information sources for the Russian-speaking population.⁸² Consequently, future developments regarding media independence in Latvia warrant close monitoring in 2024.

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, 5.75 /
election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the 7.00
transparency and accountability of local authorities.

- On January 1, 2023, the Local Government Law came into force. The stated aim of the law is "to ensure democratic, legal, efficient,

sustainable, open, and publicly accessible administration within the administrative territory of each local government, and also balanced access to local government services."⁸³ The law is meant to give municipalities greater autonomy and independence and involve the residents in decision making.

- The data from the 2023 Eurobarometer indicates that of the various levels of government, Latvian citizens express the greatest trust in their local governments. Latvia's 58-percent trust level in local government is above the EU average of 55 percent.⁸⁴
- In the past few years, municipal governments have been encouraged to become more transparent, and according to the Municipal Transparency Index 2023 published by the Delna Society for Transparency, some municipalities, especially Riga, have achieved notable progress.⁸⁵
- Despite the focus on openness and public accessibility, municipal councils in 2023 have been marred by scandals involving inefficiency and corruption, spotlighting concerns regarding their capability, transparency, and accountability. One such instance involves the mayor of Rezekne, Aleksandrs Bartaševičs, whose inaction and catastrophic mismanagement of the municipal budget has resulted in a deficit of nearly €4 million (\$4.4 million). Deliberate and severe violations impacting the planning and execution of the local government's finances were cited as grounds for his removal. Auditors are investigating whether the catastrophic missteps were the result of maladministration or corruption.⁸⁶
- Several other municipalities are struggling with budget deficits and have called for the resignation of their mayors.⁸⁷ Whether attributed to corruption or incompetence, these events underscore a pattern of poor decision-making and contextual awareness within Latvian local governance.
- Amendments to the Law on the Prevention of Conflict of Interest in the Activities of Public Officials that prohibit members of municipal councils from receiving remuneration from associations, foundations, religious organizations, or commercial entities funded by their municipalities went into force on April 1, 2023.⁸⁸ The stated aim of the law "is to ensure that the actions of public officials are in the public interests by preventing the influence of a personal or financial interest of any public official, his or her relatives or counterparties on the actions of the public official, to promote openness of the actions of the public officials and their public accountability, and also the public confidence in the actions of public officials."
- Forthcoming developments presage a significant shift in municipal governance procedures. From the 2025 municipal elections onwards, leading officials of local governments will be required to obtain

security clearances. This mandate, initiated by the president on November 22 and unanimously supported by the parliamentary Defense, Internal Affairs, and Corruption Prevention Committee, necessitates checks by the Constitution Protection Bureau (SAB) to ascertain local officials' credibility and investigate any ties to Russian or former Soviet security agencies. Consequently, questions regarding loyalty are permeating discussions surrounding local democratic governance.⁸⁹

- There were several ongoing investigations in 2023 into potential corruption and funds mismanagement in various municipal governments (see Corruption).

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees 6.00 / of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and 7.00 prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.

- Latvia's judiciary remained independent in 2023 according to many experts, although public perception was somewhat mixed. According to a 2023 Eurobarometer survey, 42 percent of the respondents rated the independence of the Latvian justice system as being very good or fairly good, which is below the EU average of 53 percent. However, only 27 percent rated the system as very bad or fairly bad, also below the EU average of 36 percent. A large segment of Latvians surveyed could not answer or did not have an opinion.⁹⁰
- The trust level in the judiciary and the court system is relatively low. The data from the 2023 *Social Cohesion Radar* report shows that only 44 percent of surveyed individuals trust the court system, while 11 percent distrust the system. That trust level is below the EU average, as well as below that of Latvia's Baltic neighbors Estonia and Lithuania.⁹¹ The greatest interference in the justice system is perceived to come from economic and other specific interests; 55 percent of Latvian respondents say these interests very much influence the justice system, well above the EU average of 41 percent.⁹²
- In 2023, several laws governing migration and borders were amended. Amendments to the State Border Guard Law were approved to clarify the authority of the State Border Guard in preventing unauthorized crossings of Latvia's border, particularly outside of designated entry points and procedures. Similarly, the draft law titled Amendments to the State Border Law of the Republic of Latvia established specific regulations for situations necessitating enhanced border security measures. These amendments to both the State Border Guard Law and the State Border Law of the Republic of Latvia were justified by the need to safeguard Latvia's external border and the broader EU against hybrid threats from Russia and Belarus.⁹³ The amendments have received criticism from human

rights organizations but were backed by the European Commission. Whether challenges are brought to the Constitutional Court is an issue that should be monitored in 2024 (see National Democratic Governance).

- In 2023, Constitutional Court challenges were brought against the Immigration Law amendments of 2022 requiring former Latvian citizens or noncitizens who had accepted Russian citizenship to pass a Latvian language exam in order to extend their residence permits.⁹⁴ The challenge brought to the Constitutional Court argues that the contested provision places the applicants in an unequal position when compared to other former Latvian citizens and noncitizens who have acquired permanent residence permits in Latvia. The Constitutional Court ruling will be very important for any next steps the Latvian Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs takes in relation to Russian citizens who have failed to engage with the system (see National Democratic Governance).⁹⁵
- Latvian law enforcement and the judiciary was rocked by scandal over the case of Leons Rusiņš, who murdered his ex-wife Iveta on April 16 in Jēkabpils and subsequently disappeared. The victim had reported threats to the police for over a year, but they were slow to investigate and prosecute Rusiņš, resulted in him remaining free to stalk her.⁹⁶ The case prompted internal police inquiries into whether regulations were followed, which resulted in the chief of the police station overseeing the area being dismissed.⁹⁷
- Justice Minister Inese Lībiņa-Egnere sent a letter to the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Aigars Strupiņš, in May asking him and the court to evaluate the legal proceedings related to the Jēkabpils case and to make the necessary improvements in the organization of the courts' work.⁹⁸ Following the review, Strupiņš admitted that the justice system had failed at the state level.⁹⁹ As a result of the scandal, the Saeima unanimously amended the Criminal Law amendment to make stalking or threats of violence punishable by up to three years in prison in cases where the victim is a current or former spouse of the offender or they otherwise have a close family relationship,¹⁰⁰ and later in the year Latvia ratified the Istanbul Convention aimed at preventing domestic violence (see National Democratic Governance).
- On December 7, the Constitutional Court of Latvia issued a ruling on a case brought by Julija Stepanko, a parliamentarian who had refused to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Under a special law which required Saeima deputies to be vaccinated, she was barred from participating in parliamentary sittings.¹⁰¹ Stepanko contested this decision, and the Constitutional Court ruled in her favor. In its decision, the Court emphasized that the provisions mandating COVID-19 vaccination as a prerequisite for parliamentary participation did not align with Article 101 of the Latvian constitution,

which held that all Latvians had the right "to participate in the work of the State and of local government."¹⁰² The court underscored the crucial role of every parliamentarian in Latvia's parliamentary democracy, stating that even opinions expressed by a single member or a minority are vital to parliamentary proceedings. According to the court, a member of the Saeima can effectively represent the people, including by voicing their will, only when afforded the opportunity to exercise rights essential to their parliamentary duties.¹⁰³

- The courts and the judicial system were also decisive in setting precedents in important corruption cases (see Corruption).

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and 4.50 / conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption 7.00 initiatives.

- The situation in Latvia regarding corruption has seen some achievements, but concerns remain in 2023. The Corruption Risk Forecast (CRF) lists Latvia as improving,¹⁰⁴ while Latvia's rating on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for 2023 improved by one point.¹⁰⁵
- There have been several positive developments this year in terms of addressing and prosecuting corruption. To deal with corruption risks in politics, the Law on Disclosure of Interest Representation came into effect on January 1.¹⁰⁶ The law's objective is to promote transparency in disclosures of interests and lobbying processes, bolstering public trust in decision-making. Various amendments to existing laws were also implemented in 2023 to mitigate corruption risks. Notably, the Law on Public Procurement was adjusted to foster openness and stimulate supplier competition in procurement practices. Additionally, amendments to the Law on the Prevention of Conflict of Interest in the Activities of Public Officials took effect on April 1 to further address potential conflicts of interest (see Local Democratic Governance).
- Latvian authorities took significant legal actions in 2023 to fight corruption. On December 20, the former Bank of Latvia governor, Ilmārs Rimšēvičs, was sentenced to six years in prison for accepting bribes.¹⁰⁷ KNAB's arrest of Rimšēvičs in February 2018 garnered widespread international attention and further tarnished Latvia's reputation regarding illicit activities within its banking sector. Subsequently, there has been a concerted effort to cleanse the banking sector.
- On September 27, the Riga Regional Court of appeal upheld a verdict in the case of Aivars Lembergs, an oligarch often associated with wielding influence within the ZZS party, which is currently part of Prime Minister Siliņa's three-party coalition, and sentenced him to four years in prison as well as a fine and confiscations of his

property.¹⁰⁸ Lembergs, the former mayor of the Latvian city of Ventspils, has faced sanctions from the United States and was convicted in 2021 by a Latvian court of money laundering and corruption. The upholding of Lembergs's conviction by the appellate court underscores the separation of political and judicial powers in Latvia.

- In April 2023, the Economic Affairs Court convicted the chairman of a property management company for offering a €2.1 million (\$2.25 million) bribe to a Riga City Council deputy. The defendant was sentenced to four years and six months in prison.¹⁰⁹ This case highlights ongoing efforts to combat corruption within Latvia's governmental and business sectors. This case was swiftly dealt with by the relatively new and specialized Economic Affairs Court, and the judgement sets a stringent precedent of significant jail time.
- These developments represent significant leaps forward for Latvia in tackling prominent, long-standing corruption cases. However, there remains much to do to improve the effectiveness of the country's anticorruption institutions. The civil society sector continues to criticize one vital structure in the fight against corruption, KNAB, for its sluggish activity, lack of public engagement, and stagnant results.¹¹⁰ There have been calls for a public inquiry into the effectiveness of KNAB, which the bureau opposes.¹¹¹
- Problems also remain in relation to local corruption scandals. In July, the mayor of Riga, Mārtiņš Staķis, resigned citing unwillingness of the city's governing coalition to adequately investigate a whistleblower report on corruption.¹¹² In November, the investigative journalists of the nonprofit Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism Re:Baltica published a scathing attack on the mayor of Daugavpils, the second largest city in Latvia, for living well above what his official salary would provide, a likely indication of corruption.¹¹³
- To put the corruption problem into context, currently the European Public Prosecutor's Office is investigating more than 33 cases in Latvia which relate to the misappropriation of EU funds.¹¹⁴ In Valmiera municipality, for instance, the investigation is looking into the potential collusion between the city and a business to receive European financing for a new production plant.¹¹⁵ A similar case of suspected collusion is under investigation in Valka, where the former mayor has been detained.¹¹⁶

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