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Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2024 - Latvia

Free

88

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 37 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 51 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

88 / 100 Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Latvia is a multiparty democracy that holds free and fair elections. Civil liberties are generally respected in law and in practice. However, corruption remains a major problem affecting politics, the judiciary, and the wider criminal justice system. The country's ethnic Russian population faces disadvantages in matters such as education and employment.

Key Developments in 2023

- In November, Latvia's parliament, the Saeima, amended several laws to provide legal recognition and new rights to same-sex couples. Another long-pending issue, adoption of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women, was resolved when the Saeima ratified it in November and the minister of foreign affairs signed it soon after.
- In January, authorities extended a state of emergency on Latvia's border with Belarus after the flow of irregular crossings steeply increased. Officials from Latvia and neighboring countries have accused Belarusian authorities, with support from the Kremlin, of coaxing migrants and asylum seekers to Belarusian borders and stranding them there.

- The border state of emergency ended in August. But in June, the Saeima amended two laws, allowing authorities to repel irregular border crossings. Amnesty International and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) criticized the amendments, saying they violated asylum rights.
- The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (PMLP) stated in late December that more than over 1,200 Russian citizens had not complied with regulations requiring them to request a residency permit or take a language test, and could be expelled from Latvia.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The Saeima elects the president, who may serve up to two four-year terms. The prime minister, who holds most executive authority, is nominated by the president and approved by the Saeima.

In September 2023, the Saeima voted to approve a government led by Evika Siliņa, who became prime minister. She represents New Unity, the same political party as the former prime minister, Krišjānis Kariņš, who had resigned in August.

Earlier, in May, the Saeima elected Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs as the 11th president of Latvia. He became the first openly gay head of state in the European Union (EU).

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The constitution provides for a unicameral, 100-seat Saeima, whose members are elected to four-year terms under a proportional system from five multimember districts. Electoral lists need to receive at least 5 percent of all votes cast to enter the Saeima.

The 2022 parliamentary elections were competitive and credible, and stakeholders accepted the results. Seven electoral alliances won representation, including several relatively new political movements.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

In general, the electoral framework is consistent with democratic standards and implemented fairly. Stakeholders regard the Central

Election Commission as generally impartial and capable of ensuring the integrity of elections.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, 4 / and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of 4 these competing parties or groupings?

Latvia's political parties form, organize, and compete freely. However, candidates cannot run as independents (including in municipalities), and those who belonged to communist or pro-Soviet organizations after 1991 may not hold public office.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its 4 / support or gain power through elections? 4

The country has experienced numerous peaceful transfers of power between rival parties, and opposition parties typically have a strong presence in the Saeima and in local governments. However, parties representing Latvia's Russian-speaking population have never been invited to participate in forming a government.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces 4 / that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that 4 employ extrapolitical means?

People's political choices are generally not subject to undue interference. Politically connected businesspeople exercise undue influence in the country using patronage networks, corrupt dealings, and other opaque means to infringe on the autonomy of voters and candidates. Efforts by Latvian authorities to combat corruption and money laundering have reduced the political influence of these figures somewhat.

In September 2023, the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), a political entity associated with Aivars Lembergs, one of Latvia's wealthiest residents, became part of the new Siliņa-led government, and held cabinet positions including the economy, agriculture, welfare, and climate and energy ministries. The same month, the Riga Regional Court sentenced Lembergs to four years in prison after he was found guilty of money laundering, taking bribes, falsifying documents, and unauthorized participation in a property transaction. Finance Minister Arvils Ašeradens of New Unity said the verdict would not impact the coalition agreement.

Authorities and other observers continue to express concern about the presence of Russian government disinformation and propaganda in

Latvian media, among other attempts by Moscow to influence domestic politics.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4

As of early 2023, 9.3 percent of Latvia's registered residents (175,000 people) were noncitizens. Most are of Slavic origin, and do not have the the right to vote, hold public office, work in government offices, or establish political parties. Noncitizens may seek naturalization, while their newborn children are granted Latvian citizenship automatically.

Though women have made gains in political participation, they hold only 32 percent of seats in the Saeima. Its speaker, Daiga Mieriņa, is a woman, as is Prime Minister Siliņa. In the new Siliņa cabinet, 5 of the 14 members are women. LGBT+ people are poorly represented in Latvian politics, and parties have been reluctant to address their interests. However, in November 2023, the Saeima amended several laws to give same-sex partnerships legal status, which are expected to take effect in July 2024. President Rinkēvičs is openly gay.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 4 / 4

The country's elected leadership sets and implements government policies without improper interference from foreign or unelected entities, and the politically diverse legislature provides a meaningful check on executive authority.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 3 / 4

Latvian anticorruption and auditing bodies have historically been subject to politicization attempts, funding shortfalls, and a dearth of qualified personnel. However, both the prosecutor general's office and the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) have recently expanded their activities. In a May 2023 report, the European Commission (EC) positively evaluated the work of the KNAB, praising its efficiency in dealing with corruption issues. An October 2023 report by the Financial Intelligence Unit (FID) noted increased efforts to confront money laundering.

In March 2023, the KNAB launched a criminal case involving irregularities in a €220 million (\$239.5 million) food procurement tender by the State Center for Defense Logistics and Procurement (VALIC) for the military.

In September 2023, prominent ZZS politician Aivars Lembergs was sentenced to four years in prison on corruption charges. The same month, Gunārs Kūtris, a ZZS figure and candidate for Saeima speaker, denied that Lembergs had acted improperly and, alluding to Lembergs, asserted that he would invite "Latvian millionaires" to consult on economic issues even if they had criminal convictions or were under international sanctions. (Lembergs was sanctioned by the United States in 2019, with US officials citing corruption concerns.) Kūtris apologized after an outcry that included a public statement against his candidacy from the local offices of Transparency International, and the post eventually went to Daiga Mieriņa of the ZZS.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 3 / 4

The legislative framework features provisions intended to ensure government transparency. However, there is a notable lack of transparency in the functioning of state-owned companies, in public procurement processes, and for defense purposes. Public procurement processes remain at high risk of corruption, according to the EC's 2023 *Rule of Law Report*.

In January 2023, the Law on Transparency of Representation of Interests came into force. Its provisions define "interest representatives" (lobbyists) and regulate their activities and declarations. The law had been adopted in October 2022, after 15 years of debate.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 3 / 4

While Latvian media outlets publicize a wide range of political views in both Latvian and Russian, the ownership of traditional and digital media outlets is highly concentrated. Editorial autonomy of private media is vulnerable to business interests, as well as to political meddling in certain cases. Public media are largely financed by annual allocations of the state budget, which can lead to improper influence. Libel remains a criminal offense.

Lagging media literacy, the spread of hate speech, and an increase in online attacks against journalists are growing concerns.

After the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, more than 200 journalists and 23 media organizations emigrated to Latvia from Russia. Several Latvian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), through

the Media Hub Riga, continue to support journalists in exile who have registered and are working in Latvia.

In June 2022, the Latvian regulatory authorities banned retransmission of all Russia-based television channels until the end of the war in Ukraine and the return of Crimea to Ukraine. They have also blocked numerous Russian websites, including the official website of the Russian government. That December, Latvian authorities revoked the broadcast license of TV Rain, an independent Russian channel operating in Latvia—a move criticized by both by local and international journalist organizations.

Media outlets were restricted from accessing areas near the border with Belarus under a state of emergency related to the high rate of irregular border crossings, which was in effect between August 2021 and August 2023.

Public service media are financed by annual allocations of the state budget; they received 0.11 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021, significantly lower than the average in Europe. In June 2023, the independent Public Electronic Mass Media Council (SEPLP), which is tasked with minimizing the risks of political influence in media, called for increasing funding to 0.16 percent of GDP.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 4 / 4

Freedom of religion is generally respected.

In September 2022, the Saeima amended the Law of the Latvian Orthodox Church to make it fully independent from the Moscow Patriarchate. Earlier that year, in March, the Saeima had amended the Law on Religious Organizations to widen the government's ability to terminate the activities of a religious group.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 3 / 4

While academic freedom is largely upheld, lawmakers have placed some limitations on instruction in recent years.

Following Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Latvian authorities accelerated the transition to Latvian-only instruction in all schools, including at the preschool level. In September 2022, the Saeima passed amendments shortening the transition from six years to two. Up to 30 percent of teachers in schools that teach in minority languages lack sufficient Latvian language skills and could face penalties or dismissal. In August 2023, Latvian Radio reported that the transition would impact 265

schools including kindergartens, 46,000 schoolchildren and kindergarten attendees, and some 5,300 instructors.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4 / 4

There are few restrictions on personal expression or private discussion. However, legal constraints include a ban on the public display of Soviet or Nazi symbols, as well as prohibitions on incitement to ethnic hatred and denial of historical crimes.

Since February 2022, government authorities have launched several dozen criminal cases against individuals who allegedly supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including on social media, though only a few have actually been heard in court. The State Security Service banned more than 200 people from entering Latvia over their support for the invasion by that October.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is protected by law and generally respected in practice.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 4 / 4

The government generally does not restrict the activities of NGOs. However, advocacy by NGOs is often viewed as partisan activity.

Civil society groups were, however, restricted from accessing areas near the border with Belarus under the 2021–23 state of emergency declared in response to the high rate of irregular border crossings.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 4 / 4

Workers may establish trade unions, strike, and engage in collective bargaining, and antiunion discrimination is prohibited. A 2019 law imposed fines on employers that refuse to negotiate a collective agreement, among other potential violations.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4

While judicial independence is generally respected, institutions within the judiciary continue to function with limited resources. Politicization and corruption within the judicial system persist. The EC's 2023 *Rule of Law Report* expressed concern about a lack of safeguards to prevent political influence in Supreme Court appointments.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 3 / 4

The legal framework provides safeguards against arbitrary arrest and guarantees for fair trial procedures. Although the functioning of the court system is generally satisfactory, it remains hampered by corruption and inefficiency, and defendants with adequate resources have exploited these weaknesses to delay or obstruct prosecutions. Criminal suspects are sometimes interrogated without the presence of a lawyer, and lengthy or unnecessary pretrial detention remains a concern.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

Latvia's residents are generally free from major threats to physical security, though the country has comparatively high levels of violent crime by EU standards. According to Eurostat data, as of 2022, Latvia has the highest rate of intentional homicides and sexual offenses in the EU. Latvia also has one of the EU's higher incarceration rates. Some prison facilities reportedly suffer from poor physical conditions and episodes of violence.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

The constitution guarantees equality before the law and the protection of human rights without discrimination, and several safeguards are specified by law. However, state language policies discriminate in the courts, education, employment, and access to services, for those who do not speak Latvian or do not speak it well.

A number of messages and decisions were issued in 2023 regarding Russian citizens in Latvia who were required to extend their permanent residence permits or had not registered to take a Latvian language test by the beginning of September. Initially, they were required to leave Latvia by the end of November. According to the PMLP, at the end of year, over 1,200 Russians had not complied, and the agency stated that they might be expelled from Latvia.

Women continue to suffer from a gender-based pay gap, which, according to Eurostat, is among the highest in the EU in 2022 at 17.1 percent.

Since 2021, a number of EU member countries, including Latvia, have experienced an increase in attempted irregular border crossings from Belarus. Officials from Latvia, Poland, and neighboring countries have accused Belarusian authorities, with support from the Kremlin, of coaxing migrants to Belarusian borders and stranding them there. In 2023, more than 13,800 people were prevented from crossing into Latvia from Belarus, according to the Latvian government. Amnesty International stated in its 2023 report on Latvia that officials had "committed serious abuses against refugees and migrants" during the period between August 2021 and August 2023, when a state of emergency was in place at the Belarusian border. In June, before that state of emergency ended, the Saeima amended two laws, allowing authorities to "prevent" irregular border crossings. Amnesty International and the UNHCR criticized the amendments, saying they violated asylum rights.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

People may generally travel freely within the country and internationally. However, in October 2023, Latvia closed the Vientuļi (Ludonka) and Pededze border crossing points in response to Russian authorities' decision to significantly restrict entry of Ukrainian citizens into its territory from the EU to two locations. In September, the Ministry of Justice proposed prohibiting vehicles with Russian and Belarusian license plates from entering Latvia. In November, the Saeima amended the Road Traffic Law to ban cars with Russian license plates from being driven within Latvia; the related restrictions will take effect in early 2024.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4 / 4

The legal and regulatory framework supports an environment in which property rights are respected and people may freely operate businesses, though corruption can impede business activities.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

Individual freedom regarding personal status matters such as marriage and divorce is generally upheld, but a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage was adopted in 2005. In May 2022, following rulings by the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court, the Administrative District Court issued a judgment that recognized a same-sex couple as being in "a

public legal relationship." In a November 2023 vote, the Saeima provided legal recognition and new rights to same-sex couples.

Laws on domestic violence encompass various forms of abuse and provide for protection orders and criminal charges. However, police do not always take meaningful action when cases are reported.

According to government statistics for 2021, every fourth woman and every fifth man aged 18–74 had experienced physical or sexual violence. Among EU member states, Latvia has the highest rate of women victims of homicide by family members or close partners.

In October 2023, the Saeima rejected a public initiative (signed by 13,000 Latvian citizens) asking Latvia not to ratify the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on violence against women. The Saeima ratified the convention in a November vote, and the minister of foreign affairs signed the ratification document in December.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from 3 / economic exploitation? 4

Legal protections against exploitative working conditions are generally upheld, though enforcement is uneven in the large informal sector of the economy. Informal workers are more vulnerable to labor abuses and recruitment into criminal enterprises.

The US State Department's 2023 *Trafficking in Persons Report* found that Latvia's residents are subject to trafficking for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and forced labor abroad, while a growing number of foreign migrant workers in Latvia are exposed to labor exploitation. Identified victims have access to a state-funded assistance program. The government also continued an awareness campaign on trafficking risks among refugees from Ukraine.

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Austrian Red Cross	Wiedner Hauptstraße	Contact
Austrian Centre for	32, 1041 Wien	Imprint & Disclaimer
Country of Origin and	T +43 1 589 00 583	F.A.Q.
Asylum Research and	F +43 1 589 00 589	Data Protection Notice
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