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Freedom in the World 2014 - Latvia

Overview:

In January 2013, Latvia's parliament (Saeima) passed legislation aimed at adopting the euro currency, and President Andris Bērziņš signed the law the following month. In July, European Union (EU) officials gave final approval for Latvia to adopt the euro, which it was expected to do at the start of 2014. However, Latvian residents remained wary of the ongoing sovereign-debt crisis within the eurozone, and there was little public enthusiasm for joining the bloc. Harmony Center—a leftist party that draws significant support from Latvia's Russian-speaking population and opposed the country's adoption of the euro—performed strongly in municipal elections held in June. The party has campaigned against austerity programs enacted since the global economic downturn began in 2008.

The parliament passed legislation in June banning the display of Soviet and Nazi symbols at public events, but President Bērziņš had not signed the law by year's end. In October, amendments to Latvia's citizenship law, approved by the parliament in May, took effect. The amendments allow many Latvians living abroad to become dual citizens, and provide newborns, regardless of where

they were born, with citizenship if at least one parent is a Latvian citizen. The law also grants children of noncitizens born after August 1991 Latvian citizenship if they are already permanent residents and if their parents pledge to help them learn the Latvian language, a provision previously criticized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as restrictive.

In November, Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis resigned over a deadly accident at a Riga supermarket in which 54 people were killed when the roof caved in, saying he took “political responsibility” for the disaster. His resignation was unexpected, as he had not faced notable criticism over the accident. Snap elections were not expected, as parliamentary polls were already set for October 2014. However, a permanent government had yet to be formed by the end of the year.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 33 / 40 [\[Key\]](#)

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, who serves up to two four-year terms; recent elections have generally been considered free and fair. The prime minister is nominated by the president and approved by the parliament.

Bērziņš, a multimillionaire former banker and a member of the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), was elected president in 2011. In snap parliamentary elections held that year, Harmony Center captured the majority of the votes for the first time, winning 31 seats, and the Zatlers Reform Party (ZRP), formed by former president Valdis Zatlers, finished second with 22 seats. The center-right Unity coalition secured 20 seats, followed by the conservative National Alliance with 14 and the ZZS with 13. Despite its first-place finish, Harmony Center was shut out of the new government, and the ZRP, Unity, and the National Alliance formed a 56-seat governing coalition, with Valdis Dombrovskis of Unity returning as prime minister; Dombrovskis stepped down in November in the wake of the supermarket disaster.

Harmony Center’s position as the dominant party in Riga’s city government was reaffirmed in local elections held in June 2013; Harmony Center also posted a strong performance in several other major cities. The For Latvia and Ventspils party—led by the mayor of Ventspils, Aivars Lembergs, who faced a number of corruption charges in recent years—won a landslide victory in Ventspils local elections.

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. Residents who do not hold Latvian citizenship may not vote, hold public

office, or work in government offices. Noncitizens may join political parties, as long as the party does not count more noncitizens than citizens as members. Approximately 14 percent of Latvia's residents are noncitizens; most are ethnic Russians, but Latvia's noncitizen population also includes many Poles, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Elections to the Latvian Noncitizens' Congress took place in June 2013, but the organization has no official political powers. All residents of Latvia are eligible to vote for representatives to the Latvian Noncitizens' Congress.

C. Functioning of Government: 7 / 12

Corruption is a serious problem and exists at every level of government. Many citizens have little faith that politicians will act in voters' best interests, according to 2013 research by anticorruption watchdog Transparency International, which also reported that some 25 percent of respondents said they had paid bribes to government officials. Several corruption cases were opened against government officials in the city of Riga in 2013. In one case, former Riga transportation official, Leonards Tenis, was charged in February with accepting bribes from a number of vehicle manufacturers, including Germany's Daimler AG. Criminal corruption proceedings against Mayor Lembergs of Ventspils involving allegations of bribery, money laundering, and tax evasion were also ongoing at the year's end. Latvia was ranked 49 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 51 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 15 / 16

The government generally respects freedom of the press, but investigative journalists and whistleblowers sometimes face criminal charges as a result of their reporting. Libel is a criminal offense. Newspapers publish a wide range of political viewpoints, but there has been evidence of increasing business and political influence on the media. Private television and radio stations broadcast programs in both Latvian and Russian. By law, 65 percent of both national and regional broadcasts must be in Latvian or subtitled or dubbed in Latvian. The government does not place restrictions on the internet.

In July 2013, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) awarded €20,000 (\$28,000) to journalist Ilze Nagla, ruling that a Latvian judge had inappropriately authorized a search of her home in 2010 after she reported on the salaries of senior officials at state-owned companies. The ECHR found that the judge who approved the search of Nagla's home had not adequately established that the police's interest in obtaining evidence trumped Nagla's right to protect her sources. Nagla had received the information from a researcher at the University of Latvia, who had accessed various companies' income-tax files by exploiting a security vulnerability on the Latvian tax authority's website.

A Russian-speaking reporter, Andrey Khramtsov, was charged in May 2013 with inciting public disorder after questioning people in Riga as to whether they would violate a proposed measure banning the public display of Nazi or Soviet symbols. In December 2012, Leonīds Jākobsons—

owner of the online Russian-language news outlet *Kompromat*, which covers organized crime and government corruption, was arrested and charged with illegally obtaining electronic communication data. The case was brought in relation to Jākobsons's attempt in 2011 to publish e-mails sent by Riga mayor Nils Ušakovs of Harmony Center that appeared to show that he had engaged in corrupt activities. In early 2013, Jākobsons accused Latvian authorities of forcing him to spend a month in a mental institution in 2012; police claimed he went to the facility voluntarily, having agreed to spend time there for observation in connection with the allegations against him. Meanwhile, the 2010 murder of Grigorijs Nēmcovs—the publisher of *Million*, a Russian-language newspaper focusing on political corruption—remains unsolved, as does a 2012 attack against Jākobsons that resulted in his hospitalization.

Freedom of religion is generally respected; however, religious groups that have been registered with the government for more than 10 years have certain privileges that newer groups do not, including various tax benefits, the right to own property, and permission to worship in public places. Academic freedom is generally respected.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12

Freedom of assembly and association are protected by law, and the government generally respects these rights in practice. However, organizers of public demonstrations must obtain permission to hold events 10 days in advance. In June 2013, the parliament passed legislation banning the display of Soviet and Nazi symbols at public events, but Bērziņš had not signed the law by year's end. The legislation was introduced in response to highly controversial demonstrations in Riga organized each year by Latvia's ethnic Russians to commemorate the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, as well as an annual Waffen SS veterans' parade. Both events took place without major incident in 2013.

The government does not restrict the activities of nongovernmental organizations. 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 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.

In January 2013, the ECHR ruled in favor of a disabled man who claimed that he had been held against his will at a state social-care institution for more than 10 years without the possibility of challenging his confinement in court; he was awarded €15,000 (\$21,000). In August, the ECHR awarded €5,000 (\$7,000) to a man who alleged that a Latvian court had failed to consider his claim that an undercover police officer had incited him to engage in narcotics transactions that had resulted in his conviction on drug-trafficking charges.

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.

Same-sex marriage was banned in 2005, and members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face discrimination. A 2012 report by the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance found that Latvia had made some improvements in combatting hate crimes, implementing nondiscrimination training for police, providing education for children of ethnic minorities, and increasing the participation of minorities in political life. However, it also noted that few racially motivated crimes are investigated or prosecuted and ethnic Roma face particularly severe discrimination.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men, but they often face employment and wage discrimination. Domestic violence is not frequently reported, and police do not always take meaningful action when it is. Latvia is both a source and destination country for women and girls trafficked for the purpose of forced prostitution.

Income inequality in Latvia is high, and the country has the third-lowest minimum wage in the EU. The welfare system is inadequate; a May 2013 European Commission report indicated that 40 percent of Latvia's population was at risk of social exclusion or poverty. Poor economic conditions and high unemployment have prompted many young, highly educated people to leave Latvia. The country's 2011 census showed that Latvia lost some 13 percent of its population between 2000 and 2011.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)

2014 Scores

Status

Free

Freedom Rating

(1 = best, 7 = worst)

2.0

Civil Liberties

(1 = best, 7 = worst)

2

Political Rights

(1 = best, 7 = worst)

2

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