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The State of the World's Human Rights; Latvia 2023

Legislative amendments undermined access to asylum at the border. The law on civil partnerships was adopted.

Background

In August, prime minister Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš was replaced by Evika Siliņa, who led a new coalition government.

Torture and other ill-treatment

In July, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture reported allegations of ill-treatment of people in police custody and prisons. People in migration detention also reported to the Committee cases of severe ill-treatment by officials at the border.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

In June, legal amendments granted border guards powers to “prevent” irregular entries at the border, which in practice can result in unlawful summary returns.¹ Another amendment – triggered in August and due to expire in February 2024 – introduced the option of activating an “enhanced” border protection regime in case of “disproportionately large” irregular crossings. Between August 2021 and August 2023, when a state of emergency was in force at Latvia’s borders allowing summary returns, border officials committed serious abuses against refugees and migrants.

During the year, Latvia reported 13,863 “prevented” border crossings, increasing from 5,286 in 2022.

Human rights defenders

In January, the authorities opened criminal proceedings for smuggling against two members of the NGO I Want to Help Refugees, for their work assisting refugees and migrants at the border.

Discrimination

As a result of legislative changes in 2022 connected to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, certain permanent residence permits granted to Russian citizens were set to expire in September. Almost 18,000 people affected had to pass a Latvian language test as part of the procedure to renew their residence permits. At the end of the year, 1,213 Russian citizens were liable to be deported, having failed to regularize their stay under the amended law. The ombudsman observed that this requirement risked violating the constitutional principle of equality and non-discrimination.

In October, media and journalists' organizations expressed concern about a parliament-backed proposal, that from 2026 onwards public media would only produce content in Latvian and languages belonging to the "European cultural space", affecting access to information for the large Russian-speaking population.

Gender-based violence

On 30 November, Latvia ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

LGBTI people's rights

The law on civil partnership was finally adopted in November.

Right to a healthy environment

Unlike most EU countries, Latvia's greenhouse gas emissions in the first and second quarters of the year were higher than the same period in 2022. The European Commission continued infringement proceedings against Latvia for failure to comply with EU standards on reduction of emissions of certain pollutants.

Economic, social and cultural rights

Following recommendations by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2021, the statutory minimum wage was increased from EUR 500 to EUR 620 per month and several other benefit payments were increased.

1. "Latvia: Legal amendments would empower border guards to torture and push back migrants and refugees", 21 June

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