

Document #2035789

Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2020 - Latvia

FREE

89

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 37 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 52 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

87 / 100 Free

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

Overview

Latvia developed into a democracy after regaining independence in 1991. Elections are regarded as free and fair, and freedoms of assembly and association are generally respected in practice. However, corruption remains a major problem affecting politics, the judiciary, and the wider criminal justice system. The country's ethnic Russians face discrimination.

Key Developments in 2019

- In January, Unity party leader Krišjānis Kariņš successfully formed a five-party coalition government. European Court of Justice (ECJ) judge Egils Levits was selected as president by the Saeima (parliament) in May.
- The government moved to combat money laundering and corruption throughout the year; in June, the Saeima passed legislation strengthening Latvia's banking regulator, and the government devoted more funding to anticorruption and auditing offices in September. In December, the Saeima voted to allow port facilities in Riga and Ventspils to come under public administration after businessperson Aivars Lembergs, who was linked to the Ventspils facility, was sanctioned by the United States over corruption allegations.
- In October, the Saeima passed legislation that will grant automatic citizenship to Latvian-born children of noncitizens in 2020.

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 is nominated by the president and approved by the parliament. Māris Kučinskis of the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS) became prime minister in 2016 and served as a caretaker after the October 2018 legislative election, while coalition talks took place. Then president Raimonds Vējonis nominated Jānis Bordāns of the New Conservative Party (JKP) and Aldis Gobzems, leader of Who Owns the State? (KPV LV), to form a government, but neither of them secured a coalition. Kariņš was nominated in January 2019 and successfully formed a government.

In May 2019, the Saeima selected ECJ judge Egils Levits to succeed Vējonis as president.

A2 0-4 pts

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

The Latvian constitution provides for a unicameral, 100-seat Saeima, whose members are elected to four-year terms. The 2018 parliamentary election was viewed as competitive and credible, and stakeholders accepted the results.

That election saw a significant loss by all three previously governing parties—the ZZS, the center-right Unity, and the conservative National Alliance—which jointly took 32 seats. The opposition Harmony party, which mainly defends the interests of Latvia's ethnic Russians, took 23 seats, one fewer than in the previous election. Newly founded movements took the remaining 45: the populist KPV LV and the right-wing JKP each took 16 seats, and the liberal coalition Development/For! (LA/KP) took the remaining 13. Unity leader Kariņš successfully formed a coalition with the National Alliance, JKP, a majority of KPV LV lawmakers, and LA/KP in January 2019.

A3 0-4 pts

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

In general, the electoral framework is implemented fairly by the Central Election Commission (CEC) and regional and local election administrations.

The president has traditionally been elected through a closed vote but in late 2018, the outgoing Saeima amended the constitution to make future balloting open. Levits was the first president to be selected through an open ballot.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

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

Latvia's political parties organize and compete freely. However, Latvian political candidates cannot run as independents, and those who belonged to communist or pro-Soviet organizations after 1991 may not hold public office. Parliamentary elections often result in the entry of new political parties to the Saeima.

B2 0-4 pts

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

Opposition parties compete freely and have a realistic chance of increasing their power through elections. However, Harmony and its predecessors, mostly supported by 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 that are external to the 4 /
political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 4**

Politically influential businesspeople have affected Latvians' ability to freely make political choices in recent years. In 2017, transcripts of these individuals discussing efforts to replace government officials and influence media outlets were released during the so-called Oligarch Talks scandal.

The ZZS is closely affiliated with Aivars Lembergs, who was implicated in the 2017 scandal, but its coalition was defeated in 2018. Since then, the government has subsequently worked to bolster its own authority. In June 2019, the Saeima passed legislation to strengthen the banking regulator, the Financial and Capital Market Commission (FKTK). In September, it earmarked additional funding to combat money laundering and to bolster existing audit and anticorruption offices. In December, the Saeima amended existing legislation to place port facilities in Riga and Ventspils under public administration. Earlier that month, the United States sanctioned Lembergs, who served as the mayor of Ventspils and administered its port through his business holdings, over allegations of corruption.

Authorities and other observers continue to express concern about the presence of disinformation and Russian propaganda in Latvian media, and other attempts by Russia to influence domestic politics.

Score Change: The score improved 3 to 4 because the 2018 election and subsequent government decisions have reinforced an apparent decline in influence among politically connected businesspeople.

B4 0-4 pts

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

Over 200,000 of Latvia's registered residents are stateless, and most of them are ethnic Russians. They may not vote, hold public office, work in government offices, or establish political parties. In October 2019, lawmakers adopted previously rejected legislation that will automatically grant citizenship to Latvian-born children of noncitizens beginning in 2020.

Women won 31 percent of seats in the Saeima in the 2018 election, up from 19 percent previously.

LGBT+ people are poorly represented in Latvian politics, and parties have been reticent to address LGBT+ issues. However, the Saeima currently includes two openly LGBT+ members, foreign minister Edgars Rinkēvičs and LA/KP lawmaker Marija Golubeva, who won her seat in 2018.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

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

While elections are held on time and elected representatives are duly seated, Latvian governments are fragmented and often short-lived. Business groups have historically exploited this to influence their decisions, though the current government has since worked to bolster its authority by strengthening institutions and combating money laundering.

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because the new government has pursued various policies meant to reduce improper influence by private interests, and has generally operated without interference from unelected entities.

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, the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) remained active in 2019; in September it raided the offices of several construction firms over allegations that the firms bribed public officials and manipulated bidding processes between 2015 and 2018.

Latvian authorities and courts also dealt with several ongoing corruption cases in 2019. Lembergs was scheduled to face trial over corruption allegations, but in October, a Riga court delayed the proceedings to 2020 to allow his lawyer to review the case. Meanwhile, longtime central bank governor Ilmārs Rimšēvičs was charged with bribery in 2018 and money laundering in May 2019. His trial began in November, but the Riga District Court stayed the case in late December, sending it to the ECJ to rule on Rimšēvičs's potential immunity from prosecution. The national government also grappled with a procurement scandal within Riga's municipal government, which was revealed in late 2018. In April 2019, environmental minister Juris Pūce suspended mayor Nils Ušakovs, and the Saeima was considering legislation that would dissolve the city's council at year's end.

C3 0-4 pts

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

The legislative framework for ensuring openness and transparency of the government is extensive. However, there is a notable lack of transparency in functioning of state companies, and in public procurement processes.

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, government offices, courts, and politically connected businesspeople sometimes interfere with media outlets' and reporters' work. In late 2018, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP), Latvia's media regulator, abruptly dismissed the chairperson of publicly operated Latvian Television (LTV) along with a board member. In April 2019, the Latvian Association of Journalists (LŽA) called on prosecutors to investigate the decision, and the regulator's chief resigned over the matter in September.

Libel remains a criminal offense.

Authorities have occasionally restricted Russian radio and news websites, citing concerns about propaganda in some of these cases. In November 2019, the NEPLP suspended the broadcast of nine Russian-language television channels because their owner, Russian businessperson Yuri Kovalchuk, was subject to European Union (EU) sanctions.

D2 0-4 pts

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

Freedom of religion is generally respected. However, Latvia's small Muslim population has faced

social pressure in the wake of a 2015 refugee crisis.

D3 0-4 pts

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

Recent years have seen lawmakers begin to place some limitations on academic instruction. In 2015, the Saeima adopted a law mandating that schools provide children a "moral education" that coincides with the values of the constitution, including traditional views of marriage and family life. A law that took effect in 2017 enabled the firing of teachers found to be "disloyal to the state."

Authorities in 2018 endeavored to discourage or eliminate the use of minority languages in schools and universities, with the measures generally viewed as targeting Russian-language instruction. The Saeima amended the Education Law to phase out the use of minority languages in public and private high schools, and significantly reduce their use in primary schools. Lawmakers approved a measure that prevented private and public higher education institutions from offering programs conducted in Russian and other minority languages, with an exception granted for philology. The Kariņš government publicly committed to maintain these policies in 2019.

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

Private discussion is generally open and free. The public display of Soviet and Nazi symbols is banned.

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 does not restrict the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). However, advocacy by NGOs is increasingly viewed as partisan activity.

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.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4

While judicial independence is generally respected, inefficiency, politicization, and corruption within the judicial system persist. EU polling has previously shown significant distrust of the courts among the general public and companies alike. In a 2019 survey conducted by European Network of Councils for the Judiciary, 46 percent of polled judges in Latvia reported that the government did not respect their independence.

F2 0-4 pts

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

The legal system is overburdened and hampered by corruption and inefficiency. By law, legal aid must be provided to people who cannot retain their own, but this is inconsistently enforced. Suspects are sometimes interrogated without the presence of a lawyer. Lengthy 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 has one of the EU's highest prison population rates. Prisons continue to suffer from overcrowding, conditions are poor, and abuses of detainees and prisoners by law enforcement agents has been reported.

According to statistics agency Eurostat, Latvia had the EU's second-highest intentional homicide rate in 2017, the last year this data was available.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 3 / 4

Latvia lacks a specific law guaranteeing gender equality, but gender equality has featured in policy plans promulgated since 2004. A 2019 World Bank report noted that Latvia was one of six countries that guaranteed gender equality on employment and business matters, but a pay gap also persists. Members of Latvia's Roma minority face discrimination in schools and workplaces. Latvian laws do not offer specific protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (except in employment) or gender identity.

According to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the country's strict language policies have set the stage for discrimination against minorities in the public and private spheres.

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

Citizens and noncitizens may travel freely within the country and internationally.

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

Years of reform efforts have created an environment in which people may freely establish businesses and own property, 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

Domestic violence is not frequently reported, and police do not always take meaningful action when it is. Same-sex marriage was banned in 2005, and Latvia is one of six EU member states that do not recognize same-sex partnerships.

G4 0-4 pts

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

About 27 percent of Latvia's population was at risk of social exclusion or poverty in 2019, according to Eurostat. The shadow economy is extensive, and informal workers are vulnerable to labor abuses and being drawn into criminal operations.

However, the Latvian economy has rebounded since the 2008–09 financial crisis, which inflicted severe economic hardship. Unemployment declined to 6.4 percent by the end of 2019, from 17.3 percent in 2009 and a record high of 21.3 percent in 2010. GDP per capita reached 69 percent of the EU average in 2018, from 52 percent in 2009. The monthly minimum wage rose by €50 (\$57), to €430 (\$490) in 2018.

The US State Department's 2019 *Trafficking in Persons* report noted that Latvians are vulnerable to sex trafficking, brokered marriages, domestic servitude, and forced labor. Latvia maintains an assistance mechanism for trafficking survivors, but the State Department also noted that prosecutors have relatively little success in convicting traffickers.

ecoi.net summary:



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