



Document #2107753

USDOS – US Department of State (Author)

2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Latvia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Latvia during the year.

There were no credible reports of significant human rights abuses.

The government took credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

Section 1.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

A. ARBITRARY DEPRIVATION OF LIFE AND OTHER UNLAWFUL OR POLITICALLY MOTIVATED KILLINGS

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings.

B. DISAPPEARANCE

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

C. TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN, OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT, AND OTHER RELATED ABUSES

The law prohibited such practices, and there were no credible reports government officials employed them.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) noted in 2022 that prisoner-on-prisoner violence and the formation of informal prisoner hierarchies were problems. Prisoners complained of poor sanitation, insufficient ventilation, lack of natural light, and nutrition.

Abusive Physical Conditions: The Daugavpils Detention Center, operated by the State Border Guards, held at any given time dozens of asylum seekers and third-country, irregular migrants who unlawfully entered the country from Belarus throughout the year. Families, including children, were housed in a separate ward within the detention center. Movements within the detention center were limited. The State Border Guards processed requests for health services, legal counsel, and other needs, as well as complaints.

Administration: There were no significant reports regarding prison or detention center conditions that raised human rights concerns. Prison authorities generally investigated credible allegations of mistreatment and documented the results of their investigations in a publicly accessible manner.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring by national and international human rights monitors, including the CPT, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the ombudsperson, and an independent nongovernmental organization (NGO) observer.

Improvements: In August, authorities opened a new asylum seekers' accommodation center in Liepna to reduce crowds at the Daugavpils Detention Center.

D. ARBITRARY ARREST OR DETENTION

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and allowed any individual to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government generally observed these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

In most cases officials required a warrant issued by an authorized judicial official to make an arrest. Exceptions were specifically defined by law and included persons caught by police in the act of committing a crime, suspects identified by eyewitnesses, and suspects who posed a flight risk. The law required prosecutors to charge detainees and bring them before a judge within 48 hours. Through June, the ombudsperson did not receive any complaints concerning detention without timely charges.

Officials generally informed detainees promptly of charges against them. Some detainees complained that authorities failed to provide verbal information regarding their rights immediately upon arrest. Instead, they received information sheets explaining their rights and duties. While a bail system existed, judges used it infrequently and usually in cases involving economic crimes.

Detainees had the right to an attorney who could be present during questioning. According to the CPT's 2022 report, several detainees claimed they had been informally questioned by police without the presence of a lawyer, prior to the intake of a formal statement in a lawyer's presence. The government generally provided attorneys for indigent defendants.

Third-country, irregular migrants who unlawfully entered the country from Belarus received legal counsel only if they challenged their initial detention, or after their request for asylum was denied and they wished to appeal the decision.

E. DENIAL OF FAIR PUBLIC TRIAL

The constitution and law provided for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provided for the right to a fair and public trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right.

Through June, the ombudsperson received two complaints concerning lengthy judicial proceedings. Latvian courts were processing cases from 2009. There was a lengthy waiting period from when a case was filed to the date it was tried in court.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

F. TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Not applicable.

G. PROPERTY SEIZURE AND RESTITUTION

The government had laws and mechanisms in place, and NGOs and advocacy groups reported the government made significant progress on resolving Holocaust-era claims, including for foreign citizens.

Of the €40 million (\$43.2 million) awarded to the Jewish community in 2022 in lieu of returning 265 communal properties nationalized under Soviet occupation, €4 million (\$4.3 million) were allocated from the state

budget during the year. The funds were used to provide social and material assistance to Holocaust survivors and fund cemetery and building restoration projects (such as community centers, museums, and memorials).

The Department of State's *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act Report* to Congress, released publicly in July 2020, can be found on the Department's website: <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

H. ARBITRARY OR UNLAWFUL INTERFERENCE WITH PRIVACY, FAMILY, HOME, OR CORRESPONDENCE

The constitution and the law prohibited such actions, and there were no reports the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2.

Respect for Civil Liberties

A. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, INCLUDING FOR MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND OTHER MEDIA

The constitution and the law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right. An independent media, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for media members.

Freedom of Expression: Although the law generally provided for freedom of expression, it criminalized incitement to racial or ethnic hatred and the spreading of false information regarding the financial system. The law forbade glorifying or denying genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes against the country perpetrated by the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany, and the use of symbols of totalitarian regimes in political settings. Violation of these provisions could lead to a five-year prison sentence, community service, or a fine. There were also restrictions on speech deemed a threat to national security. The law criminalized nonviolent acts committed against the state or that challenged its "independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, or authority." Through June, police initiated two criminal procedures for glorifying or denying genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes – both cases pertaining to the war in Ukraine.

Through June, the State Security Service initiated five criminal cases against individuals for inciting national, ethnic, religious, or racial hatred.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: Independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views with few restrictions. The law required

that 65 percent of all television broadcast time in national and regional electronic media be in Latvian or be dubbed or subtitled. Extensive Russian-language programming was also available in all national and local media. Restrictions on speech that incited racial hatred, spread false information regarding the financial system, or glorified or denied genocide, crimes against humanity, or crimes against the country by the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany also applied to print and broadcast media, the publication of books, and online newspapers and journals. In May, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) imposed a fine of €8,500 (\$9,189) on the *Tvnet* portal for the manner in which interview subject Aleksejs Roslikovs, a member of parliament, used the word “deportation,” equating the possible expulsion of Russian citizens from Latvia to how Latvians were deported to Siberia in 1941 and 1949. The Ministry of Culture, the Media Ethics Council, and the parliamentary Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee criticized the NEPLP’s decision. The State Security Service also stated it did not believe the remarks constituted an offense. *Tvnet* appealed the NEPLP’s decision.

Internet Freedom

There were no credible reports the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. Internet speech was subject to the same restrictions as other forms of speech and media.

In February, the NEPLP restricted access to websites linked to Russian propaganda until the sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU were lifted. In 2022, the NEPLP blocked several websites that disseminated false and misleading content regarding Russia’s hostilities in Ukraine and justified war crimes committed by Russia. The block applied to websites in Russia, Belarus, and within the EU, such as *freebalt.com*, *antifashist.com*, and *Russia Today*.

B. FREEDOMS OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

The constitution and law provided for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution and the law provided for freedom of peaceful assembly. The government generally respected this right, with some restrictions. Organizers of demonstrations typically had to notify authorities 10 days in advance. Authorities could approve demonstrations within 24 hours of an event if longer advance notice was “reasonably impossible.” Officials could deny or modify permits to protect public safety or national security.

Freedom of Association

The constitution and the law provided for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right. The law prohibited the

registration of communist, Nazi, or other organizations that contravened the constitution or advocated the violent overthrow of the government.

C. FREEDOM OF RELIGION

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

D. FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THE RIGHT TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

The law provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

E. PROTECTION OF REFUGEES

The government generally cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers.

Access to Asylum: The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government established a system for providing protection to refugees. In June, the government amended the law on the State Border and State Border Guards to allow for the announcement of an “enhanced border regime” in response to increased irregular migration instigated and organized by Belarusian authorities. Under the new law, during an “enhanced border regime,” applications for asylum were accepted only at official border crossing checkpoints, allowing the State Border Guard to refuse applications for asylum if requested outside of those points. UNHCR expressed concern that the legal change effectively authorized “pushbacks” and could lead to individuals not being granted effective access to territory and the right to seek asylum, as required by international and European law. UNHCR also noted concerns that the amendments to the law did not specify how assessments to refuse entry for asylum-seekers arriving irregularly should be conducted, and that the assessments would be undocumented.

Durable Solutions: The government provided a quarter of the funding for the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) voluntary return program and administered most of the IOM’s remaining budget. During the year, the IOM assisted in the voluntary return of 38 persons: 15 Indians, 12 Uzbeks, six Azerbaijanis, two Russians, and one person each from Tajikistan, Moldova, and the UK. The program was terminated in July.

The government assisted more than 3,000 Ukrainian citizens and other residents of Ukraine who fled Russia’s war. More than 50,000 Ukrainians had registered in Latvia since February 2022.

Temporary Protection: The law allowed for the granting of temporary protection to individuals not found to qualify for refugee status but who

were nonetheless determined to need international protection. Through June, the government granted temporary protection status to 9,155 persons, mostly Ukrainian citizens, and granted alternate status to 21 persons.

F. STATUS AND TREATMENT OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

Not applicable.

G. STATELESS PERSONS

As of July, the government reported 155 stateless persons in the country who had been granted stateless status in accordance with the 1954 UN Statelessness Convention. Persons categorized by authorities as stateless could pursue citizenship through naturalization after obtaining a permanent residence permit and lawfully residing in the country for five years.

Section 3.

Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: According to international election observers, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office of Democratic Initiatives and Human Rights, national elections were widely reported to be fair and free of abuses and irregularities. NGOs reported lack of adequate infrastructure that would allow persons with disabilities to access polling stations independently.

Political Parties and Political Participation: Citizens could organize political parties with minimal restriction. The law prohibited the country's noncitizen residents from organizing political parties without the participation of at least an equal number of citizens. Individuals who remained active in the Communist Party or other pro-Soviet organizations after 1991 or who worked for such institutions as the Soviet KGB were prohibited from holding public office.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable Groups: Approximately 10 percent of the population were noncitizen residents – most of them ethnic Russians – who could not participate in elections and choose their representation.

Section 4.

Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, and the government generally implemented the law effectively. Officials sometimes engaged in corrupt practices, and polling data consistently showed the majority of the public believed corruption was widespread, officials were rarely held accountable, investigation and prosecution of corruption cases were slow, and penalties were mild.

Corruption: Corruption was a problem. Investigation of corruption cases improved, but prosecutions were slow, and penalties were mild and usually limited to fines. NGOs stated concerns regarding the quality of investigations and the efficiency of the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau's (KNAB) leadership. A lack of appropriate judicial training, quality of law education, lack of interagency communication, poor work organization, and lengthy written procedures were the main problems in the judicial sector. Public procurements entailed the largest corruption risks.

Through June, the KNAB initiated 16 criminal proceedings on bribery, abuse of office, fraud, exceeding the powers of office, and disclosure of classified information.

Section 5.

Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction to monitor or investigate human rights conditions or cases and publish their findings. Government officials were often cooperative and responsive to the views of these groups.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Office of the Ombudsperson was responsible for monitoring the government's performance on human rights. The ombudsperson reported good cooperation with the agencies he monitored and said his office operated without direct government or political interference. In its most recent report in 2019, the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance observed that the ombudsperson's mandate did not include providing independent assistance to victims of racism. The Office of the Ombudsperson could not enforce its recommendations or levy fines, although it could apply to the Constitutional Court to initiate proceedings against a public institution that failed to address a source of discrimination. The ombudsperson could also file a complaint in an administrative court if it was in the public interest or bring a case to the civil courts if the problem concerned a violation of equal treatment. As required by law, the Office of the Ombudsperson published an annual report describing its activities and making recommendations to the government.

A standing parliamentary committee on human rights and public affairs met weekly when parliament was in session. It considered initiatives related to human rights.

Section 6.

Discrimination and Societal Abuses

WOMEN

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law specifically criminalized rape of a person, regardless of gender. Spousal rape was explicitly considered rape with “aggravated circumstances.” Criminal penalties for rape ranged from four years to life imprisonment. The government effectively enforced the law.

When police received a report of rape, they were required to open an investigation. Because the Ministry of Justice did not distinguish between spousal rape and non-spousal rape cases involving aggravated circumstances, there were no reports available on whether any spousal rape case was prosecuted. NGOs stressed that rape cases were underreported.

The law provided a broad definition of violence that included physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. Domestic and intimate partner violence was criminalized and considered an aggravating factor in certain criminal offenses. There were penalties for causing “minor” bodily harm when the survivor and perpetrator were spouses, former spouses, or civil partners. Penalties ranged from fines to imprisonment.

The law allowed police to investigate domestic violence without a survivor’s prior approval and criminalized stalking. The law allowed survivors of domestic violence to request that police officers issue an order for the eviction of the perpetrator for eight days. Upon receiving such a request, police had to react immediately. Only courts could issue restraining orders and were required to respond to such requests within one business day. Once a restraining order was issued, it remained in force until a court revoked it.

Domestic violence was a serious problem. Through June, police initiated 155 criminal proceedings for domestic violence and detained 47 persons. In the same period, police issued 395 restraining orders. In a high-profile case, a man killed his former wife on April 16 with an axe in Jekabpils in front of her mother and daughter after she had filed for a restraining order and requested additional police protection. The case provoked an intense public reaction. Both police and the prosecutor’s office investigated the case and issued calls for a more thorough response by authorities in domestic violence cases. In May, the Cabinet of Ministers

tasked the Crime Prevention Council with drafting a plan to combat violence against women and domestic violence for the period 2024-2029.

Parliament ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) on November 30.

Police were required to use standardized protocols to report and investigate gender-based violence, including domestic violence. Responding police officers were required to complete and send an evaluation to the social service of the relevant local government within one working day. In most cases doctors could not report domestic violence to police without the consent of adult victims.

As of July 1, the government provided for a crisis apartment as a rehabilitation service for survivors of violence. The crisis apartment service was intended for rehabilitation of victims for up to 30 days, but the stay could be extended up to 180 days. The government provided state funding to shelters. There was one government-funded survivor support hotline and several NGO-managed crisis hotlines. The government hotline referred survivors to an appropriate NGO for further support.

Discrimination: The law provided for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. The government enforced its antidiscrimination laws effectively.

There were instances of hiring and pay discrimination against women, particularly in the private sector, but they were underreported to the ombudsperson. In the most recent data from 2022, the average gross hourly earnings of women in the country were 17.1 percent lower than those of men.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

The government provided access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. Emergency contraception and postexposure prophylaxis were available as part of clinical management of rape.

SYSTEMIC RACIAL OR ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

The law provided for equal treatment and protection of members of racial and ethnic minority groups against violence, discrimination, and hatred. The government enforced its antiviolenence laws effectively.

NGOs representing minority groups stated that discrimination and harassment of members of national minority groups, including what they

considered hate speech, were underreported to authorities.

Roma faced widespread societal discrimination, high levels of unemployment, and illiteracy. The government continued integration and awareness programs in support of Roma, although some community members expressed concern that the support was inconsistent.

CHILDREN

Child Abuse: Violence against children was a problem. The law provided for protection of children against violence, exploitation, sexual abuse, involvement in commercial sexual exploitation, and serious threats to their life, health, or development, such as hazardous conditions. Violation of the law was punishable by imprisonment, community service, or a fine and supervised probation for a period of up to three years. The law empowered custody courts to remove vulnerable and abused children from violent homes if parents or guardians could not do so or were themselves perpetrators of the violence. Police effectively enforced laws against child abuse.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage was 18. Persons younger than 18 could legally marry only with parental permission and as long as one party was at least 16 and the other at least 18. The government effectively enforced the law.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited the commercial sexual exploitation of children, the sale of children, offering or procuring a child for commercial sex, and practices related to child pornography. Authorities generally enforced the law. The purchase, display, reproduction, or distribution of child pornography was punishable by up to three years in prison. Involving a child in the production of pornography was punishable by up to 12 years in prison, depending on the age of the child. The minimum age for consensual sex was 16.

ANTISEMITISM

Government sources estimated there were approximately 7,000 Jewish residents in the country. There were no reports of antisemitic attacks against individuals, although on the internet there were public references to stereotypes by some fringe groups. In April the government allocated €170,000 (\$183,770) for a program designed to combat racism and antisemitism through education and integration efforts. The government provided financial support to Jewish history, religious, and cultural institutions.

The annual commemoration of Latvian Legionnaires who fought in German Waffen SS units against the Soviet army in World War II was held in Riga in March. As in recent years, the event was sparsely attended, with an estimated 350 participants, including four parliamentarians from National Alliance. Separately, some government officials attended a

memorial event at the regimental cemetery in Lestene, as they have in previous years.

On July 4, President Egils Levits, Speaker of Parliament Edvards Smiltens, several members of parliament, Jewish community representatives, government officials, and foreign diplomats attended the Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Riga. The ceremony was open to the public.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

ACTS OF VIOLENCE, CRIMINALIZATION, AND OTHER ABUSES BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY OR EXPRESSION, OR SEX CHARACTERISTICS

Criminalization: No laws criminalized consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults, cross-dressing, or other sexual or gender characteristic-related behavior. There were no reports seemingly neutral laws were disproportionately applied to target lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons.

Violence and Harassment: There were no reports that state or nonstate actors perpetrated, condoned, or tolerated violence or harassment against LGBTQI+ individuals or those reporting such abuse. NGOs stated that instances of violence and other abuses based on sexual orientation or gender identity tended to be underreported.

In Daugavpils, an LGBTQI+ person got into a fight with another person. The LGBTQI+ person said he was attacked over his sexuality. After the local prosecutor closed the case for a lack of evidence, the prosecutor of the district reopened it for further examination. The case was pending at year's end.

Discrimination: The law prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Authorities generally enforced the law. The government did not collect data regarding sexual orientation and gender identity and thus could not accurately assess the magnitude of the problem or need for specialized services.

NGOs reported an improved relationship with the Ministry of Justice and with police, reflected by increased responsiveness by police to complaints filed by LGBTQI+ persons. Through June, a total of 39 same-sex couples had been recognized by courts as a legal family unit in the country, including 11 during the year. Another 24 same-sex couples were waiting for their cases to be heard in court. On November 9, the parliament passed a package of amendments introducing social and financial benefits

and creating a new legal institution of partnership for same-sex couples. The partnerships law had not entered into force at year end.

There were no reports of discrimination in health, housing, education, or employment.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: The law provided a process for legal gender recognition, but not through self-identification. Through June, 14 persons had legally changed their gender. The law required transgender persons to provide a medical opinion from a panel of doctors attesting to their stated gender for authorities to change their gender identity markers.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There was no law banning so-called conversion therapy practices, but there were no publicly documented cases of forced or involuntary so-called conversion therapy practices to try to change the sexual orientation or gender identity or expression of adults or children.

There were no reports surgeries were performed on children or nonconsenting adult intersex persons.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: The government generally allowed for the expression, association, and peaceful assembly of LGBTQI+ persons and other individuals speaking out on LGBTQI+ issues.

More than 7,000 persons attended Riga Pride in June, setting a record for the event. Five protesters were present, and police reported one protester who was detained but no other incidents. Local media provided factual, mostly neutral, or positive coverage.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The constitution and law prohibited discrimination against persons with disabilities and mandated their access to education, employment, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others. The government generally did not enforce these provisions.

The law mandated access to public buildings for persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, NGOs stated that less than 8 percent of public buildings were accessible to persons with disabilities. Adherence to accessibility regulations was haphazard; ramps existed but were often too steep, and bathrooms for persons with disabilities were often on the second floor of buildings with no elevators. In July, after 11 years of litigation, the Association of People with Disabilities and Their Friends obtained a favorable verdict in its lawsuit against the Riga City Council regarding compliance with environmental accessibility requirements in the building owned by the Art Academy of Latvia. The EU had provided funding for the

building with the stipulation that the facility had to be made accessible to persons with disabilities. There was no requirement to make private buildings accessible to persons with disabilities.

While health and labor services were provided as stipulated by law, NGOs stated that most persons with disabilities had limited access to work and health care due to a lack of personal assistants, the lack of specialized job education and training programs, the weak performance of the State Employment Agency, and a lack of government support for businesses employing persons with disabilities. Persons with intellectual disabilities had the least opportunities for employment. According to a 2022 study by the Parliamentary Analytical Office reduced to “a meaningless existence.” The accessibility of health services was limited in regions due to inaccessible infrastructure. According to the State Health Inspectorate, only 4 percent of dental offices were accessible to persons with disabilities, and in the region of Kurzeme, which constituted one third of the territory of the country, there was only one dental office accessible to persons with disabilities.

Access to housing and mortgage loans was scant.

Schools were generally able to accommodate the needs of children with physical disabilities. NGOs cited a lack of psychological support for students with mental disabilities. Several schools dedicated only to students with disabilities still existed, although children were increasingly integrated into the regular educational system.

Access to some polling stations and information regarding election candidates and processes was a problem for persons with disabilities. The government did not take action to address the problem, limiting the rights of persons with disabilities to participate in civic life.

Institutionalized Children: Through June, 540 children were in state-run orphanages, 97 percent of whom were older than four. Through June, there were six reports of abuse in institutions, two of which were confirmed by the National Inspectorate for the Protection of Children’s Rights.

Section 7.

Worker Rights

A. FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND THE RIGHT TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

The law provided for workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination and employer interference in union functions, and provided reinstatement for unlawful dismissal, including dismissal for

union activity. Unions could not have fewer than 15 members or less than 25 percent of the total number of employees in the company (which could not be fewer than five).

There were several limitations on these rights. Uniformed members of the military and members of the State Security Services could not form or join unions. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, collective bargaining in the public administration was a formal procedure with no real substance since all employment conditions were fixed by law.

While the law provided for the right to strike, it required a strike vote by a simple majority at a meeting attended by more than half of the union's members. It prohibited strikes in sectors related to public safety and by personnel classified as essential, including judges, prosecutors, police, firefighters, border guards, employees of state security institutions, prison guards, and military personnel. The law prohibited "solidarity" strikes by workers who were not directly involved in a specific labor agreement between strikers and their employers, a restriction criticized by local labor groups. It also banned "political" strikes. The law provided arbitration mechanisms for essential personnel not permitted to strike.

The government effectively enforced laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike for workers. EU labor regulations also applied. Resources, inspections, and remediation were adequate under the law. Penalties for violations of freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike were commensurate with or less than those for analogous violations such as civil rights violations. Penalties were regularly applied against violators. Penalties ranged from a few hundred to several thousand euros but were insufficient to deter violations. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays and appeals. Labor rights organizations expressed concern regarding employer discrimination against union members.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were generally respected. The law on trade unions required trade unions to be independent. Anti-corruption officials and press reports stated, however, that external funding and support called into question the independence of some individuals and groups active in unions.

B. PROHIBITION OF FORCED OR COMPULSORY LABOR

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

C. PROHIBITION OF CHILD LABOR AND MINIMUM AGE FOR EMPLOYMENT

The statutory minimum age for employment was 15. Children ages 13 or older could work in certain jobs outside of school hours with written

permission from a parent. The law prohibited children younger than 18 from performing nighttime or overtime work. The law provided that children could not work in jobs that posed a risk to their physical safety, health, or development. The government effectively enforced child labor and minimum age laws. Penalties were commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes and were regularly applied against violators.

There were no reports of labor abuses involving children or unregistered employment of youth. There were no confirmed reports of the worst forms of child labor. The law prohibited all the worst forms of child labor.

D. DISCRIMINATION (SEE SECTION 6)

E. ACCEPTABLE CONDITIONS OF WORK

Wage and Hour Laws: The law set a monthly minimum wage that was above the official poverty line. The law provided for a regular workweek of 40 hours. The maximum permitted overtime work calculated over a four-month reference period could not exceed eight hours on average within a seven-day period. The law required a minimum of 100 percent premium pay in compensation for overtime, unless the parties agreed to other forms of compensation in a contract; however, this requirement was rarely enforced. Workers in low-skilled manufacturing and retail jobs as well as some public-sector employees, such as firefighters and police, were reportedly most vulnerable to poor working conditions, including long work hours, lack of overtime pay, and arbitrary remuneration.

Occupational Safety and Health: The law established appropriate minimum occupational safety and health (OSH) standards for the workplace for the main industries in the country. The government proactively identified unsafe conditions and responded to workers' OSH complaints. While the law allowed workers to remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardizing their employment, these regulations were not always followed. Workers were able to complain to the State Labor Inspectorate when they believed their rights were violated, most notably the industrial sector, transportation, construction, wood processing, and lumber industries.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The government effectively enforced minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. Penalties were commensurate with those for other analogous crimes and sufficient to deter violations. Penalties for violations were fines that varied widely, depending on the severity and frequency of the violation. Penalties were regularly applied against violators. The State Labor Inspectorate was responsible for enforcing minimum wage regulations, restrictions on hours of work, and OSH standards. The number of labor inspectors was sufficient to enforce compliance, and the inspectorate had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions.

OSH standards and labor laws were not always enforced in the informal economy, which equaled approximately 27 percent of the total economy.

Workplace injuries and fatalities were primarily in the transportation, construction, wood processing, and lumber industries. Real wage estimates were difficult to calculate in the sizeable informal economy, especially due to the increasing economic hardships as a result of the war in Ukraine. According to an academic study done by the Stockholm School of Economics, untaxed salaries accounted for 27 percent of the GDP in 2022.

ecoi.net description:

Annual report on human rights in 2023

Country:

Latvia

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#) (Author)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/latvia>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

23 April 2024

Available on ecoi.net since:

23 April 2024

Document ID:

2107753

Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for
Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and
Documentation
(ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße
32, 1041 Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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