



Document #2097710

Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2023 - 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 2022

- After competitive and credible parliamentary elections in October, the center-right party New Unity won 26 out of 100 seats in the Saeima (parliament) and established a ruling coalition with the centrist alliance United List and the right-wing National Alliance. Harmony, which mostly represents the Russian-speaking population and previously had the largest parliamentary faction, did not pass the electoral threshold to be represented in the Saeima.
- In September, Latvia announced a state of emergency in areas near its border with Russia after Moscow declared a partial military mobilization to support its war effort in Ukraine. Latvia also extended the state of emergency on its border with Belarus, which was declared last summer after the flow of irregular crossings steeply

increased. The government received about 36,600 Ukrainians fleeing Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine but continued to use "pushback" measures against migrants from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere who attempted to enter Latvia from Belarus.

- Due to the large number of Russian speakers in Latvia's population, the war in Ukraine also increased cultural tensions within society. Authorities banned all Russia-based media outlets in June, began to demolish Soviet monuments, and sped up the transition to teaching in Latvian in all schools.

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 parliament. Current prime minister Krišjānis Kariņš is the first head of government to have served a full term of office since Latvia regained independence. After parliamentary elections in October 2022, Kariņš was approved to continue leading the government. President Egils Levits came to power in 2019 in an orderly and fair manner.

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 multi-member 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. Relatively new political movements took 45 seats, similarly to the 2018 election.

The center-right party New Unity, headed by Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, won 26 out of 100 seats in the Saeima, 18 more than they won in the 2018 elections. In December, New Unity established a ruling coalition with the newly formed centrist alliance United List, which won 15 seats, and the right-wing National Alliance, which won 13. Despite previously having the largest parliamentary faction, the opposition center-left Social Democratic party Harmony, which mostly represents the Russian-speaking population, did not pass the electoral threshold to be represented in parliament. The new Saeima also includes the Union of

Farmers and Greens (ZZS), a splinter party from Harmony called For Stability!, the center-left Progressives, and the populist Latvia First. Voter turnout was 59.4 percent, about 5 percent higher than in 2018.

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 operating impartially and ensuring the integrity of the electoral process.

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, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

Latvia's political parties organize and compete freely, and elections often result in representation for newly founded parties or coalitions. 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. In October 2022, that restriction was expanded to include Latvian candidates to the European Parliament.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 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 that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 4 / 4

Politically connected businesspeople historically exercised undue influence in the country, using patronage networks, corruption, and other opaque means to infringe on the autonomy of voters and candidates. Efforts by Latvian authorities to combat corruption and money laundering have apparently reduced the political influence of these figures. However, during the parliamentary elections in October 2022, influential individuals including Aivars Lembergs, the former mayor of Ventspils and one of the

richest people in the country, Andris Šķēle, a former prime minister, and Ainārs Šlesers, a former transport minister, retained some of their political sway in both the opposition and ruling parties.

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 January 2021, around 200,000 of Latvia's registered residents—most of them ethnic Russians—were stateless, without the right to vote, hold public office, work in government offices, or establish political parties. In April 2022, the Saeima passed legislation amending the Citizenship Law to allow the government to revoke the citizenship of individuals who support countries or people responsible for war crimes.

Though women have made gains in political participation, at the end of 2022 they only held 29 percent of seats in the new Saeima. In the new cabinet, 6 of the 14 members are women. Reappointed foreign affairs minister Edgars Rinkēvičs is openly gay. However, LGBT+ people are poorly represented in Latvian politics, and parties have been reluctant to address their interests.

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 2022, Latvia adopted new legislation on whistleblowing to align with European Union (EU) goals and amended laws on the financing of political parties to promote stability and parliamentary efficiency.

Several high-profile figures were convicted of corruption in 2021. In February 2021, prominent ZZS politician bail Aivars Lembergs was sentenced to five years in prison. In February 2022, Lembergs was released while he appealed the sentence. Former prime minister Šķēle and former transport minister Šlesers were indicted in 2021 in a so-called Digitalgate criminal case. In January 2022, the Court of Economic Affairs acquitted them both.

C3 0-4 pts

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

The legislative framework features extensive provisions intended to ensure government transparency. However, there is a notable lack of transparency in the functioning of state-owned companies and in public procurement processes. Public procurement processes remain at high risk of corruption, according to the European Commission's 2022 *Rule of Law Report*.

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 both 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.

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 websites, including kremlin.ru, an official Russian site.

However, between the start of the war in Ukraine and July 2022, more than 200 journalists and 23 media organizations emigrated to Latvia from Russia. In December, Latvian authorities revoked the broadcast license of TV Rain, an independent Russian channel operating in Latvia—a move criticized by both local and international journalist organizations.

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.

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 begun to place 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.

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.

By October 2022, Government authorities had launched around 30 criminal proceedings against individuals who allegedly supported the war in Ukraine, including by posting videos on social media expressing approval of the invasion. By October the State Security Service had banned more than 200 people from Latvia for similar reasons, and in December it warned the parliamentary party For Stability! that its operations could be terminated due to allegedly prowar comments by its members of parliament.

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. The government restricted public gatherings as a public-health measure to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021. As of April 2022, most pandemic restrictions were lifted by the government.

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 often 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, and antiunion discrimination is prohibited. In practice, the share of workers covered by collective-bargaining agreements has declined over time and covered around 27 percent of the workforce in 2018, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 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.

In general, the general public perceives judicial independence as average, while businesses perceive it as very low.

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 had been gradually improving, it was still 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 the latest Eurostat data, as of 2020, Latvia still has the highest homicide rate, particularly of women, 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 2 / various segments of the population? 4

The constitution guarantees equality before the law and the protection of human rights without discrimination, and several safeguards are specified in law. However, state language policies discriminate against ethnic minority groups in education, employment, and access to services.

Women continue to suffer from a gender-based pay gap in practice, and Roma in Latvia face discrimination in schools and workplaces. Discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation is prohibited, but the law does not provide broader protection against discrimination for LGBT+ people.

In August 2021, authorities declared a state of emergency after a growing number of migrants and asylum seekers from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere attempted to enter Latvia from Belarus. The government subsequently authorized the use of militarized “pushback” measures, preventing many legitimate refugees and asylum seekers with incomplete paperwork from entering the country. Between August 2021 and November 2022, up to 8,000 people were prevented from crossing into Latvia.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

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

Citizens and noncitizens may travel freely within the country and internationally. Movement restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic were generally seen as legitimate public health measures.

G2 0-4 pts

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

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 3 / marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic 4 violence, and control over appearance?

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. While lawmakers have repeatedly declined to pass legislation recognizing same-sex partnerships, in May 2022,

following interpretations of the constitution 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.”

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. Latvia had not yet ratified the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention on violence against women as of 2022.

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. According to Eurostat, 26 percent of Latvia’s population was at risk of social exclusion or poverty as of 2021.

The US State Department’s 2022 *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.

ecoi.net description:

Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2022

Country:

Latvia

Source:

[Freedom House](#) (Author)

Original link:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/latvia/freedom-world/2023>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

2023

Available on ecoi.net since:

26 September 2023

Document ID:
2097710

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
Documentation	info@ecoi.net	
(ACCORD)		

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

