

Freedom in the World 2022 - Latvia

Free

88

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 37 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 51 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

89 / 100 Free

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

Overview

Latvia is a multiparty democracy whose elections are regarded as free and fair. 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 2021

- In August, authorities declared a state of emergency after a growing number of migrants and asylum seekers from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere attempted to cross the Belarusian border into Latvia. The government subsequently authorized the use of militarized “push-back” measures, preventing legitimate refugees and asylum seekers with incomplete paperwork from entering the country. Around 450 people, mostly from Iraq, were detained that month, and over 3,800 people were prevented from crossing by the end of the year.
- In February, authorities banned retransmission of Russian Rossija RTR television channel for a year for incitement of hatred, violence, and provocation of military conflict. A day later, 16 other Russian television channels were sanctioned, as they had not been granted permission for retransmission in Latvia.

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 (parliament) 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. Both Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš and 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 2018 parliamentary elections were viewed as competitive and credible, and stakeholders accepted the results. All three previously governing parties recorded significant losses, producing a highly fragmented parliament. Seven electoral alliances won representation, and newly founded

movements took 45 seats. After lengthy negotiations, a broad coalition of five conservative, liberal, and populist parties and alliances was formed in 2019 under the leadership of Kariņš of center-right New Unity.

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. Local elections held in June 2021 were conducted competently, and were the first elections held after the reorganization of the administrative-territorial system in 2020, which reduced the number of municipalities from 119 to 42. Voting in two municipalities was postponed until September, and voting in Riga did not occur because an emergency election had been held in 2020.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive 4 / 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

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.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power 4 / through elections? 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, center-left Harmony and predecessor parties that were 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 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. However, the 2018 election defeat of the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS)—whose most prominent politician has long faced corruption allegations—and subsequent efforts by the new government to combat graft and money laundering have apparently reduced the improper influence of such figures.

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+, 3 / and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

More than 200,000 of Latvia's registered residents are stateless—most of them are ethnic Russians—without the right to vote, hold public office, work in government offices, or establish political parties.

Though women have made gains in political participation, they only hold 31 percent of seats in the Saeima. LGBT+ people are poorly represented in Latvian politics, and parties have been reluctant to address their interests. In 2018, two openly LGBT+ people were elected to Parliament: Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs and lawmaker Marija Golubeva, who became the interior minister after a cabinet reshuffle in June 2021.

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

The country's elected leadership can set and implement 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, the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) has recently expanded its activities, and saw a change of leadership via an open competition organized for the first time in 2020. The new general prosecutor—appointed by Parliament on the recommendations of a Justice Council—stepped up efforts to deal with cases of corruption and abuse of public duties.

Several high-profile figures were convicted of corruption in 2021. In February, prominent ZZS politician Aivars Lembergs—the former mayor of Ventspils and one of the richest people in the country—was sentenced to five years in prison. Former prime minister Andris Šķēle and former transport minister Ainars Šlesers were also indicted.

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.

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 are 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. The National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP), the country's media regulator, is formed by the parliament and perceived to be occasionally influenced by politicians. Libel remains a criminal offense.

Authorities have occasionally restricted access to Russian radio and news websites, citing concerns about propaganda. Lagging media literacy, the spread of hate speech, and an increase in online attacks against journalists are growing concerns.

In February 2021, the NEPLP banned retransmission of Russian Rossiya RTR television channel for a year for incitement of hatred, violence, and provocation of military conflict. A day later, it also sanctioned 16 other Russian television channels because it was unclear whether permission had been granted for their retransmission in Latvia.

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 some social pressure since a 2015 refugee crisis.

D3 0-4 pts**Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political 3 / indoctrination? 4**

While academic freedom is largely upheld, lawmakers have begun to place some limitations on instruction in recent years.

Authorities in 2018 endeavored to discourage or eliminate the use of minority languages in schools and universities, and the measures were generally viewed as targeting Russian-language instruction. After a Constitutional Court ruling, the Saeima amended the legislation in April 2021 to allow university-level instruction in other official European Union (EU) languages.

D4 0-4 pts**Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 4 / without fear of surveillance or retribution? 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.

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.

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 Organisation 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, inefficiency, politicization, and corruption within the judicial system persist.

Legislation that took effect in 2020 increased transparency and the judiciary's role in the selection of both new judges and the country's prosecutor general, with candidates applying through an open competition. However, institutions within the judiciary continue to function with limited resources.

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. In general, the efficiency of the court system has been improving and the duration of civil, commercial, and administrative cases in court corresponds to or is shorter than the EU average. However, the court system has been 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

Latvians are generally free from major threats to physical security, though the country has comparatively high levels of violent crime by EU standards. Latvia also has one of the EU's higher prison population 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 various segments of the population? 2 / 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further marginalized the Russian-speaking population, which has lower vaccination rates than the overall population. The government chose not to create vaccination campaigns in any foreign language, including Russian, and simultaneously restricted unvaccinated people from entering public spaces.

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. Around 450 people who crossed the border, many of whom were from Iraq, were detained that month, and over 3,800 people were prevented from crossing into Latvia through the end of 2021.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to authorities’ militarized pushback against and lack of asylum procedures for migrants attempting to enter the country from Belarus.

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. 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 establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4 / 4

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

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 recognize same-sex partnerships, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of parental leave for same-sex couples. In April 2021, it also ruled inheritance taxation laws should treat same-sex and opposite-sex partners in families equally.

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 ratified the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention on violence against women as of 2021.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 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 2020.

The US State Department’s 2021 *Trafficking in Persons* report found that Latvians 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 summary:

Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2021



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