



LATVIA



A restaurant in Riga
Flickr / Michael Bliefert

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LATVIA



Chapter 1 | Geography



Forested land near Sigulda
Flickr / Renārs Fedotovs

Introduction

Latvia is located in Eastern Europe on the southwestern shore of the Baltic Sea. At 64,589 sq km (24,937 sq mi), Latvia is slightly larger than West Virginia and the second-largest of the three Baltic states, larger than Estonia and smaller than Lithuania. The country's geography is defined by alternating highlands and plains covered with abundant forests. Latvia shares borders with Estonia to the north (333 km or 207 mi), Russia to the east (332 km or 206 mi), Belarus to the southeast (161 km or 100 mi), and Lithuania to the south (544 km or 338 mi). To the west lies the Baltic Sea, and in the north is the Gulf of Riga, forming a total coastline of 498 km (309 mi). As of 2021, Latvia had an estimated population of 1,862,687.^{1, 2}

1 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

2 OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Latvia 2019, "Chapter 1. Environmental Performance: Trends and Recent Developments," OECD iLibrary, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f451533c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f451533c-en>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Geographical Divisions and Topographical Features

Latvia's geographical features were formed by ancient glacial activity. The country's territory consists of alternating uplands and lowlands marked by rivers and lakes. Manifestations of glacial activity are evident in accumulations of stones and earth deposited by glaciers, called moraines; narrow mounds of gravel, sand, and boulders deposited by glacial streams, called eskers; and oval or elongated hills caused by glacial drift, called drumlins.^{3, 4, 5, 6} From west to east, the Baltic coast marks the beginning of the Kurzeme Upland. This area dominates the west of the country and gives way to the central Zemgale Plain. The eastern part of the country, slightly more elevated than the west, is dominated by the Vidzeme Upland. This upland is home to Gaizina Kalns, Latvia's highest point at 312 m (1,023 ft). To the east of the Vidzeme Upland is the East Latvian Lowland, which converges with the Latgale Upland.^{7, 8, 9}

Latvia is divided into five major geographical regions: roughly from west to east they are Courland, Semigallia, Riga, Vidzeme, and Latgale. Each region retains distinct cultural features reflecting Latvia's fractured political history prior to unification in 1918.¹⁰ The country is administratively divided into 33 local government areas, consisting of 26 districts and seven cities. The local government areas are further subdivided into approximately 600 municipalities, consisting of 7 cities as well as towns and rural areas.¹¹

Forests are the most prominent feature of Latvia's landscape, covering over half of the country. Although forests are found throughout, the Ventspils region in the west has the highest concentration of forest cover. Wetlands such as bogs (poorly drained acidic areas of accumulated plant materials) and fens (water-saturated low land areas with alkaline soil) are another prominent feature of the geography, covering nearly 5% of Latvia's territory. The largest wetland is the Lubana wetland complex in the East Latvian Lowland.^{12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19}

3 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

4 Merriam-Webster, "Moraine," n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moraine>

5 Merriam-Webster, "Esker," n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/esker>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

6 Merriam-Webster, "Drumlin," n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/drumlin>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

7 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>

8 CultureGrams, "Latvia," 2021, http://online.culturegrams.com/secure/world/world_country.php?contid=5&wmn=Europe&cid=4&cn=Latvia, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

9 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

10 On Latvia, "Administrative Division in Latvia," n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/tag/administrative-division>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

11 NSD, "Latvia: Administrative Division," n.d., https://o.nsd.no/european_election_database/country/latvia/administrative_divisions.html, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

12 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

13 A. Ozols, "Forests and Forestry in Latvia," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, n.d., <http://www.fao.org/3/w3722E/w3722e21.htm>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

14 Monagabay, "Latvia Forest Information and Data," n.d., <https://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/2000/Latvia.htm>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

15 Climate Change Post, "Latvia," 28 June 2021, <https://www.climatechangepost.com/latvia/forestry-and-peatlands/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

16 Forest Information System for Europe, "Latvia Basic Data," n.d., <https://forest.eea.europa.eu/countries/latvia/latvia-basic-data>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

17 NorBalWet, "Latvia," Ramsar, n.d., <https://www.norbalwet.org/our-wetlands/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

18 Merriam-Webster, "Bog," n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bog>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

19 Merriam-Webster, "Fen," n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fen>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Climate

Latvia's climate is heavily influenced by the country's location on the Baltic Coast. The Gulf Stream current, which flows from the Atlantic Ocean and warms northwest Europe, brings humidity and makes winters milder than other locations at a similar latitude. Winter lasts from mid-December to mid-March, with temperatures averaging about -2°C (28°F) on the coast and -6°C (21°F) inland. Winter snowfalls are frequent, with snow continuously present on the ground for about 82 days out of the year. Summer temperatures average around 17°C (62°F) and are slightly higher in the east than in the west. There are about 177 frost-free days per year.^{20, 21, 22, 23, 24}

Rainfall occurs an average of 180 days per year, and cloudy skies are common. Summer is considered the rainy season. The upland regions see the most precipitation, with a yearly average of 76 cm (30 in); in the lowlands, the average annual rainfall is 50 cm (20 in). Day length varies highly with the seasons; days last more than 17 hours in the summer and less than 7 hours in the winter.^{25, 26, 27}

Bodies of Water

Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea is a major body of water that connects Latvia to eight other countries. The sea stretches 1,600 km (1,000 mi) in length from north to south and averages 193 km (120 mi) in width. The Baltic is the world's youngest sea, having formed 10,000 to 15,000 years ago from glacial erosion. It is among the world's largest bodies of brackish water, with salt water from the northeast Atlantic mixing with fresh water from the many surrounding rivers. The Baltic seafloor is essentially a dead zone inhabited primarily by bacteria; the saline-concentrated waters remain trapped below the surface waters. The gulfs of Bothnia, Finland, and Riga are subdivisions of the sea.^{28, 29, 30}

Gulf of Riga

The Gulf of Riga is a large offshoot of the Baltic Sea, with an area of 18,000 sq km (7,000 sq mi) and a maximum depth of 54 m (177 ft). The Latvian portion of the gulf's coastline is primarily low and sandy, with several rivers emptying into it. Latvia's capital Riga is situated at the southern curve of the gulf.³¹ The gulf is an important location for migrating birds; its northern and eastern coastal waters are spawning grounds for the Baltic herring.³²

20 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

21 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

22 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

23 Weather Online, "Latvia," n.d., <https://www.weatheronline.co.uk/reports/climate/Latvia.htm>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

24 Weather & Climate, "Climate and Average Weather in Latvia," n.d., <https://weather-and-climate.com/average-monthly-Rainfall-Temperature-Sunshine-in-Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

25 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

26 CultureGrams, "Latvia," 2021, http://online.culturegrams.com/secure/world/world_country.php?contid=5&wmn=Europe&cid=4&cn=Latvia, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

27 Weather & Climate, "Climate and Average Weather in Latvia," n.d., <https://weather-and-climate.com/average-monthly-Rainfall-Temperature-Sunshine-in-Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

28 *New World Encyclopedia*, "Baltic Sea," n.d., https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Baltic_Sea, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

29 Alastair Dougal Couper et al., "Baltic Sea," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 30 December 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Baltic-Sea>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

30 World Wildlife Fund, "About the Baltic," n.d., <https://www.wwfbaltic.org/about-the-baltic/#nature>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

31 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Gulf of Riga," 16 May 2007, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gulf-of-Riga>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

32 Diptarka Ghosh, "Gulf of Riga," *World Atlas*, 26 February 2021, <https://www.worldatlas.com/gulfs/gulf-of-riga.html>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Daugava River

The Western Dvina River (called Daugava in Latvia) is Latvia's major waterway, bisecting the country from the southeast to the northwest and passing through Riga before emptying into the Gulf of Riga. The Daugava originates in Russia's Tver region and sketches a southward arc through Belarus before entering Latvia. The river drains an area of 88,000 sq km (34,000 sq mi), and its total length is 1,020 km (632 mi), of which 357 km (222 mi) are in Latvia; at its mouth, it reaches a width of 1.5 km (0.9 mi). Historically, the Daugava has functioned as an important route for transport and trade. In the 20th century, several dams were built on the river to generate hydroelectric power, despite popular opposition due to the flooding of historic and scenic areas. Other significant rivers in Latvia are the Gauja in the northeast, the Venta in the west, and the Lielupe in the country's center. The upland regions are dotted with numerous lakes.^{33, 34}

Major Cities

City Name	Population ³⁵
Riga	627,487
Daugavpils	82,046
Liepaja	68,535
Jelgava	56,062
Jurmala	49,687
Ventspils	33,906

Riga

Riga is Latvia's capital and its most populous and important city. The city was founded in 1201 at a natural harbor near the mouth of the Daugava River. It became a major trade center and military headquarters for the German, Polish, Swedish, and Russian armies that would control it over the centuries. In the 19th century, it became the heart of Latvia's growing national consciousness as well as a center for industrialization and technological innovation. The city was at the center of Latvia's tumultuous 20th century history, from the devastation brought on by the two world wars to the declarations of independence in 1918 and 1991.^{36, 37}

Today, Riga is a major port and cosmopolitan center. Its modern industrial facilities produce ships, diesel engines, and streetcars. It is home to Latvia's most prestigious universities and cultural venues, such as the Riga Stradins University and the Mezaparks performance venue, home to the Latvian Song and Dance Festival held every five years. Riga's many tourist attractions include the medieval buildings of the historic city center, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.^{38, 39}

33 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

34 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Western Dvina River," 5 August 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Dvina-River>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

35 World Atlas, "The Largest Cities in Azerbaijan," n.d., <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-biggest-cities-in-azerbaijan.html>

36 Guntis Smidchens, "Riga," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Riga>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

37 Lidija Liegis, "Sixteen Thousand Voices in Perfect Harmony: Latvia's Incredible Song Festival," Deep Baltic, 20 November 2018, <https://deepbaltic.com/2018/11/20/sixteen-thousand-voices-in-perfect-harmony-latvias-incredible-song-festival/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

38 Guntis Smidchens, "Riga," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Riga>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

39 Lidija Liegis, "Sixteen Thousand Voices in Perfect Harmony: Latvia's Incredible Song Festival," Deep Baltic, 20 November 2018, <https://deepbaltic.com/2018/11/20/sixteen-thousand-voices-in-perfect-harmony-latvias-incredible-song-festival/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Daugavpils

Daugavpils, Latvia's second-largest city, is located in the southeast, near the borders with Belarus and Lithuania. The city was founded in the 1270s as a Teutonic fort along the Daugava River; it did not see significant population growth until the advent of regional railroads in the mid-19th century. In the second half of the 20th century, Daugavpils became a model Soviet city with a robust Russian identity. Today, the city retains a Russian-speaking majority; many of its residents oppose Lithuania's efforts at reorientation away from Russian influence, such as membership in the European Union. The city is a rail and road transportation hub, and its factories produce electrical instruments, bicycles, and synthetic fiber.^{40, 41}

Liepaja

Latvia's third-largest city, Liepaja, lies on the Baltic coast in the southwest of the country. In 1263 the Teutonic Order built a fortress on the site of a previously existing small settlement. Liepaja became a port in 1703 and went on to change hands between Sweden, Poland, and Russia. The city became a naval base in 1893 and was strategically important during the two world wars. During the Soviet era, the city was an important military base and was closed to outside access. In addition to its naval role, Liepaja today has transformed into a center for commercial fishing and a seaside holiday destination for European tourists.^{42, 43}

Jelgava

Jelgava is Latvia's fourth-largest city and is located 45 km (28 mi) southwest of Riga. The city experienced extensive devastation during World War II, with 90% of its buildings destroyed as the Soviets occupied it, followed by the Nazis, and the Soviets again. After the war, the Soviets turned Jelgava into an industrial town, best known for manufacturing buses. Today the city is a railway junction, and its factories manufacture machinery, linen, and foodstuffs.^{44, 45}

Jurmala

Jurmala is a seaside resort located just west of Riga on a peninsula between the Gulf of Riga and the Lielupe River, a tributary of the Daugava. The city originated in the 19th century when several local fishing villages were transformed into getaways for Riga's elite. Throughout the 20th century—and especially during the Soviet era—the city grew and its amenities became accessible to ordinary people. Today Jurmala retains its beaches and 19th-century charm alongside modern hotels and nightclubs.^{46, 47}

Ventspils

Ventspils is located on Latvia's Baltic coast, some 190 km (118 mi) west of Riga. The location's human habitation dates back to the second millennium BCE. It was a Slavic settlement in the 10th century and became a German town in 1378. Its importance grew with the establishment of a shipyard in the 17th century and a railroad connection in the

40 Augustinas Žemaitis, "History of Daugavpils," On Latvia, n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/history-of-daugavpils-257>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

41 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Daugavpils," 22 July 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Daugavpils>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

42 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Liepaja," 4 June 2013, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Liepaja>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

43 Augustinas Žemaitis, "History of Liepaja," On Latvia, n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/history-of-liepaja-593>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

44 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Jelgava," 12 August 2010, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Jelgava>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

45 Augustinas Žemaitis, "History of Jelgava," On Latvia, n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/history-of-jelgava-609>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

46 Augustinas Žemaitis, "History of Jurmala," On Latvia, n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/history-of-jurmala-560>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

47 On Latvia, "Jurmala of Latvia," n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/topics/cities-of-latvia/jurmala>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

early 19th century. Today, Ventspils is a major port whose ice-free harbor and Russian oil pipeline connection allow for the sustained export of hydrocarbons. Fishing is also an important economic activity.^{48, 49}

Environmental Concerns

Waste Management

Waste management is an increasingly significant environmental issue for Latvia. In 2017, each Latvian generated an average of 436 kg (961 lb) of municipal waste, an increase of 37% over the 2005 average. Latvia is part of a Europe-wide trend in which waste from countries with strict ecological standards is illegally transported to countries with weaker regulations. Waste such as plastics and rubber finds its way to Latvia from Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom.^{50, 51, 52}

Latvia's landfill system is undergoing reform. In recent years, over 500 unregulated landfills have been closed, replaced by EU-compliant regional landfills. Latvia's waste recycling rates are also improving, with about 30% of municipal waste being recovered as of 2016.^{53, 54, 55}

Water Pollution

The Baltic Sea is uniquely vulnerable to pollution due to its shallow depth, restricted connection to the ocean, and relatively stagnant and cold waters. The primary sources of pollution are municipal, industrial, and agricultural wastes from the surrounding countries being discharged into the sea. Significant polluting substances include pesticides and heavy metals. Oil spills have also caused considerable damage. Eutrophication, a process by which dissolved nutrients stimulate algae blooms that in turn deprive the sea of oxygen, is the most widely noted effect of pollution in the Baltic. This process effectively makes deep waters unsuitable for most marine life. The Baltic has also been negatively affected by overfishing and the introduction of invasive species.^{56, 57, 58, 59}

48 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Ventspils," 22 July 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ventspils>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

49 On Latvia, "Ventspils of Latvia," n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/topics/cities-of-latvia/ventspils>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

50 OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Latvia 2019, "Chapter 1. Environmental Performance: Trends and Recent Developments," OECD iLibrary, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f451533c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f451533c-en>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

51 Robyn White, "Latvia to Repatriate 'Illegal' UK Waste," LetsRecycle.com, 26 June 2020, <https://www.letsrecycle.com/news/latest-news/latvia-to-repatriate-illegal-uk-waste/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

52 Baltic News Network, "Mamikins: Latvia Is Becoming a Landfill for Rich European Countries," 22 June 2017, <https://bnn-news.com/mamikins-latvia-is-becoming-a-landfill-for-rich-european-countries-167443>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

53 OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Latvia 2019, "Chapter 1. Environmental Performance: Trends and Recent Developments," OECD iLibrary, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f451533c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f451533c-en>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

54 Robyn White, "Latvia to Repatriate 'Illegal' UK Waste," LetsRecycle.com, 26 June 2020, <https://www.letsrecycle.com/news/latest-news/latvia-to-repatriate-illegal-uk-waste/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

55 Baltic News Network, "Mamikins: Latvia Is Becoming a Landfill for Rich European Countries," 22 June 2017, <https://bnn-news.com/mamikins-latvia-is-becoming-a-landfill-for-rich-european-countries-167443>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

56 G. Rheinheimer, "Pollution in the Baltic Sea," PubMed.gov, 1998, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9722964/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

57 Mats Walday et al., "The Baltic Sea," European Environmental Agency, 23 November 2020, https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/report_2002_0524_154909/regional-seas-around-europe/page141.html, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

58 LRT, "EU Moves to Tackle Baltic Sea Pollution," 2 July 2020, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1194121/eu-moves-to-tackle-baltic-sea-pollution>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

59 UN Environment Programme, "Baltic Sea," n.d., <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/oceans-seas/what-we-do/working-regional-seas/regional-seas-programmes/baltic-sea>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Natural Hazards

Flooding

Latvia has seen increasing levels of rainfall since the 1960s, resulting in a higher prevalence of flooding. In the summer and fall of 2017, severe flooding caused damage to crops, drainage systems, transport infrastructure, and water treatment installations. In parts of eastern and central Latvia, May 2021 was among the top three rainiest months of May on record since 1961. The coasts of the Baltic Sea and Gulf of Riga, home to about half of Latvia's population, are vulnerable to flooding and rising sea levels.^{60, 61}

Drought

Despite the overall increase in precipitation in recent decades, parts of Latvia have also experienced periods of drought. In 2018 and 2019, western parts of the country saw prolonged dry spells that caused damage to vegetation, leading to significantly lower grain harvests and decreased productivity for dairy farms. In 2018, the droughts caused an estimated USD 416 million in damage to Latvia's agriculture. The 2018 drought also led to major wildfires that caused USD 92.9 million in damage.^{62, 63, 64, 65}

60 OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Latvia 2019, "Chapter 1. Environmental Performance: Trends and Recent Developments," OECD iLibrary, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f451533c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f451533c-en>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

61 LETA, "Meteorologists Warn about Possible Floods Coming Up in Latvia," Baltic News Network, 25 May 2021, <https://bnn-news.com/meteorologists-warn-about-possible-floods-coming-up-in-latvia-225164>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

62 Terra Daily, "Latvia Declares State of Disaster over Drought," 26 June 2018, https://www.terradaily.com/reports/Latvia_declares_state_of_disaster_over_drought_999.html, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

63 Xinhua, "Drought-Stricken Farmers in Southwest Latvia Seek Gov't Support," 3 August 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/03/c_138279484.htm, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

64 Xinhua, "Latvian Farmers Expect Much Less Grain Output Owing to Drought," 17 August 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/17/c_137396242.htm, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

65 Xinhua, "Latvian Agricultural Sector Reports 359 Mln Euros in Drought Damage," 23 August 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/23/c_137411031.htm, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Latvia in Perspective

Geography Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. Forests are the most prominent feature of Latvia's landscape. True False
2. Latvia has an extensive coastline on the Caspian Sea. True False
3. Riga is Latvia's capital and its most populous and important city. True False
4. Ventspils is a major seaport with an ice-free harbor and a Russian oil pipeline connection. True False
5. Eutrophication is a low-moisture weather pattern that has been held responsible for recent droughts in Latvia. True False

Latvia in Perspective

Geography Assessment Answers

1. True:
Forests cover over half of the country, with the highest concentration of forest cover in the Ventspils region in the west.
2. False:
Latvia has a coastline on the Baltic Sea, not the Caspian Sea.
3. True:
Riga has a population of about 627,000 people.
4. True:
Ventspils is crucial for the export of hydrocarbons. It has a population of nearly 34,000 people.
5. False:
Eutrophication is a process in which dissolved nutrients stimulate algae blooms that in turn deprive the sea of oxygen. It effectively makes the deep waters of the Baltic Sea unsuitable for most marine life.

Chapter 2 | History



Cēsis Castle ruins, 13th century CE
Wikimedia / AgrisR

Introduction

Latvia's history is inextricably tied to its strategic location on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea and shaped by the involvement of surrounding powers, especially the Germans and the Russians. Germans arrived in the 12th century, conquering the local tribes and establishing a feudal system that would dominate for centuries. In the 18th century, Latvia fell to imperial Russia, under whose heavy-handed rule there developed a sense of Latvian nationhood and culture. After World War I, Latvian patriots seized upon Russian disorder to declare independence, which would last for two decades. World War II saw devastating occupations of Latvia by the Soviets, the Nazis, and the Soviets again. After the war, Latvia became a model Soviet republic and had its cultural identity suppressed by Moscow. Latvia again gained independence in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union and set out to integrate into Western Europe.^{1, 2, 3}

- 1 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 2 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 3 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Early History

The Livonians, or Libiesi, a Finno-Ugric people related to the Estonians and the Finns, arrived in the Baltic area around 3,000 BCE. The Livonians lived primarily in the northern part of present-day Latvia, on the west and east sides of the Gulf of Riga. About a millennium later, the Balts, an Indo-European people related to the Lithuanians, arrived in the area and gradually absorbed the Livonians. In the ancient world, the eastern Baltic region became known for its amber. In the first century CE, the Roman historian Tacitus mentioned a group called the Aestii, who lived on the Eastern shores of the Baltic Sea and traded amber with the Roman Empire.^{4, 5, 6}

Over the first millennium CE, present-day Latvia's inhabitants coalesced into several independent tribal kingdoms, such as the Lats, Levs, Livs, Sels, and Zemgals. The Baltic region was affected by the migrations that took place during this period, including by the Slavs and possibly the Huns. Trade developed with the Byzantine Empire and the Vikings, but the area was also the target of Viking raids and attempted conquests.^{7, 8, 9, 10}

German, Polish-Lithuanian, and Swedish Rule

The late 12th century saw the beginning of a German push into the eastern Baltic region, spearheaded by merchants and Christian missionaries. Crusaders arrived in the region in 1198, and by 1237 the powerful Teutonic Order had conquered the Latvian tribal kingdoms. The Germans established themselves as the ruling class of a feudal system that forced indigenous serfs to pay taxes and work the land. German rule was embodied in the Livonian Confederation, comprised of the Teutonic Order, the city of Riga, and the archbishop of Riga. In 1282, Riga joined the Hanseatic League, a powerful north German merchant association, thus becoming an important trade center in the eastern Baltic region.^{11, 12, 13, 14}

The German rulers were frequently involved in wars and power struggles with surrounding foreign powers. In the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation swept northern Europe, and most of Latvia became Lutheran. Starting in 1561, the Latvian territory came under the control of the Lithuanian kingdom and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the 17th century, the power dynamics shifted in favor of Sweden, which gained control of Riga in 1621 and other Latvian territories in 1629. Throughout the changes in political rule, the feudal system persisted, and the German nobility maintained economic, social, and cultural dominance over Latvia.^{15, 16, 17}

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- 4 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 5 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 6 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 7 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 8 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 9 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 10 History Files, "European Kingdoms: Northern Europe: Latvia (Latvija) / Livonia (Balts)," n.d., <https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsEurope/EasternLatvia.htm>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 11 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 12 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 13 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 14 Guntis Smidchens, "Riga," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Riga>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 15 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 16 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 17 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Russian Rule

Throughout the 17th century, Russia, the growing imperial power to Latvia's east, tried unsuccessfully to gain a foothold on the Baltic shore. In 1710, Tsar Peter I succeeded in seizing Riga from the Swedes, marking the beginning of Russian dominance in the region. Russian control over Latvia was expanded and consolidated with the First and Third Partitions of Poland so that by 1795 all of Latvia was under Russian rule.^{18, 19, 20}

The tsars imposed a Russian administrative bureaucracy upon the existing German landholding elites. Russian cultural influences became prominent; some Latvians sought higher education in St. Petersburg, while others joined the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1817 and 1819, Tsar Alexander I introduced reforms granting more freedoms to serfs. In 1861, all serfs within the empire were emancipated, and Latvian peasants were allowed to buy land they had worked for generations.^{21, 22, 23}

In the second half of the 19th century, a Latvian national consciousness began to emerge. The growing ranks of Latvian intellectuals, educated abroad or at the newly established Riga Polytechnical University, began articulating a distinct Latvian cultural and political awareness. The modern Latvian language was promoted through the publishing of books and newspapers. The national identity took hold among the growing working class that was moving to cities as part of growing industrialization. A significant milestone for Latvian nationalism came in 1873 when the first Latvian National Song Festival was held in Riga, showcasing traditional Latvian music and defying the tsarist regime.^{24, 25, 26, 27, 28}

The growing discontent against Russian rule came to a head in the Russian Revolution of 1905. In Riga and other cities, class-conscious factory workers erupted in strikes and protests, while in the countryside, peasants rose against the German landed gentry. The authorities' brutal suppression of the revolt, resulting in some 3,000 deaths, further united Latvians against Russian rule.^{29, 30, 31}

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- 18 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 19 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 20 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 21 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 22 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 23 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 24 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 25 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 26 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 27 Latvia.eu, "Discover: Song Celebration," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/song-celebration>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 28 CultureGrams, "Latvia," 2021, http://online.culturegrams.com/secure/world/world_country.php?contid=5&wmn=Europe&cid=4&cn=Latvia, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 29 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 30 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 31 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Independence

The beginning of World War I in 1914 forced the evacuation of half of the Latvian population in the face of invading German armies. Latvian nationalists took advantage of the instability brought on by the 1917 Russian Revolution to declare Latvia's independence on 18 November 1918. A two-year war of independence followed, and Latvia was caught between the Red Army's attempts to push westward into Europe and German forces' efforts to stop Soviet expansion. Many Latvians—marked by Russian imperial oppression and influenced by Marxist ideas—joined the Soviet cause, while some Latvian military units joined forces with the Germans against the Soviets. As the upper hand in the conflict alternated between pro- and anti-Bolshevik forces, a short-lived Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic was declared in December 1918, and Riga fell to the Red Army and then to the Germans. By early 1920, the Latvian army, with help from Estonia, Poland, Britain, and France, forced both the Germans and the Soviets from Latvian territory. In August of that year, the Soviet Union recognized Latvia's independence.^{32, 33, 34, 35}

The two decades of Latvian independence were marked by economic, social, and cultural achievements. The financial sector was stable, and inflation was low. Industry and agriculture thrived, and the government bolstered essential sectors such as heavy industry, electricity, building materials, and food processing. Latvians received generous welfare benefits, and agrarian reform granted land to approximately 145,000 peasants. Cultural and artistic activity flourished, thanks in part to the establishment of national radio and a national symphony orchestra in the mid-1920s.^{36, 37, 38}

But independent Latvia's political landscape proved fragmented and volatile. The lack of a dominant political group led to some 40 parties vying for the electorate's votes. The proportional election system ensured that a large number of those parties would make it into the parliament (Saeima). In 1922 the Saeima was composed of 22 parties, and in 1931 that number rose to 24. Between 1922 and 1934, Latvia was led by 18 different governments consisting of various combinations of coalition partners.^{39, 40, 41}

The period's dominant political figure was the centrist Karlis Ulmanis. He was the leader of the coalition that declared independence in 1918 and served as prime minister three times. In 1934, in the face of discontent over the country's political instability and growing coup threats from the right, Ulmanis seized power with the help of the army, dissolved the Saeima, and suspended the constitution. Even though Ulmanis ruled by decree, banned all political parties, and

32 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

33 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

34 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

35 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Karlis Ulmanis," 1 January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Karlis-Ulmanis>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

36 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

37 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

38 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

39 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

40 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

41 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

imprisoned opponents, his populist credentials and relative restraint led to little protest against his dictatorship. A primary focus of his efforts was maintaining Latvia's neutrality between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.^{42, 43, 44, 45}

World War II and the Soviet Period

In 1939, Latvia's efforts at neutrality were thwarted when the secretive Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the Nazis and the Soviets awarded Latvia to the Soviets. Latvia conceded when faced with Soviet military superiority. The following year, the Red Army invaded, deported Ulmanis, and established a government that moved to incorporate Latvia into the Soviet Union. Moscow carefully orchestrated events to falsely portray a popular willingness for Latvia to join the Soviets. A purge of possible dissenters commenced, and some 35,000 Latvians were sent to Siberia. In 1941, the Soviet presence was replaced by an equally brutal Nazi occupation when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The Nazis killed most of Latvia's Jews and Roma and forcibly drafted Latvians into the military. As the Soviet Union reeled under Nazi attack, some 80,000 Latvians became part of the Red Army. After the tide of World War II turned in 1944, the Red Army retook Latvia, and about 200,000 Latvian refugees fled westward.^{46, 47, 48}

After the war, Latvian culture and national identity were curtailed in favor of a concerted Sovietization process. The Soviets consolidated control through political repression, mass deportations, the forced collectivization of peasants, and the migration of a significant number of Russians and other non-Latvians to work in the rapidly growing industrial sector. Soviet loyalists held all political leadership positions, and power rested wholly with the Communist Party of Latvia. Vigorous Sovietization continued after the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953; efforts by some Latvian communist leaders to reemphasize the Latvian culture and language and establish a measure of local autonomy were met with purges by Moscow.^{49, 50, 51}

Throughout the Soviet era, life for Latvians was characterized by censorship, propaganda, and dogmatic ideology in public life, culture, and education. The population lived in apprehension of the web of secret police informers; the wrong political convictions could mean exclusion from educational or career opportunities. Yet Latvia, along with Estonia and Lithuania, became a showcase Soviet republic and had a slightly higher standard of living than other parts of the Soviet Union. The three republics' factories and industrial plants played important roles in the Soviet planned economy. Seaside resorts and well-preserved Western European medieval architecture made the Baltics a coveted destination for tourists from throughout the Soviet Union.^{52, 53}

42 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Karlis Ulmanis," 1 January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Karlis-Ulmanis>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

43 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

44 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

45 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

46 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

47 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

48 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

49 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

50 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

51 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

52 National History Museum of Latvia, "Latvia under the Soviet Rule. 1944–1985," n.d., http://invm.lv/en/?page_id=1079, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

53 Russia Beyond, "Why the Baltics Was a Great Place to Live under the Soviets (PHOTOS)," 16 June 2020, <https://www.rbth.com/history/332322-why-baltics-was-great-place>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

By the 1980s, Moscow's heavy-handed rule had led to the development of anti-Soviet opposition, such as the Helsinki-86 human rights group. The Soviet policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) created a more permissive political environment. In 1987, street protests erupted in Latvia, opposing ecological destruction and calling for democracy and decentralization. The pro-independence movement coalesced into the Latvian Popular Front in 1988. In 1990 that group went on to win parliamentary elections, and the legislature declared independence in May. In January 1991, Soviet security forces attempted unsuccessfully to regain control in Riga, and the resulting unrest led to several Latvian casualties. As the Soviet Union collapsed, Moscow recognized Latvia's independence in September 1991.^{54, 55, 56, 57}

Independence and Recent Events

After independence, Latvia adopted a Western European orientation and set out to overcome the decades of Soviet occupation. The 1922 constitution was restored, and in the 1993 elections, Karlis Ulmanis' great-nephew Guntis Ulmanis became president. The last Soviet-era Russian troops left Latvia in 1994. In 1999, Latvians elected Vaira Vike-Freiberga as president, the first woman president in Eastern Europe. Five years later, Latvia was among the first wave of former communist states to join NATO and the European Union. The country's economy began rapid expansion in 2005.^{58, 59, 60, 61, 62}

The 2008 global economic crisis caused a severe contraction in Latvia's economy, forcing the government to seek a bailout from the International Monetary Fund and implement austerity measures like higher taxes and cuts to public sector salaries and welfare payments. The unpopular measures triggered street protests and led to the fall of the sitting government. By 2010, a series of economic reforms helped kickstart the economy's recovery.^{63, 64}

Latvia's history with Russia continued to shape its politics and national discourse. After independence, the Saeima passed laws restricting citizenship primarily to Latvians and mandating the use of the Latvian language in politics and education, thus alienating the mostly Russian non-Latvian population. Russia decried the violation of minority rights in Latvia and retaliated by limiting the flow of oil to Latvian ports in 2002 and 2004. In elections held in 2011, the pro-Russia Harmony party won the most parliamentary seats, but a coalition of pro-Latvian parties kept it from gaining power. Russia's takeover of Crimea and its interference in Ukraine in 2014 heightened regional tensions

54 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

55 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

56 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

57 Andrejs Vaisberg et al., "Latvia's Interior Ministry Seized by Soviet Forces," *Guardian*, 20 January 1991, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1991/jan/21/eu.politics>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

58 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

59 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

60 Latvia.eu, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

61 CultureGrams, "Latvia," 2021, http://online.culturegrams.com/secure/world/world_country.php?contid=5&wmn=Europe&cid=4&cn=Latvia, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

62 BBC News, "Latvia Profile—Timeline," 29 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17529542>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

63 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

64 BBC News, "Latvia Profile—Timeline," 29 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17529542>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

and led NATO to reinforce its presence in the Baltics. The Harmony party repeated its electoral victory in 2018 and was again excluded from power when Arturs Krisjanis Karins became prime minister at the head of a center-right coalition.^{65, 66, 67}

65 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

66 BBC News, "Latvia Profile—Timeline," 29 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17529542>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

67 Steven Pifer, "Crimea: Six Years after Illegal Annexation," Brookings, 17 March 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/17/crimea-six-years-after-illegal-annexation/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Latvia in Perspective

History Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. After conquering the eastern Baltic region in the early 13th century, the Germans allowed the Latvian tribes to retain their social status and structures. True False
2. The Russian empire took control of Latvia over the course of the 18th century. True False
3. Latvia largely avoided the violence and bloodshed that characterized the Russian Revolution of 1905. True False
4. Latvia's interwar independence period was characterized by political stability and democratic transfers of power. True False
5. After regaining independence in 1991, Latvia pursued a policy of integration and inclusion for its sizeable ethnic Russian minority. True False

Latvia in Perspective

History Assessment Answers

1. False:
The Germans established themselves as the ruling class of a feudal system that forced indigenous serfs to pay taxes and work the land.
2. True:
In 1710, Tsar Peter I seized Riga. By the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, all of Latvia was under Russian rule.
3. False:
Class-conscious Latvian factory workers erupted in strikes and protests, and Latvian peasants rose against the German landed gentry. The authorities' brutal suppression of the revolt resulted in around 3,000 deaths.
4. False:
The period was politically fragmented and volatile, with some 40 political parties and shaky ruling coalitions. In 1934, Karlis Ulmanis seized power and began a dictatorial regime.
5. False:
The legislature passed restrictive citizenship, language, and education laws, alienating the mostly Russian non-Latvian population. Latvian political parties have repeatedly joined forces to keep a pro-Russian party from the governing coalition.

Chapter 3 | Economy



Central Market , Riga
Flickr / Jorge Franganillo

Introduction

Upon gaining independence in 1991, Latvia implemented market reforms and welcomed foreign investment. Domestic consumption increased and the economy grew. After Latvia joined the European Union in 2004, economic growth was further boosted by significant EU funds. The 2008–09 global economic crisis caused a severe economic recession. Structural, fiscal, and business reforms followed, and the economy eventually recovered. Today, Latvia continues its economic integration with Western Europe. The country has leveraged its strategic geographic location between Europe and Asia to become an important transit and logistics center. Additionally, its specialized mechanical engineering and chemical manufacturing sectors rely on a highly skilled and educated workforce. In 2019, Latvia had a gross domestic product (GDP) purchasing power parity of USD 59.102 billion, giving its economy a global rank of 108 out of 228 countries. GDP is the overall value of all goods and services created by an economy within a certain period. Economic growth has been consistent in recent years, averaging 3.17% per year between 2017 and 2019.^{1, 2, 3}

1 Central Intelligence Agency, “Latvia,” *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

2 Santander, “Latvian Economic Outline,” September 2021, <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/latvia/economic-outline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

3 OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Latvia 2019, “Chapter 1. Environmental Performance: Trends and Recent Developments,” OECD iLibrary, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f451533c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f451533c-en>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Agriculture

The agriculture sector makes up 3.9% of Latvia's GDP and employs 7.7% of the labor force. The primary crops are wheat, rapeseed, barley, oats, potatoes, rye, and beans. The primary animal products are milk, pork, and poultry. Agricultural land accounts for 29.9% of Latvia's surface. About 18.6% of the country's total land area is considered arable, meaning that it is fit for growing crops. The share of agricultural land is growing, with an increase of 11% between 2005 and 2019. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, agricultural output grew in 2020.^{4, 5, 6, 7}

As an EU member, Latvia receives direct payments for agricultural and rural development under the bloc's Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). CAP is a complex system of subsidies for EU farmers that aims to create a self-sufficient food supply, provide farmers with income security, and provide consumers with affordable food. Latvian farmers receive significantly smaller payments than other member states because CAP payments are based on past economic performance, and Latvia's agriculture sector performed poorly before the country joined the European Union in 2004. In 2018, Latvia and the two other Baltic states received payments of 54–60% of the EU average, even though Latvia's agricultural production costs were 113% of the EU average. The Latvian government has repeatedly lobbied the European Union to reform the CAP so that Latvia's direct payments are closer to parity with the EU average.^{8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13}

Latvia has a strong tradition of organic farming, dating back to the 1980s when Soviet collectivization policies were loosened, allowing farmers more control over land and farming practices. Today, organic farming accounts for 11% of agriculture in the country, among the highest rates in the European Union. About 5% of Latvia's farms are certified organic. The organic sector is dominated by dairy products, oats, and buckwheat, but also produces cattle, potatoes, honey, and specialty products like gray peas and northern berries. Organic products are available in retail stores as well as through direct purchasing partnerships with farmers. Young urban families drive domestic organic foods consumption.^{14, 15}

- 4 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 5 Merriam-Webster, "Arable," n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/arable>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 6 OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Latvia 2019, "Chapter 1. Environmental Performance: Trends and Recent Developments," OECD iLibrary, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f451533c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f451533c-en>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 7 Santander, "Latvian Economic Outline," September 2021, <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/latvia/economic-outline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 8 Xinhua, "CAP, Farming Subsidies Dominate EU Agriculture Commissioner's Latvia Visit," 6 October 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/06/c_136660861.htm, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
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Forests cover about 52% of Latvia's territory, a significantly higher rate than the Europe-wide average of 33%. The primary tree species are conifers such as birch, white alder, and aspen. About 70% of Latvia's forests are used for wood production. Important wood products include wooden panels, processed wood, firewood, wood chips, and wood pellets. Forestry-related products account for 20% of Latvia's exports.^{16, 17, 18}

Fishing along Latvia's Baltic coast and the Gulf of Riga has been a significant economic activity for centuries. Today, Latvia's territorial waters encompass about 10% of the Baltic Sea, providing abundant fish resources. The total fish catch is about 100,000 tons per year, consisting primarily of herring, salmon, and cod. In Latvia's rivers and lakes, the main species caught are bream, carp, pike, and perch. Carp is also grown through commercial fish farming.^{19, 20}

Industry

The industry sector accounts for 22.4% of Latvia's GDP and employs 24.1% of the labor force. The primary subsectors are processed foods, processed wood products, textiles, processed metals, pharmaceuticals, railroad cars, synthetic fibers, and electronics. Construction and mechanical engineering are rapidly expanding. Latvian manufactured goods such as radios, refrigerators, and railroad equipment have a positive reputation. After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, industrial production decreased by about 2.5%, but recovery has been faster than expected.^{21, 22, 23, 24, 25}

Chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturing accounts for about 10% of Latvia's manufacturing output. The sector became well established during the Soviet period when Latvia was central to drug technology research and manufactured 25% of the Soviet Union's medical preparations. Today, Latvia's chemical industry comprises about 530 companies, employing thousands of highly skilled and educated subject matter experts. Anti-flu medicines, petrochemicals, household chemicals, and paint are among the goods produced by the sector. Three-fourths of the output is exported.^{26, 27, 28}

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 - 23 Santander, "Latvian Economic Outline," September 2021, <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/latvia/economic-outline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
 - 24 Daina Zalamane, "Latvia's Manufacturing Industry Is Recovering Faster than Planned," Public Broadcasting of Latvia, 24 August 2020, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/economy/latvias-manufacturing-industry-is-recovering-faster-than-planned.a371518/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
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 - 28 Latvia.eu, "Economy," 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/economy/economy>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

The growth of Latvia's manufacturing capacity has been slower than planned by industrial policymakers. Between 2010 and 2020, Latvia's manufacturing sector averaged 12.3% of GDP, below the EU average of 16.7% and lower than the averages of Lithuania and Estonia. In 2020, manufacturing reached 12.5% of GDP, significantly short of the government's goal of 20%. An initiative to increase productivity by 40% over 2011 figures in 2020 also fell short as productivity increased by just 26.6%.^{29, 30}

Energy and Natural Resources

Latvia is not an oil-producing country and does not possess any oil or gas reserves. Hydroelectric power plants supply 53% of the country's electricity, and an additional 8% comes from other renewable sources; the other 39% comes from imported fossil fuels, primarily natural gas from Russia.^{31, 32, 33}

The bulk of Latvia's hydropower is generated by three hydroelectric power plants—Kegums, Plavinas, and Riga—on the Daugava, the country's largest river. As of 2021, the three plants were undergoing major renovations to increase production capacity and lengthen their lifespans. Several other, smaller plants operate on the Aiviekste and Gauja rivers. Most of the plants date back to the Soviet period. Latvia's hydroelectric plants have been criticized for adversely affecting fish species such as salmon and lamprey, whose ability to migrate through rivers and spawn is impeded by the plants' dams.^{34, 35, 36} Other renewable energy sources include wind, wood biomass, and landfill and sewage sludge biogas.^{37, 38, 39}

Latvia's primary natural resources are peat, dolomite, limestone, sand, and gravel.^{40, 41} Peat is partially carbonized and decomposing plant matter extracted from bogs, which are poorly drained wet areas surrounding open waters. Once extracted, peat is used in plant cultivation or burned as a biofuel. Peat extraction is a well-established and traditional activity in the Baltics, dating back to the 18th century. Latvia's peat deposits are primarily found in the southeastern Latgale region and the northeastern Vidzeme region.^{42, 43}

- 29 Baltic Times, "Latvia Falling behind Its Industrial Targets—Economics Ministry," 26 July 2021, https://www.baltictimes.com/latvia_falling_behind_its_industrial_targets_-_economics_ministry/, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
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- 36 Daniel Nyqvist, "Salmon Migration in River Daugava," 19 November 2017, <http://www.nrrv.se/2017/11/salmon-migration-river-daugava/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
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- 39 CEE Bankwatch Network, "A Breath of Fresh Air: How Latvia Can Increase Wind Power Capacity Tenfold by 2030," 16 December 2019, <https://bankwatch.org/blog/a-breath-of-fresh-air-how-latvia-can-increase-wind-power-capacity-tenfold-by-2030>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 40 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 41 OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Latvia 2019, "Chapter 1. Environmental Performance: Trends and Recent Developments," OECD iLibrary, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f451533c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f451533c-en>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
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- 43 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "Understanding Latvian Peat," 29 June 2021, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/environment/understanding-latvian-peat.a409237/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Services

The services sector is the largest contributor to Latvia's economy, constituting 73.7% of GDP and employing 68.1% of the labor force.⁴⁴ The primary drivers of the sector are tourism, logistics and transport, and information and computer technology (ICT). Other noteworthy subsectors are finance, customer service, and personnel management.^{45, 46, 47}

Transit and logistics contribute 8.3% to Latvia's GDP and employ about 75,000 people. Latvia is well-positioned geographically along routes that link Western Europe to Russia and the rest of Asia. Latvia's rails are part of a major east-west corridor that handles tens of millions of tons of cargo per year. The country's three major ice-free ports—Riga, Ventspils, and Liepaja—handle some 120 million tons of cargo per year. The vast majority of the country's rail and port cargo travels to a location other than Latvia. The government is continually working to further integrate Latvia's transport infrastructure into that of the European Union.^{48, 49, 50}

ICT accounts for over 4% of Latvia's GDP. The major components of Latvia's ICT sector are computer software, computer services, telecommunications services, and computer hardware and peripherals. The strength of ICT in Latvia comes in the wake of significant post-independence investments in updating the country's data and voice communications capabilities. In 2017, about 6,500 ICT-related companies were operating in Latvia, employing over 33,000 people. Latvian laws and regulations make it easy and cheap to set up technology companies, and Riga is home to over 400 startups.^{51, 52}

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45 Invest in Central Europe, "Top Sectors in Latvia," n.d., <https://www.investincentraleurope.com/latviasectors>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

46 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

47 Magnetic Latvia, "Global Business Services," n.d., <https://investinlatvia.org/en/key-sectors/sectors/global-business-services>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

48 Invest in Central Europe, "Top Sectors in Latvia," n.d., <https://www.investincentraleurope.com/latviasectors>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

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51 Invest in Central Europe, "Top Sectors in Latvia," n.d., <https://www.investincentraleurope.com/latviasectors>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

52 International Trade Administration, "Latvia—Country Commercial Guide: Computer Services," 16 October 2020, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/latvia-computer-services>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Tourism

Tourism is a primary component of Latvia's services sector, making up 4.1% of the total GDP in 2016; tourism and related industries support about 79,000 jobs. Starting in the early 2000s, Latvia made significant investments in tourist infrastructure, and the country became known for quality, affordable accommodations.^{53, 54, 55, 56} Latvia is one of 26 European countries that make up the Schengen Zone, where the removal of internal border controls allows for the free movement of people between countries.⁵⁷

Latvia's abundant natural beauty and historical and cultural heritage make it an appealing tourist destination.⁵⁸ Riga is the most popular tourist location.⁵⁹ In the historic Old Town Center, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, colorful houses evoke the city's medieval prosperity and the 130 m (427 ft) tall tower of St. Peter's Church provides a panoramic view of the entire city.^{60, 61, 62} Other tourist draws are well-preserved castles and monasteries, the Baltic coast, and abundant forests. At Gauja National Park in north-central Latvia, visitors can take to nature trails for bird watching, foraging mushrooms, and exploring bogs.^{63, 64}

Tourist arrivals to Latvia began growing year-on-year in 2010, reaching a peak of 2.9 million in 2019. Over half of the foreign visitors come from Latvia's neighbors, Lithuania, Estonia, Russia, and Belarus. Large numbers of visitors also come from Sweden, Germany, Finland, and the United Kingdom. After the implementation of travel restrictions in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign visits to Latvia declined by 63%, and the number of nights visitors spent in the country dropped 64% from the previous year.^{65, 66, 67}

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- 55 *Baltic Times*, "Impact of Sharing Economy on Latvia's Tourism Industry Grows—OECD," 9 March 2018, https://www.baltictimes.com/impact_of_sharing_economy_on_latvia_s_tourism_industry_grows_-_oecd/, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
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- 59 Baltic News Network, "Majority of Tourists Staying in Latvia Hail from Neighbouring Countries," 13 November 2020, <https://bnn-news.com/majority-of-tourists-staying-in-latvia-hail-from-neighbouring-countries-218899>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
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- 62 Magnetic Latvia, "Riga St Peter's Church," 1 March 2021, <https://www.latvia.travel/en/sight/riga-st-peters-church>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 63 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 64 James Forrest, "The Wood Life: My Four Days Immersed in Latvia's Forests," *Guardian*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2020/jan/23/latvia-immersed-in-woods-forest-bathing-wellbeing>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
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- 66 Statista, "Number of Nights Spent by International Tourists in Latvia from 2008 to 2019," 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/450351/number-of-inbound-nights-in-latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 67 Baltic News Network, "Majority of Tourists Staying in Latvia Hail from Neighbouring Countries," 13 November 2020, <https://bnn-news.com/majority-of-tourists-staying-in-latvia-hail-from-neighbouring-countries-218899>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Trade

In 2020, Latvia had a favorable balance of trade of USD 390 million or 1.16% of GDP. A favorable balance of trade means that the value of exports surpasses that of imports.^{68, 69} Latvia's major export partners are Lithuania, Estonia, Russia, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Primary exports include lumber, broadcasting equipment, wheat, packaged medicines, whiskey, and other hard liquors. Major import partners are Russia, Lithuania, Germany, Poland, and Estonia. The primary imports are refined petroleum, broadcasting equipment, cars, packaged medicines, and aircraft. In 2019, exports of goods and services amounted to 60.13 % of GDP. Imports of goods and services during the same period amounted to 60.97% of GDP. Latvia officially joined the World Trade Organization in 1999.^{70, 71, 72}

Latvia's trade policy is integrated with the European Union, which negotiates trade agreements on behalf of all its member states. There are three main tiers of EU trade agreements: The most involved are customs unions that establish joint customs tariffs on foreign importers. The middle tier is deep and comprehensive free trade agreements that remove or reduce customs tariffs. The lowest level is cooperation agreements that provide a general framework for bilateral economic relations but leave customs tariffs in place. As of 2019, the European Union had trade agreements in place with 77 countries. Among the bloc's main preferential trade partners are Switzerland, Turkey, Japan, Norway, South Korea, Mexico, and Canada.^{73, 74, 75}

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69 Will Kenton, "Balance of Trade (BOT)," Investopedia, 12 May 2021, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/bot.asp>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

70 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

71 Global Economy, "Latvia: Exports, Percent of GDP," n.d., <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Latvia/exports/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

72 Global Economy, "Latvia: Imports, Percent of GDP," n.d., <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Latvia/imports/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

73 Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Ireland), "Free Trade Agreements," n.d., <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Trade-Investment/Free-Trade-Agreements/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

74 European Commission, "Negotiations and Agreements," 22 January 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/negotiations-and-agreements/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

75 European Commission, "Factsheet: Annual Report on the Implementation of EU Trade Agreements in 2019," n.d., https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2020/november/tradoc_159040.pdf, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Banking and Finance

Banking

Latvia is a member of the Eurozone, a group of 19 EU member states that use the euro (EUR) as their national currency.⁷⁶ As of August 2021, USD 1 was worth EUR 0.84.⁷⁷ EUR 1 is subdivided into 100 euro cents. The euro is denominated in EUR 1 and 2 coins and EUR 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, and 200 banknotes.^{78, 79} Before joining the Eurozone in 2014, Latvia's currency was the lat, first introduced in 1922 and reintroduced in 1992.⁸⁰ In 2017, Latvia recorded a public debt of 36.3% of GDP, a ranking of 147 out of 210 countries.⁸¹

The Bank of Latvia, or Latvijas Banka, is Latvia's central monetary authority. The bank was founded in 1922 as part of the administrative structure of the newly proclaimed Republic of Latvia. Today, the bank's mission is to maintain price stability and promote sustainable economic development in Latvia. In 2019, the bank was part of a Europe-wide banking corruption scandal involving murky outside investments. Since Latvia is a member of the Eurozone, its monetary policy is closely integrated with the European Central Bank.^{82, 83, 84, 85, 86}

There are 16 banks currently operating in Latvia. The banking sector is dominated by three Latvian banks, Rietumu, PNB, and Citadele; two Swedish banks, SEB and Swedbank; and one Estonian bank, Luminor. Swedbank is the top bank for number of customers, assets, profits, and capital and reserves. In 2018, ABLV—then Latvia's third-largest bank—closed down after the U.S. Treasury Department accused it of money laundering, triggering a bank run that drained ABLV of assets. That same year, Latvia successfully implemented reforms to make its banking system stable and help deter financial crimes.^{87, 88, 89}

Finance

In 2019, foreign direct investment (FDI) into Latvia reached USD 789 million, a decrease compared to USD 998 million in 2018. That year, the country's total FDI stock was USD 17.9 billion, some 30% of GDP. FDI is investment across borders in which an investor from one economy significantly controls or influences a business enterprise in another economy. The primary recipients of FDI in Latvia are financial and insurance activities, wholesale and retail, real estate, and manufacturing. The most prominent foreign investors are Sweden, Russia, Estonia, and the

76 European Commission, "What Is the Euro Area?" n.d., https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/euro-area/what-euro-area_en, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

77 XE, "1 USD to EUR—Convert US Dollars to Euros," n.d., <https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=1&From=USD&To=EUR>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

78 European Central Bank, "Coins," n.d., <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/euro/coins/html/index.en.html>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

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80 Latvia.eu, "Currency in Latvia," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/economy/currency-latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

81 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

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83 Latvijas Banka, "Monetary Strategy Review," 23 July 2021, <https://www.bank.lv/en/tasks/task-monetary-policy/monetary-strategy-review-2020>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

84 Latvijas Banka, "Latvijas Banka's Priorities for 2019–2022," 2 January 2019, https://www.bank.lv/en/tasks/priority-areas-for-2019-2022_, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

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86 Aaron Eglitis, "Central Bank Boss Hails Renewed Faith in Latvia after Scandals," Bloomberg, 16 March 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-17/central-bank-boss-hails-renewed-faith-in-latvia-after-scandals>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

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88 Baltic Legal, "Top Banks in Latvia," n.d., <https://www.baltic-legal.com/banking-in-latvia-top-banks-eng.htm>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

89 European Banking Federation, "Latvia's Banking Sector: Facts & Figures," December 2020, <https://www.ebf.eu/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Netherlands. Ease of starting a business, a simple tax structure, and a skilled and competitively priced workforce help make Latvia attractive to foreign investors. Some drawbacks are the small-sized market and the need to improve protections for minority shareholders. In 2020 the World Bank ranked Latvia the 19th-easiest place to do business out of 190 economies.^{90, 91}

Standard of Living

Latvia ranked 37 out of 189 countries on the 2020 UN Human Development Index, which measures a country's standard of living based on key dimensions.⁹² Latvia spends about 6% of its GDP on health expenditures. Life expectancy at birth is 75.65 years, a global ranking of 116 out of 227. Life expectancy for males is 71.19 years and for females 80.3 years. The infant mortality rate is 4.93 deaths per 1,000 live births, a global ranking of 178 out of 227. The maternal mortality rate is 19 deaths out of 100,000 live births, a global ranking of 124 out of 184.⁹³

Major causes of death are primarily non-communicable diseases, including ischemic heart disease, stroke, Alzheimer's disease, lung cancer, and colorectal cancer. The significant risk factors that drive most death and disability are high blood pressure, dietary risks, tobacco, high body mass index, and high cholesterol.⁹⁴ Latvia's incidence of tuberculosis, 26 per 100,000 people in 2019, has decreased in recent years but remains among the highest in the European Union.^{95, 96}

In 2019, 21.6% of Latvians were at risk of poverty. Latvia sets the risk-of-poverty threshold at about USD 512 per month for a single-person household. Although the poverty risk trend has been on the rise since 2010, the 2019 rate was slightly lower than the previous year's. Over 71% of single Latvians over the age of 65 are at risk of poverty. The poverty risk rate is growing fastest among children and families with children. The highest concentration of poverty risk is in the Latgale region in the southeast of the country. Social assistance has likely diminished poverty by about 15% in recent years.^{97, 98, 99}

Emigration, a low birth rate, and a high mortality rate have combined to create a drastic reduction in Latvia's population—a decrease of over 18% between 2000 and 2018. Poverty like that in the Latgale region is driving younger Latvians to seek better economic opportunities in more prosperous EU countries. Of the tens of thousands of Latvians who emigrate each year, only about 40% return. The birthrate is declining yearly; in 2019, it was the

90 Santander, "Latvia: Foreign Investment," August 2021, <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/establish-overseas/latvia/investing>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

91 Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute, "Foreign Direct Investment," n.d., https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/foreign_direct_investment, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

92 United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Data Center," n.d., <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

93 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

94 IHME, "Latvia," 2020, <http://www.healthdata.org/latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

95 KNOEMA, "Latvia—Incidence of Tuberculosis," n.d., <https://knoema.com/atlas/Latvia/topics/Health/Risk-factors/Incidence-of-tuberculosis>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

96 Baltic News Network, "Tuberculosis Infection Rates in Latvia Remain Some of the Highest in EU," 21 March 2017, <https://bnn-news.com/tuberculosis-infection-rates-in-latvia-remain-some-of-the-highest-in-eu-162438>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

97 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "One Fifth of Latvia's Population Were at Risk of Poverty in 2019," 23 December 2020, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/one-fifth-of-latvias-population-were-at-risk-of-poverty-in-2019.a386516/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

98 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "Almost a Quarter of Latvia's Population Remains at Risk of Poverty," 16 January 2020, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/almost-a-quarter-of-latvias-population-remains-at-risk-of-poverty.a344322/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

99 Jade Follette, "Top 10 Facts About Living Conditions in Latvia," Borgen Project, 16 July 2019, <https://borgenproject.org/top-10-facts-about-living-conditions-in-latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

lowest in a decade. The mortality rate is increasing—in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic—and is outpacing the birth rate. The population drop constitutes a threat to Latvia’s future stability, potentially depriving the country of future taxpayers and military recruits.^{100, 101, 102, 103, 104}

Employment

Latvia’s 2019 labor force participation rate was 77.74%, a global ranking of 104 out of 180 countries. Labor force participation is the percentage of the population between the ages of 15 and 64 that is active economically during a specific period.^{105, 106} That same year, Latvia’s unemployment rate stood at 6.14% of the labor force.¹⁰⁷ After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the unemployment rate predictably increased. By the summer of 2021, it was back to pre-pandemic levels, although it was the highest among the three Baltic republics.^{108, 109, 110}

Latvia is currently experiencing a labor shortage. In a 2019 survey of Latvian employers, 63% of respondents said they struggled to find unskilled workers, and 74% had difficulty hiring skilled workers. A major contributor to the labor shortage is skills mismatch, a difference between the skills possessed by workers and those sought by employers. Other contributing factors are high emigration rates, population decline, and a large informal economy, which in 2015 was estimated to account for about 20% of GDP. Some Latvian businesses are hiring employees from abroad, primarily from Ukraine, India, and China, but the process for bringing in foreign workers is considered expensive, complicated, and time-consuming.^{111, 112, 113, 114, 115}

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- 100 Baltic News Network, “Demographer: Latvia Has the Lowest Birth Rate Level Observed the Past Decade,” 16 January 2020, <https://bnn-news.com/demographer-latvia-has-the-lowest-birth-rate-level-observed-the-past-decade-209438>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 101 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, “Latvia’s Census Shows Sharpest Population Decline among Baltic States,” 28 May 2021, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/latvias-census-shows-sharpest-population-decline-among-baltic-states.a406618/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 102 Gordon F. Sander, “Latvia, a Disappearing Nation,” 5 January 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/latvia-a-disappearing-nation-migration-population-decline/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 103 Official Statistics of Latvia, “More Rapid Decline in Population,” 28 May 2021, <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/population/population-number/press-releases/6935-number-population-latvia-2020>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 104 Aden Littlewood, “Is Latvia Running out of People?” GRC Insights, 8 November 2020, <https://insights.grcglobalgroup.com/is-latvia-running-out-of-people/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 105 Aaron O’Neill, “Latvia: Labor Force Participation Rate from 2009 to 2019,” Statista, 27 July 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/993643/labor-force-participation-rate-in-latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 106 Index Mundi, “Labor Force Participation Rate, Total (% of Total Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate)—Country Ranking,” 28 December 2019, <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/indicators/SL.TLF.CACT.ZS.rankings>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 107 Central Intelligence Agency, “Latvia,” *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 108 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, “Unemployment Rate at 7.5% in Latvia in July,” 19 August 2021, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/employment/unemployment-rate-at-75-in-latvia-in-july.a417653/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 109 Santander, “Latvia: Economic Outline,” August 2021, <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/latvia/economic-outline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 110 Baltic News Network, “Though Unemployment in Latvia Continues Going Down, It Remains the Highest in Baltic States,” 17 August 2021, <https://bnn-news.com/though-unemployment-in-latvia-continues-going-down-it-remains-the-highest-in-baltic-states-227446>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 111 OECD, “OECD Economic Surveys: Latvia,” September 2017, <https://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/Latvia-2017-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 112 International Labor Organization, “What Is Skills Mismatch and Why Should We Care?” 1 April 2020, https://www.ilo.org/skills/Whatsnew/WCMS_740388/lang--en/index.htm, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 113 Xinhuanet, “Labor Shortages Affecting More than Half of Employers in Latvia: Survey,” 9 December 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/09/c_138618352.htm, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 114 OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Latvia 2019, “Chapter 1. Environmental Performance: Trends and Recent Developments,” OECD iLibrary, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f451533c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f451533c-en>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 115 OECD, “Innovation, Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability in Latvia,” 11 April 2019, <https://www.oecd.org/latvia/innovation-agricultural-productivity-and-sustainability-in-latvia-9789264312524-en.htm>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Latvian law gives workers the right to join unions, go on strike, and bargain collectively.¹¹⁶ About 13% of Latvian employees belong to a labor union, primarily workers in the public sector; some 34% of the country's labor force has collective bargaining coverage.¹¹⁷ The State Labor Inspectorate, part of the Ministry of Welfare, is responsible for enforcing labor law.¹¹⁸ The Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (LBAS) is the country's only trade union confederation and its largest non-governmental organization. About 20 unions, typically organized by specific industries or occupations, are affiliated with LBAS. Union membership in Latvia has declined significantly since independence in 1990, despite recruitment efforts. In 2018, LBAS had just over 91,000 members, down from 275,000 in 1995.^{119, 120}

Outlook

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic caused the Latvian economy to contract by about 3–4% in 2020. An economic rebound commenced the following year, spurred by government stimulus measures, a resilient export sector, competent government handling of the health crisis, and increased consumer spending. The pandemic period saw an increase in government borrowing, and the debt-GDP ratio rose from 45.5% in 2020 to 47.2% in 2021. Some obstacles to a full recovery and future growth are lingering pandemic-related restrictions and regional tensions with neighboring Belarus. Attaining convergence with EU per-capita income remains one of Latvia's major economic goals. Today, per-capita GDP is about 70% of the EU average, up from under 25% in the 1990s.^{121, 122, 123, 124, 125}

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- 116 U.S. Department of State, "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Latvia," 30 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 117 Worker-participation.eu, "Latvia," n.d., <https://www.worker-participation.eu/National-Industrial-Relations/Countries/Latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 118 International Labour Organization, "Latvia," n.d., https://www.ilo.org/labadmin/info/WCMS_209359/lang--en/index.htm, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 119 Worker-participation.eu, "Latvia: Trade Unions," n.d., <https://www.worker-participation.eu/National-Industrial-Relations/Countries/Latvia/Trade-Unions>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 120 European Institute for Gender Equality, "Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (LBAS) Latvijas Brīvo arodbiedrību savienība," n.d., <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/structures/latvia/free-trade-union-confederation-latvia-lbas-latvijas-brivo-arodbiedribu-savieniba>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 121 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 122 International Labour Organization, "About the ILO in Latvia," August 2021, https://www.ilo.org/budapest/countries-covered/latvia/WCMS_473726/lang--en/index.htm, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 123 Focus Economics, "Latvia Economic Outlook," 31 August 2021, <https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/latvia>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 124 Santander, "Latvian Economic Outline," September 2021, <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/latvia/economic-outline>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.
- 125 OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Latvia 2019, "Chapter 1. Environmental Performance: Trends and Recent Developments," OECD iLibrary, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f451533c-en/index.html?itemId=content/component/f451533c-en>, retrieved on 22 October 2021.

Latvia in Perspective

Economy Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. Latvia has one of the lowest rates of organic farming in the European Union. True False
2. Chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturing is a prominent part of Latvia's industrial sector. True False
3. Latvia's hydroelectric plant dams have been retrofitted to better allow the river migration of fish such as salmon and lamprey. True False
4. Non-European visitors to Latvia must obtain visas to travel to other parts of Western Europe. True False
5. Latvia is a member of the Eurozone. True False

Latvia in Perspective

Economy Assessment Answers

1. False:
Organic farming accounts for 11% of agriculture in Latvia, among the highest rates in the European Union.
2. True:
Chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturing accounts for about 10% of Latvia's manufacturing output.
3. False:
Latvia's hydroelectric plants have been criticized for adversely affecting fish species such as salmon and lamprey, whose ability to migrate through rivers and spawn is impeded by the plants' dams.
4. False:
Latvia is one of 26 European countries that make up the Schengen Zone, where the removal of internal border controls allows for the free movement of people between countries.
5. True:
The Eurozone is a group of 19 EU member states that use the euro as their national currency.

Chapter 4 | Society



Easter Festival at the Open Air Museum, Riga
Flickr / Sek Keung Lo

Introduction

Latvia is a multicultural society steeped in a rich folk tradition and a history of conquest and perseverance. With Soviet dominance a recent memory, the Latvian majority is eager to fortify the Latvian language and identity, sometimes to the detriment of the substantial Russian-speaking minorities. Although religiosity is not prevalent, the Lutheran, Catholic, and Orthodox churches are powerful institutions with geographic and ethnic power bases and a conservative social influence. Latvians take pride in their rich and unique culinary, literary, and artistic creativity. The treasured tradition of folk music is a powerful unifying force for Latvians everywhere.^{1, 2, 3}

1 Latvia.eu, "Get to Know Latvia!" n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

2 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

3 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 7 October 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Ethnic Groups and Languages

Latvians

Latvians are the largest ethnic group in Latvia, making up 62.7% of the population.⁴ The Latvians were a division of the Baltic people who migrated to the area some 2,000 years ago. After Germans conquered Latvian tribal kingdoms in the 12th century, the Latvians became land-working serfs. Over the centuries, the region passed from German to Polish to Swedish to Russian minority rule. In the latter 19th century, the Latvians began developing a national identity that led to Latvia becoming independent from Russia in 1918.^{5, 6, 7, 8}

Latvian is the first language of about 62% of the people of Latvia. The language, together with Lithuanian, occupies the Baltic branch of the Proto-Indo-European language tree. Over the centuries, Latvian has been influenced by German, Polish, Swedish, and Russian; nevertheless, many Latvian words are distinct and unique compared to their counterparts in other European languages. Latvian is written in a modified, 33-letter version of the Latin alphabet.^{9, 10, 11, 12, 13}

Since Latvia regained independence in 1991, the ethnic Latvian majority has sought to shore up the Latvian identity after decades of Russian domination. The national government has passed controversial laws mandating the knowledge and use of the Latvian language in education, for Latvian citizenship, and for participation in politics and other aspects of public life. The measures have drawn criticism for marginalizing the large ethnic Russian and other Russian-speaking minorities.^{14, 15, 16, 17}

Russians

Russians are Latvia's largest ethnic minority, constituting 24.5% of the population. Russians began arriving in Latvia in the 18th century after imperial Russia took control of the area. During the Soviet period in the second half of the 20th century, more Russians settled in Latvia, in keeping with Moscow's efforts to deemphasize the native nationalities of Soviet republics. Today, most ethnic Russians live in Latvia's cities and the east of the country.¹⁸

¹⁹Russian is spoken by over 33% of Latvia's inhabitants.²⁰ Russian belongs to the Slavic branch of the Proto-Indo-European language tree and is the most widely spoken Slavic language. The language is written using a 33-letter

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- 4 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 5 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 6 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 7 Latvian Institute, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 8 Augustinas Žemaitis, "Latvia's Ethnicities: Latvians," On Latvia, n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/13-13>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 9 Must Go Travel, "Latvian," n.d., <https://www.mustgo.com/worldlanguages/latvian/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 10 Holly Young, "A Language Family Tree—In Pictures," *Guardian*, 23 January 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/gallery/2015/jan/23/a-language-family-tree-in-pictures>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 11 Latvia.eu, "Language," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/society-lifestyle/language>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 12 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 13 On Latvia, "Latgalian Language in Latvia," n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/tag/latgalian-language>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 14 James H. Bater et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 15 Latvian Institute, "History of Latvia: A Timeline," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/history-landmarks/history-latvia-timeline>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 16 Lucian Kim, "A New Law in Latvia Aims to Preserve National Language by Limiting Russian in Schools," NPR, 28 October 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/28/654142363/a-new-law-in-latvia-aims-to-preserve-national-language-by-limiting-russian-in-sc>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 17 Minority Rights Group International, "Latvia: Russians," March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/russians-4/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 18 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 19 Minority Rights Group International, "Latvia: Russians," March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/russians-4/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 20 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

version of the Cyrillic alphabet.²¹ Due to the Russian dominance of the Soviet era, the Russian language is spoken by many non-ethnic Russians in Latvia. The language remains widely used in public life and is commonly heard in Riga and other major cities.^{22, 23}

Due to Latvian-centered citizenship laws, many ethnic Russians lack Latvian citizenship, limiting their mobility and employment opportunities. Limitations on the use of Russian have also created challenges in education. A recent law mandates that the last three years of public high school instruction be carried out entirely in Latvian. Ethnic Russians contend that the law targets the use of Russian specifically, as instruction at German and French schools in Riga is not affected. Nevertheless, Latvia's Russian-language media is thriving, with dozens of newspapers and periodicals in print and dozens of private radio channels. Some national and regional television channels have up to 80% of their programming in Russian.^{24, 25, 26, 27}

Belarusians

Ethnic Belarusians make up 3.1% of Latvia's population.²⁸ Although small Belarusian communities have existed near Latvia's border with Belarus for centuries, most ethnic Belarusians in Latvia moved there during the Soviet period and currently live in cities. The majority of Belarusians in Latvia speak Russian as their first language, and they often share the same political and cultural outlook as ethnic Russians. Ethnic Belarusians experience similar difficulties with obtaining Latvian citizenship and in education and the workplace as ethnic Russians.^{29, 30}

Ukrainians

Ethnic Ukrainians make up 2.2% of Latvia's population.³¹ Most of Latvia's Ukrainians arrived in the country after 1959 at the height of the Soviet era. Most Ukrainians in Latvia are primarily Russian speakers, and many are part of mixed Ukrainian-Russian families. The majority live in Latvia's cities. Like other Russian speakers in Latvia, ethnic Ukrainians face difficulties in education, employment, and obtaining Latvian citizenship.^{32, 33}

21 Must Go Travel, "Russian," n.d., <https://www.mustgo.com/worldlanguages/russian/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

22 Lucian Kim, "A New Law in Latvia Aims to Preserve National Language by Limiting Russian in Schools," NPR, 28 October 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/28/654142363/a-new-law-in-latvia-aims-to-preserve-national-language-by-limiting-russian-in-sc>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

23 Minority Rights Group International, "Latvia: Russians," March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/russians-4/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

24 Minority Rights Group International, "Latvia: Russians," March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/russians-4/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

25 Lucian Kim, "A New Law in Latvia Aims to Preserve National Language by Limiting Russian in Schools," NPR, 28 October 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/28/654142363/a-new-law-in-latvia-aims-to-preserve-national-language-by-limiting-russian-in-sc>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

26 Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Latvia, "Discover the Important Facts Regarding the Transition to Studying in the State Language," 24 January 2018, <https://www.izm.gov.lv/en/article/discover-important-facts-regarding-transition-studying-state-language>

27 Latvian Human Rights Committee, "Latvia Restricts Options of Education in Minority Languages in Basic Schools, Virtually Eliminates Them in High Schools," *Minority Monitor*, 20 September 2019, <https://www.minoritymonitor.eu/case/Latvia-restricts-options-of-education-in-minority-languages-in-basic-schools-virtually-eliminates-them-in-high-schools>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

28 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

29 Minority Rights Group International, "Latvia: Belarusians," March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/belarusians/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

30 Augustinas Žemaitis, "Belarusians," *On Latvia*, 2018, <https://www.onlatvia.com/belarusians-194>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

31 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

32 Minority Rights Group International, "Latvia: Ukrainians," March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/ukrainians/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

33 Augustinas Žemaitis, "Ukrainians," *On Latvia*, 2018, <https://www.onlatvia.com/ukrainians-196>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Livs

Livs, also called Livonians or Libiesi, are the Finno-Ugric people who settled in the west of present-day Latvia and Estonia around 3,000 BCE. By the 20th century, the last Liv cultural centers were several fishing villages on the Baltic coast in the northwest corner of Latvia. The Liv lifestyle was all but extinguished during the Soviet era as the Baltic coast became a restricted military zone. Today there are about 170 self-identified Livs in Latvia.^{34, 35, 36}

Liv culture is matriarchal, honoring the strength and wisdom of mothers. The Livs spoke Livonian, a Finno-Ugric language related to Estonian and Finnish. The last native speaker of Livonian died in 2013, and the handful of fluent speakers remaining learned it as a second or third language.^{37, 38}

Enthusiasm and support for Liv culture and the Livonian language are high in Latvia, as many see the Livs as an integral and valuable part of Latvian heritage. Since independence, there have been concerted efforts to preserve Liv culture. These efforts include printing books in Livonian, propagating traditional Liv music through choirs and musical ensembles, and an annual Liv festival held in Mazirbe, a Liv cultural center on the Baltic Coast.^{39, 40}

Latgalian

Latgalian is a language spoken by 9–15% of the population of Latvia, primarily people in the Latgale region of eastern Latvia. Latgalian developed along with the unique history of the Latgale region, which was administered more centrally by the Russian empire and lagged behind western Latvia in economic development and Latvian national identity. Jewish, Polish, and Russian cultural influences set Latgalia apart from the rest of Latvia, which had a stronger German influence.^{41, 42, 43}

After Latvia's independence, Latgalian saw a revitalization and its use became more visible in public spaces, consumer products, and traditional and popular music. A 1999 language law classifies Latgalian as a “historic variant” of Latvian. Teaching in Latgalian and learning Latgalian in schools are limited due to a lack of funding, qualified teachers, teaching materials, and parental support. Most Latgalian speakers are also fluent in Latvian and Russian.^{44, 45, 46}

34 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

35 Latvia.eu, “Latvian Livs,” 2016, <https://www.latvia.eu/latvians/latvian-livs>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

36 Roland Papp, “Keeping Alive an Extinct Language: The Finno-Ugric Tongue of Latvia’s Remote Fishing Villages,” *Deep Baltic*, 9 January 2017, <https://deepbaltic.com/2017/01/09/keeping-alive-an-extinct-language-the-finno-ugric-tongue-of-latvias-remote-fishing-villages/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

37 Latvia.eu, “Latvian Livs,” 2016, <https://www.latvia.eu/latvians/latvian-livs>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

38 Roland Papp, “Keeping Alive an Extinct Language: The Finno-Ugric Tongue of Latvia’s Remote Fishing Villages,” *Deep Baltic*, 9 January 2017, <https://deepbaltic.com/2017/01/09/keeping-alive-an-extinct-language-the-finno-ugric-tongue-of-latvias-remote-fishing-villages/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

39 Latvia.eu, “Latvian Livs,” 2016, <https://www.latvia.eu/latvians/latvian-livs>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

40 Roland Papp, “Keeping Alive an Extinct Language: The Finno-Ugric Tongue of Latvia’s Remote Fishing Villages,” *Deep Baltic*, 9 January 2017, <https://deepbaltic.com/2017/01/09/keeping-alive-an-extinct-language-the-finno-ugric-tongue-of-latvias-remote-fishing-villages/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

41 Vineta Vilcāne, “Latgalian: How the Language of Eastern Latvia is Being Revitalised,” *Deep Baltic*, 10 May 2021, <https://deepbaltic.com/2021/05/10/latgalian-how-the-language-of-eastern-latvia-is-being-revitalised/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

42 On Latvia, “Latgalian Language in Latvia,” n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/tag/latgalian-language>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

43 Mirosław Jankowiak, “Latgalian Language in Latvia: Between Politics, Linguistics and Law,” *International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies*, 30 March 2018, <https://www.iclds.org/2018/03/30/latgalian-language-in-latvia-between-politics-linguistics-and-law/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

44 Vineta Vilcāne, “Latgalian: How the Language of Eastern Latvia Is Being Revitalised,” *Deep Baltic*, 10 May 2021, <https://deepbaltic.com/2021/05/10/latgalian-how-the-language-of-eastern-latvia-is-being-revitalised/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

45 On Latvia, “Latgalian Language in Latvia,” n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/tag/latgalian-language>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

46 Mirosław Jankowiak, “Latgalian Language in Latvia: Between Politics, Linguistics and Law,” *International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies*, 30 March 2018, <https://www.iclds.org/2018/03/30/latgalian-language-in-latvia-between-politics-linguistics-and-law/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Religion

Lutheran

Lutheranism is a branch of Christianity that emerged in the 16th century with the teachings of Martin Luther as part of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Lutheranism rejected the institutional authority of the Catholic Church, relying on the authority of the Bible and upholding the theological principle of individual reconciliation to God by grace through faith. Today, Lutheranism counts about 77 million adherents worldwide. It is organized into around 150 autonomous regional or national churches, most of which are associated with the Lutheran World Federation.⁴⁷

Lutheranism reached Latvia in the 16th century as the Protestant Reformation spread throughout northern Europe. First adopted by the German landed gentry, it eventually reached the Latvian majority in the 18th century. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia took shape in 1922 after Latvia gained independence from Russia. After flourishing during the interwar period, the church met persecution and hardship with the onset of World War II and the subsequent Soviet period. In the 1980s, the church was an active participant in Latvia's efforts to break from the Soviet Union. Since Latvia's independence in 1991, the church has expanded its religious and social activity.⁴⁸

⁴⁹ Around 36% of Latvians identify as Lutheran.⁵⁰

Roman Catholic

The Roman Catholic church is led by the pope in the Vatican in Rome. Popes are part of a succession that Catholics believe goes back to Saint Peter, whom Jesus appointed head of the church. Such apostolic succession grants a pope the right to speak infallibly about spiritual matters. After the pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and priests make up the church hierarchy. Catholic religious practice centers on the seven sacraments: baptism, reconciliation, Eucharist, confirmation, marriage, holy orders (joining the priesthood), and the sacrament of the sick.^{51, 52, 53} Devotion to the Virgin Mary (the mother of Jesus), the use of the rosary, and going on pilgrimages are other important features of Catholicism.⁵⁴

The spread of Lutheranism in the 16th century displaced Catholicism's dominance in present-day Latvia. Catholicism remained predominant in Latgale in eastern Latvia as well as among the Polish and Lithuanian minorities. During the Soviet era, strong religious devotion and support from the Vatican bolstered the resilience of Latvia's Catholics in the face of restrictions and persecution. Latgale remains predominantly Catholic today, and the Latgalian language and culture are closely intertwined with Catholic religious practice. The Basilica of

47 Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Lutheranism," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lutheranism>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

48 World Council of Churches, "Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia," n.d., <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/evangelical-lutheran-church-of-latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

49 Augustinas Žemaitis, "Latvia's Religions: Lutherans," n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/lutherans-143>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

50 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

51 Jaroslav Jan Pelikan et al., "Roman Catholicism," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

52 Catholic Bridge, "Why Did the Church Move to Rome from Jerusalem?" n.d., http://catholicbridge.com/catholic/why_did_the_catholic_church_move_to_rome_from_jerusalem.php, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

53 Peter Stanford, "Roman Catholic Church," BBC Religions, 29 June 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/catholic/catholic_1.shtml#h2, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

54 Religion Facts, "Christianity," 25 February 2021, <https://religionfacts.com/christianity>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Assumption in the Latgale town of Aglona is a holy site for Latvian Catholics. The basilica contains a venerated painting of the Virgin Mary and is the site of an annual pilgrimage on 15 August.^{55, 56, 57, 58} About 19% of the people of Latvia are Roman Catholics.⁵⁹

Orthodox

Eastern Orthodoxy is a branch of Christianity whose religious practice was defined by the seven earliest church councils of the Christian era. The eastern church became closely linked with the Byzantine Empire, and an east-west split in 1054 formalized its break from the Catholic Church in Rome. Although communities exist worldwide, most Orthodox Christians live in the Balkans, the former Soviet region, and the Middle East. Orthodoxy is organized as a fellowship of independent territorial churches, with the Patriarchate of Constantinople holding symbolic precedence. Some of the church's most defining characteristics are its rich and elaborate liturgy, a strong tradition of monasticism, and an understanding of salvation as man's direct communion with the divine.⁶⁰

The Russian Orthodox church arrived in Latvia along with the Russian imperial conquest of the 18th century, as Orthodoxy was a key component of the empire. The number of Orthodox believers grew during the Soviet period—despite the communists' suppression of religious activity—as more Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians moved to Latvia. Today, about 19% of the people of Latvia are Orthodox; nearly all are native Russian speakers and live in cities and the eastern Latgale region. Most of Latvia's Orthodox communities belong to the Latvian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. In recent years, the organization has had to reassess the closeness of its ties to Moscow as it seeks to grow and maintain favor with the Latvian government. A smaller grouping of churches, the Latvian Orthodox Autonomous Church, is affiliated with the Patriarchate of Constantinople.^{61, 62, 63, 64, 65}

Other Faiths

Other smaller religious groups in Latvia include Orthodox Old Believers, other Christian sects, Judaism, Islam, and Neo-Paganism. A considerable portion of the population, 15–30%, identifies as irreligious or atheist.^{66, 67} According to a 2015 study of religiosity in 150 countries, Latvia is the eighth least religious country in the world.⁶⁸

55 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

56 Vineta Vilcāne, "Latgalian: How the Language of Eastern Latvia Is Being Revitalised," *Deep Baltic*, 10 May 2021, <https://deepbaltic.com/2021/05/10/latgalian-how-the-language-of-eastern-latvia-is-being-revitalised/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

57 Augustinas Žemaitis, "Latvia's Religions: Catholics," *On Latvia*, n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/catholics-145>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

58 Magnetic Latvia, "Aglona Basilica," 17 December 2020, <https://www.latvia.travel/en/sight/aglona-basilica>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

59 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

60 John Meyendorff, "Eastern Orthodoxy," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 20 August 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eastern-Orthodoxy>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

61 Augustinas Žemaitis, "Latvia's Religions: Russian Orthodox," *On Latvia*, n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/russian-orthodox-165>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

62 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

63 Orthodox Christianity, "Number of Orthodox Parishes in Latvia Has Increased by 1/3 Since 1992," 29 October 2019, <https://orthochristian.com/125040.html>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

64 Paul Goble, "Will Latvia Follow the Estonian or the Ukrainian Path in Orthodox Church Affairs?" *Jamestown Foundation*, 17 October 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/will-latvia-follow-the-estonian-or-the-ukrainian-path-in-orthodox-church-affairs/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

65 Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Latvia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995), <http://countrystudies.us/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

66 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

67 Augustinas Žemaitis, "Religions of Latvia: Religions: Introduction," *On Latvia*, n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/topics/culture-of-latvia/religions-in-latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

68 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "Latvia among the Least Religious Countries in the World," 25 June 2015, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/latvia-among-the-least-religious-countries-in-the-world.a135130/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Gender Issues

In 2020, Latvia ranked 17 out of 28 countries on the European Union's Gender Equality Index, which analyzes gender equality based on the key domains of work, money, knowledge, time, power, and health. Latvia's score was 60.8 out of 100 points, below the EU average of 67.9. According to the index's findings, earnings for both men and women have risen in recent years, but women earn an average of 18% less than men. While both men and women are completing higher education degrees, significantly more women than men are enrolled in liberal arts education.^{69, 70, 71}

Violence against women is a considerable and persistent problem in Latvia. About 38% of the women of Latvia have experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15. Over 32% of women victims of violence do not report their experiences to others, more than twice the EU average.⁷² Almost a third of Latvians believe domestic violence is a private issue to be resolved within the family.⁷³ Doctors can be reluctant to vouch for domestic violence victims, and police may hesitate to make arrests or issue restraining orders in domestic violence cases. In recent years, the government has strengthened law enforcement protocols to safeguard women's safety and rights.⁷⁴ Although Latvia is a signatory to the Istanbul Convention against violence against women and domestic violence, its legislature has yet to ratify it.⁷⁵

Latvia leads the Baltic states in women's representation in government. Three out of 14 (21%) cabinet ministers and 31 out of 100 (31%) legislators are women. Women also occupy 34% of local government positions. Since independence in 1991, 1 of 14 prime ministers and 1 of 6 presidents have been women.^{76, 77}

Latvian law fully guarantees equality between men and women in business and employment, making Latvia one of only six countries to do so.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Latvia's gender pay gap of 18–21% is one of the highest in the European Union, significantly above the EU average of 14%. The gap is higher in the private sector than in the public sector and is most pronounced in the financial and insurance industries. The gap has risen by an average of 0.71% per year between 2014 and 2020.^{79, 80, 81}

69 European Institute for Gender Equality, "Gender Equality Index 2020: Latvia," 28 October 2020, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

70 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "Latvia Ranks Fairly Poorly in EU Gender Equality Index," 30 October 2020, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/latvia-ranks-fairly-poorly-in-eu-gender-equality-index.a379885/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

71 Hasna Haidar, "What Is Liberal Arts Education?" Top Universities, 20 April 2021, <https://www.topuniversities.com/blog/what-liberal-arts-education>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

72 Central Statistics Bureau of Latvia, "Crime and Violence," 27 November 2020, https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/gender-equality-indicators/Crime_Violence, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

73 Baltic News Network, "Laizane: Domestic Violence against Women in Latvia Remains a Common Problem," 9 March 2017, <https://bnn-news.com/laizane-domestic-violence-against-women-in-latvia-remains-a-common-problem-161794>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

74 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Latvia," 30 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

75 Council of Europe, Istanbul Convention against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, "Text of the Convention," 24 September 2021, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

76 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "Latvia Leads Baltic States in Elected Women Politicians," 16 December 2019, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/latvia-leads-baltic-states-in-elected-women-politicians.a341840/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

77 Central Statistics Bureau of Latvia, "Power and Decision-Making," 19 June 2020, <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/gender-equality-indicators/Power-and-Decision-Making>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

78 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "Latvia a World Leader in Gender Equality Under the Law," 2 March 2019, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/latvia-a-world-leader-in-gender-equality-under-the-law.a311353/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

79 International Labour Organization, "About the ILO in Latvia," August 2021, https://www.ilo.org/budapest/countries-covered/latvia/WCMS_473726/lang--en/index.htm, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

80 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "Gender Pay Gap Continues to Rise in Latvia," 17 June 2021, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/employment/gender-pay-gap-continues-to-rise-in-latvia.a409267/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

81 Central Statistics Bureau of Latvia, "Females on Average Earn 15.9 % Less than Males," 17 June 2020, <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/population/gender-equality/press-releases/1952-unadjusted-gender-pay-gap-2019>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Latvia is considered one of the worst European countries for LGBT people to live.^{82, 83} Anti-gay discrimination is widespread, and almost half of sexual or physical attacks against LGBT people go unreported.⁸⁴ Between 1999 and 2020, the legislature rejected a law to legalize and protect same-sex relationships on six occasions. Since their introduction in 2015, so-called morality guidelines in education have left many teachers reluctant to address sexual minority issues in the classroom. In 2020, the legislature moved forward with a constitutional amendment that excluded same-sex couples from the legal definition of family. The move was a rejection of a high court ruling from the previous year that extended legal family protections to same-sex partners with children. LGBT rights activists in Latvia are attempting to forge alliances with liberal politicians and promote a message of tolerance and inclusivity. The country's first Pride parade took place in 2005.^{85, 86, 87, 88}

Cuisine

Latvia's climate and history have shaped its cuisine. To meet the demands of daily agricultural labor, Latvian peasants came to rely on simple yet rich dishes. Primary ingredients were pork, potatoes, grains, and dairy. Spices, often expensive and difficult to obtain, were not widely used. Long winters made pickling and preserving a necessity. Fishing off the Baltic coast and foraging for mushrooms and berries harken back to the country's pre-agricultural occupations. Outside German, Swedish, and Russian influences have also left their mark.^{89, 90, 91, 92}

Grey peas with bacon (*pelekje zirni ar speki*) is considered Latvia's national dish. It is a stew of gray peas (*pelekje zirni*), which are similar to chickpeas, cooked with fried onions and diced smoked pork belly (*speck*). Another popular pork dish is *karbonade*, Latvia's take on the Weiner schnitzel. A thinly sliced or beaten pork cutlet is dipped in flour, eggs, and breadcrumbs and then fried. It is typically topped with a mushroom sauce and served with potatoes, pickled vegetables, and rye bread.^{93, 94, 95, 96}

82 Henriette Jacobsen, "Latvia is Worst Place to be Gay in EU, Index Shows," Euractiv, 10 May 2016, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/social-europe-jobs/news/latvia-is-worst-place-to-be-gay-in-eu-index-shows/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

83 Zoya Sheftalovich, "Latvia, Lithuania and Poland Worst Countries to be Gay in EU," Politico, 11 May 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/latvia-lithuania-and-poland-worst-countries-to-be-gay-in-eu/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

84 Amnesty International, "Latvia 2020," 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/latvia/report-latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

85 Civicus, "Latvia: 'Faced with Hatred, We Focus on Delivering a Human Rights Message,'" 4 September 2018, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3434-latvia-faced-with-hatred-we-focus-on-delivering-a-human-rights-message>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

86 Juris Kaža, "Latvian Lawmakers Again Reject Legalizing Same Sex Partnerships," Medium, 29 October 2020, <https://juriskaza.medium.com/latvian-lawmakers-again-reject-legalizing-same-sex-partnerships-2aefbb34de02>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

87 Baiba Runce, "Married Abroad, Strangers Here: Same-sex Couple Issues in Latvia," Public Broadcasting of Latvia, 5 December 2020, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/married-abroad-strangers-here-same-sex-couple-issues-in-latvia.a384022/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

88 Juris Kaža, "Latvia Races to be Last in LGBT Equality Among the Baltics," Medium, 15 January 2021, <https://juriskaza.medium.com/latvia-races-to-be-last-in-lgbt-equality-among-the-baltics-4599b04a4d5>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

89 Jessica Esa and Will Heath, "13 Unique Latvian Foods and Drinks You Should Try in 2021," Books & Bao, 15 January 2021, <https://booksandbao.com/latvian-foods-and-drinks/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

90 Olga Rabo, "Traditional Latvian Cuisine: What's in the Menu?" Russian Abroad, 15 April 2015, <https://therussianabroad.com/traditional-latvian-cuisine/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

91 Latvia.eu, "Discover Cuisine," Latvian Institute, 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/cuisine>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

92 On Latvia, "Cuisine of Latvia," n.d., <https://www.onlatvia.com/topics/lifestyle/cuisine>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

93 Taste Atlas, "10 Most Popular Latvian Dishes," 9 January 2021, <https://www.tasteatlas.com/most-popular-dishes-in-latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

94 Kasparas Asmonaitis, "9 Latvian Foods You Must Try to Eat Like a Local," Culture Trip, 26 September 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/latvia/articles/9-latvian-foods-you-must-try-to-eat-like-a-local/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

95 Jessica Esa and Will Heath, "13 Unique Latvian Foods and Drinks You Should Try in 2021," Books & Bao, 15 January 2021, <https://booksandbao.com/latvian-foods-and-drinks/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

96 Peter Dragicevich, "Latvian Cuisine for Beginners," Lonely Planet, 11 January 2016, <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/latvian-cuisine-for-beginners>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Fish features widely in Latvian cooking. In Liepaja on the southern Baltic coast, a well-known dish is *liepajas mencins*, smoked cod slow cooked with potatoes and onions. Smoked sprats in oil are a delicacy in Riga. Other popular varieties are pike and eel.^{97, 98}

Bread is part of just about every meal in Latvia. The favored variety is whole grain rye sourdough (*rupjmaize*), usually as an elongated loaf baked in a hearth oven. It is often served for breakfast, topped with butter, cheese, or cold cuts, and alongside most main dishes at lunch and dinner. Bread soup (*maizes zupa*) is a popular dessert: moist bread is passed through a sieve, combined with spices, sugar, and dried fruit, and served topped with whipped cream.^{99, 100, 101}

Potatoes are another widely used ingredient, especially in soups. *Frikadelu zupa* is a soup made with potatoes, carrots, celery, and meatballs of ground meat, eggs, milk, flour, onions, and breadcrumbs. It is usually topped with sour cream and chopped dill. *Skabenu zupa* is made from beef stock, chopped sorrel leaves, potatoes, barley, onions, and lemon juice. It is usually garnished with toppings such as smoked pork ribs, grated carrots, hard-boiled eggs, and sour cream. Another popular potato-based dish is potato pancakes topped with sour cream and *speck* sauce.^{102, 103}

Mushrooms are a popular ingredient; every fall, it is tradition for Latvians to forage for forest mushrooms for the winter. A favored delicacy is fried boletus mushrooms served with salt, rye bread, and herbed butter.¹⁰⁴

Riga Black Balsam is an alcoholic liqueur that comes in flavors such as black currant and cherry.¹⁰⁵ Kvass is a beverage popular in Latvia and the surrounding region. It is made from fermented rye bread and is described as a sweet beer. It can contain up to 1.2% alcohol but is not considered an alcoholic drink.¹⁰⁶

97 Kasparas Asmonaitis, "9 Latvian Foods You Must Try to Eat Like a Local," Culture Trip, 26 September 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/latvia/articles/9-latvian-foods-you-must-try-to-eat-like-a-local/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

98 Peter Dragicevich, "Latvian Cuisine for Beginners," Lonely Planet, 11 January 2016, <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/latvian-cuisine-for-beginners>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

99 Taste Atlas, "10 Most Popular Latvian Dishes," 9 January 2021, <https://www.tasteatlas.com/most-popular-dishes-in-latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

100 Kasparas Asmonaitis, "9 Latvian Foods You Must Try to Eat Like a Local," Culture Trip, 26 September 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/latvia/articles/9-latvian-foods-you-must-try-to-eat-like-a-local/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

101 Jessica Esa and Will Heath, "13 Unique Latvian Foods and Drinks You Should Try in 2021," Books & Bao, 15 January 2021, <https://booksandbao.com/latvian-foods-and-drinks/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

102 Taste Atlas, "10 Most Popular Latvian Dishes," 9 January 2021, <https://www.tasteatlas.com/most-popular-dishes-in-latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

103 Kasparas Asmonaitis, "9 Latvian Foods You Must Try to Eat Like a Local," Culture Trip, 26 September 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/latvia/articles/9-latvian-foods-you-must-try-to-eat-like-a-local/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

104 Kasparas Asmonaitis, "9 Latvian Foods You Must Try to Eat Like a Local," Culture Trip, 26 September 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/latvia/articles/9-latvian-foods-you-must-try-to-eat-like-a-local/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

105 Jessica Esa and Will Heath, "13 Unique Latvian Foods and Drinks You Should Try in 2021," Books & Bao, 15 January 2021, <https://booksandbao.com/latvian-foods-and-drinks/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

106 Kasparas Asmonaitis, "9 Latvian Foods You Must Try to Eat Like a Local," Culture Trip, 26 September 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/latvia/articles/9-latvian-foods-you-must-try-to-eat-like-a-local/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Traditional Dress

Folk dress is an important and cherished part of Latvia's national heritage. Dress styles differ from region to region and have evolved over centuries. Some unifying characteristics are white and gray fabrics, linen and wool, and the prevalence of blue, yellow, red, and green accent colors. Today, folk dress remains alive with traditional Latvian dance ensembles and is prominently featured at the Latvian Song Festival.^{107, 108}

In the Kurzeme region of western Latvia, traditional dress reflected the region's ancient heritage, incorporating bronze and amber for decorative purposes. Since the early Neolithic times (approximately 10,000 BCE), amber has been a commodity for people in the region, used for trade, religious purposes, and personal adornment.¹⁰⁹ As the area industrialized in the 19th century, bright skirts with stripes or monochrome red chemical dyes became fashionable.¹¹⁰

In central Latvia's Zemgale region, folk garments were commonly adorned with subtle vertical stripes, rose patterns, and zigzag, diamond, and triangle motifs. Skirts were fastened at the waist with wide white sashes decorated with red sun and cross patterns.¹¹¹

In the Vidzeme region in north Latvia, staples of female folk clothing were large, embroidered white woolen shawls and bright, multicolored skirts decorated with stripe or plaid patterns. Married women also wore tower-shaped linen caps.¹¹²

In the Selija region in the south of the country, the folk dress featured influences from Lithuania. A distinct garment for the area was a tunic-like linen shirt with built-in shoulder pads. Decorative motifs included vertical stripes, herringbone, zigzag, and twisted bicolor yarn.¹¹³

The traditional dress in the Latgale region featured Russian, Belarusian, and Estonian influences. Skirts and other garments were predominately white with red decorations. Industrially produced clothing was rare, and most people wore homemade garments.¹¹⁴

107 Ieva Pīgozne, "The Latvian Folk Dress," Latvian Institute, 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/latvian-folk-dress>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

108 Latvia.eu, "Song Celebration," Latvian Institute, 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/song-celebration>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

109 Vaira Viķis-Freibergs, "Amber in Latvian Folk Songs and Folk Beliefs," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 1985, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43211334>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

110 Ieva Pīgozne, "The Latvian Folk Dress," Latvian Institute, 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/latvian-folk-dress>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

111 Ieva Pīgozne, "The Latvian Folk Dress," Latvian Institute, 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/latvian-folk-dress>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

112 Ieva Pīgozne, "The Latvian Folk Dress," Latvian Institute, 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/latvian-folk-dress>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

113 Ieva Pīgozne, "The Latvian Folk Dress," Latvian Institute, 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/latvian-folk-dress>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

114 Ieva Pīgozne, "The Latvian Folk Dress," Latvian Institute, 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/latvian-folk-dress>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Arts

Literature

Latvian literature has its origins in ancient folk songs, fairytales, proverbs, and sayings that predate the written Latvian language. After the German conquest of the 13th century, clergy members brought writing to the area. By the 18th century, Latvian writers began to rediscover and interact with the long-neglected folk traditions. As national consciousness grew in the 19th century, the influence of folk songs and peasant life on literature increased, as seen in the works of the folklorist Krisjanis Barons (1835–1923), the poet Andrejs Pumpurs (1841–1902), and novelists Reinis Kaudzites (1839–1920) and Matiss Kaudzites (1848–1926).^{115, 116}

Late 19th-century literature was dominated by Janis Rainis (1865–1929), whose poems, plays, novels, and translations revitalized the Latvian language and spurred currents of social justice and self-determination. Rainis's equally influential partner Aspazija (1865–1943), championed women's rights in her poems and plays. Latvia's turmoil, triumph, and tragedy in the 20th century inspired many distinguished writers, including poets Andrejs Upits (1877–1970), Karlis Skalbe (1879–1945), Aleksandrs Caks (1901–50), and Imants Ziedonis (1933–2013); novelist Janis Jaunsudrabinš (1877–1962); dramatist Martins Ziverts (1903–90); and short story writers Karlis Zarins (1889–1978) and Janis Ezerins (1891–1924).^{117, 118}

Today, Latvian literature is vibrant and diverse. Latvian-language writers share the national spotlight with Russophone writers. Some 70 publishers publish about 2,100 books per year. Notable contemporary authors are Inga Abele, Eduards Aivars, Inga Gaile, Gundega Repše, and Nora Ikstena.^{119, 120}

Visual Arts

The painter Vilhelms Purvītis's (1872–1945) structured depictions of tree groves, changing seasons, and rural scenes have become synonymous with the Latvian landscape. Janis Avotins is an acclaimed contemporary painter. Soviet-era media inspired his dark, blurry depictions of human subjects. Among the most famous living Latvian photographers is Inta Ruka, known for her black-and-white portraits of everyday Latvians.^{121, 122, 123}

Music

Traditional music is an integral part of Latvian society, at the forefront of national awakening and peaceful resistance to tyranny and occupation. The National Song and Dance Celebration demonstrates the importance of music to Latvian culture. First held in 1873 in Riga, the celebration punctuated a growing national sentiment under Russian imperial rule and has been held every five years since. The event is made possible by grassroots, national, and

115 J. A. Andrups, "Latvian Literature," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15 March 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Latvian-literature>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

116 Latvia.eu, "Latvian Literature," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/latvian-literature>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

117 J. A. Andrups, "Latvian Literature," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15 March 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Latvian-literature>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

118 Latvia.eu, "Latvian Literature," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/latvian-literature>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

119 Latvia.eu, "Latvian Literature," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/latvian-literature>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

120 Latvian Literature, "The Latvian Publishing Industry," 2019, http://latvianliterature.lv/upload/press/236/Book_market_2019_Latvia.pdf, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

121 Latvia.eu, "Culture: Key to Latvia: Art," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/node/2725>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

122 Artsy, "Jānis Avotins," n.d., <https://www.artsy.net/artist/janis-avotins>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

123 Artnet, "Vilhelms Purvītis," n.d., <http://www.artnet.com/artists/vilhelms-purvitis/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

international participation. After a week of rich and varied music and dance performances, the festival culminates in a mass choir concert combining as many as 20,000 voices on 1 stage.^{124, 125}

Film

Latvia's film industry is small but noteworthy and has consistently received international recognition. Since 1992, Latvia has regularly submitted films for Academy Award consideration in the Best International Feature category; however, it has yet to be nominated.¹²⁶ About 60 feature, animated, and documentary films are released each year in Latvia.¹²⁷ For decades, Latvia's documentary filmmakers have captured various aspects of life, from the grandiose to the absurd, with attention to detail and a flair for visual storytelling. Auteur cinema—films with a director's distinct style and vision—is popular in Latvia. Some noted Latvian filmmakers are Herz Frank, Juris Poskus, Laila Pakalnina, and Janis Nords.¹²⁸

Sports and Recreation

Ice Hockey

Ice hockey is the most popular sport in Latvia. Its popularity dates back to 1936 when the national team participated in the Winter Olympics. The most popular club team is Dinamo Riga, established in 1946 and currently active in Europe's prestigious Kontinental Hockey League. Three Latvian players—Sandis Ozolins, Karlis Skrastins, and Zemgus Girgensons—have had successful careers in the NHL.^{129, 130}

Basketball

Basketball is a close second-favorite sport in Latvia. In 1935, Latvia was one of the founding members of the International Basketball Federation; today, Latvian club teams are prominent in European competitions. Uljana Semjonova is among the world's most accomplished basketball players and a Latvian national hero. She won multiple European, world, and Olympic championships during her 1968–86 career. Three Latvian basketball players—Andris Biedrins, Kristaps Porzingis, and Davis Bertans—have been drafted into the NBA in recent decades.¹³¹

124 Latvia.eu, "Song Celebration," Latvian Institute, 2015, <https://www.latvia.eu/traditions-culture/song-celebration>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

125 Lidija Liegis, "Sixteen Thousand Voices in Perfect Harmony: Latvia's Incredible Song Festival," Deep Baltic, 20 November 2018, <https://deepbaltic.com/2018/11/20/sixteen-thousand-voices-in-perfect-harmony-latvias-incredible-song-festival/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

126 Nick Holdsworth, "Oscars: Latvia Selects 'The Mover' for International Feature Film Category," *Hollywood Reporter*, 16 September 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/2020-oscars-latvia-selects-mover-international-feature-film-category-1239870/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

127 Zane Balčus, "Latvia," Film New Europe, 2021, <https://www.filmneweurope.com/countries/latvia-profile>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

128 Latvia.eu, "Culture: Key to Latvia: Cinema," n.d., <https://www.latvia.eu/brochures/cinema>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

129 Latvia.eu, "Sports," Latvian Institute, 2016, <https://www.latvia.eu/society/sports>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

130 Kontinental Hockey League, n.d., <https://en.khl.ru/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

131 Latvia.eu, "Sports," Latvian Institute, 2016, <https://www.latvia.eu/society/sports>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Other Sports

Soccer is another popular sport in Latvia. Talented players like Marians Pahars and Maris Verpakovskis have gone on to play for prestigious European club teams; the national men's team's greatest achievement has been qualifying for the 2004 European Championship. Latvia's climate is well suited for winter sports, and Latvian athletes have won multiple Olympic medals in sliding events like skeleton, bobsled, and luge. In the summer games, Latvian athletes have excelled at the javelin throw and the long jump. The grandmaster Mikhail Tal (1936–92) held the records for the longest and second-longest unbeaten streaks in competitive chess.¹³²

132 Latvia.eu, "Sports," Latvian Institute, 2016, <https://www.latvia.eu/society/sports>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Latvia in Perspective

Society Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. Many ethnic Russians lack Latvian citizenship. True False
2. The Latgalian language is a mixture of Latvian and Russian that emerged in Latvia's cities during the Soviet period. True False
3. Communist suppression of religious activity during the Soviet era led to a decline in Latvia's number of Orthodox Christians. True False
4. *Liepajas mencins*, smoked cod slow cooked with potatoes and onions, is Latvia's national dish. True False
5. Latvian films have been nominated for and won multiple Academy Awards. True False

Latvia in Perspective

Society Assessment Answers

1. True:
Due to Latvian-centered citizenship laws, many ethnic Russians lack Latvian citizenship, limiting their mobility and employment opportunities.
2. False:
Latgalian is a language spoken by 9–15% of the population of Latvia, primarily people in the Latgale region of eastern Latvia.
3. False:
The number of Orthodox believers grew during the Soviet period—despite the communists' suppression of religious activity—as more Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians moved to Latvia.
4. False:
Grey peas with bacon (*pelekie zirni ar speki*) is considered Latvia's national dish. It is a stew of gray peas (*pelekie zirni*), which are similar to chickpeas, cooked with fried onions and diced smoked pork belly (*speck*).
5. False:
Since 1992, Latvia has regularly submitted films for Academy Award consideration in the Best International Feature category; however, it has yet to be nominated.

Chapter 5 | Security



Latvian Army during the exercise Silver Arrow 2017
Wikimedia / LatvijasArmija

Introduction

Latvia's small size and location at the fault lines of historic confrontations among European powers make it reliant on cooperation with like-minded neighbors and participation in Western military and political alliances. In 2004, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania were among the first former Soviet Republics to join NATO and the European Union. The most prominent aspect of Latvia's security and foreign policies is counteracting the influence and threat posed by Russia, its former imperial and Soviet master. For the past decade, Russia has been waging soft power and economic influence campaigns to destabilize the Baltics and erode Western European cohesion. The volatility is exacerbated by Latvia's sizeable Russian-speaking minority, which is responsive to Russian disinformation about Latvia and its Western allies.^{1, 2, 3}

1 James H. Bate et al., "Latvia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

2 Michael Birnbaum, "In Latvia, Fresh Fears of Aggression as Kremlin Warns about Russian Minorities," *Washington Post*, 27 September 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-latvia-fresh-fears-of-aggression-as-kremlin-warns-about-russian-minorities/2014/09/26/b723b1af-2aed-44d1-a791-38cebbbadbd0_story.html, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

3 Matt Cesare, "Russian Encroachment in the Baltics: The Role of Russian Media and Military," Foreign Policy Research Institute, 14 December 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/russian-encroachment-in-the-baltics-the-role-of-russian-media-and-military-2/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

U.S.-Latvia Relations

The United States and Latvia established diplomatic relations in 1922. Washington views Latvia's current government as a continuation of the post-World War I republic, having never recognized Latvia's incorporation into the Soviet Union. In 1998, the United States, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania signed the Baltic Charter, a partnership agreement that underscored Washington's support for the three republics' independence, territorial integrity, and European integration.^{4, 5, 6}

In recent decades, Latvia has emerged as a close U.S. ally and partner. Latvia has contributed to U.S.-led military operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and the two countries share strategic security goals for the east Baltic region. Latvia hosts U.S. troops as part of various operations and has acquired weapons and equipment from U.S. manufacturers. In 2020 the United States provided USD 19 million in security assistance to Latvia.^{7, 8}

Economic relations are limited, with room for growth. In 2018, Latvia imported USD 510 million worth of goods from the United States, including transportation equipment and computer and electronic products. That same year exports from Latvia to the United States totaled USD 727 million and included mainly beverages and transportation equipment. About 1,300 people in Latvia work for U.S.-affiliated organizations or companies.^{9, 10}

Relations with Neighbors

Estonia

Latvia and Estonia established diplomatic relations in late 1918, immediately following the three Baltic states' declarations of independence from Russia. Today the two countries' close friendship rests on shared cultural and historical ties and overlapping foreign policy interests. Both are united by EU and NATO memberships and an uneasy relationship with Russia. Trade relations are strong; Estonia is Latvia's second-largest export partner and fifth-largest import partner.^{11, 12, 13}

4 U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Latvia," 3 December 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

5 U.S. Embassy in Latvia, "U.S.–Latvia Relations, n.d., <https://lv.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/us-latvia-relations/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

6 Steven Erlanger, "Clinton and 3 Baltic Leaders Sign Charter," *New York Times*, 17 January 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/01/17/world/clinton-and-3-baltic-leaders-sign-charter.html>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

7 U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Latvia," 3 December 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

8 U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S., Latvia Reaffirm Relationship in Bilateral Meeting," 10 May 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1844670/us-latvia-reaffirm-relationship-in-bilateral-meeting/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

9 Derek E. Mix, "Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: Background and U.S.-Baltic Relations, Congressional Research Service, 2 January 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R46139.pdf>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

10 U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Latvia," 3 December 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

11 Embassy of Estonia in Riga, "History of Diplomatic Relations," n.d., <https://riga.mfa.ee/estonia-and-latvia/history-of-diplomatic-relations/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

12 Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Latvia," 3 February 2020, <https://vm.ee/en/countries/latvia?display=relations#economic>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

13 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Russia

Latvia-Russia relations are complex, informed by Russia's history of imperial conquest and present-day regional aggression and Latvia's pivot toward the West. Since independence, Latvia has sought to move away from the Russian cultural and linguistic influences left from the Soviet era. Russia has been a vocal supporter of the 24% of Latvia's population who are ethnic Russians and has protested Latvian laws that limit the use of the Russian language and have left many ethnic Russians without Latvian citizenship. Russia has cited the protection of ethnic Russians as a primary reason for its military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine in recent years, to the apprehension of Latvia. Despite tensions, trade between the two countries is strong; Russia is Latvia's third-largest export partner and top import partner. The bulk of Latvia's natural gas imports come from Russia.^{14, 15, 16, 17}

Belarus

Latvia and Belarus established diplomatic relations in 1992 after both became independent from the Soviet Union. The two countries' post-Soviet trajectories have differed, however. Latvia pursued Western integration while Belarus became authoritarian and developed close ties with Russia. Riga and Minsk have maintained neighborly relations and expressed interest in strengthening bilateral cooperation in trade, technology, and culture. Ties were strained in 2020 after Latvia joined most of Europe in not recognizing the legitimacy of Belarus's presidential elections that year. In 2021, Latvia froze diplomatic relations with Belarus over Belarus's detention of a dissident journalist.^{18, 19}

Lithuania

Latvia and Lithuania first established diplomatic relations in 1921. As with Estonia, Latvia's strong friendship with Lithuania is based on shared cultural and historical ties, congruent foreign policy interests, and shared EU and NATO memberships. Lithuania is Latvia's top export partner and second-biggest import partner. According to a 2019 public opinion poll, Lithuanians see Latvia as their country's closest friend.^{20, 21, 22} The two countries differ over their shared maritime boundary. Latvia wishes to explore a Baltic Sea oilfield largely within Lithuania's territorial waters before ratifying a 1999 maritime boundary treaty.²³

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- 14 Arturs Bikovs et al., "Russia's Influence and Presence in Latvia," *New Direction*, 2018, [https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/ND-RussianInfluenceInLatvia-preview\(low-res\).pdf](https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/ND-RussianInfluenceInLatvia-preview(low-res).pdf), retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 15 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 16 Indra Ekmanis, "Why Isn't Latvia the 'Next' Crimea? Reconsidering Ethnic Integration," National Center for Biotechnology Information, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7329285/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 17 BBC News, "Russia Threatens Sanctions over Latvian Language in Schools," 3 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43626368>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 18 Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of Latvia, "Belarusian–Latvian Relations," n.d., https://latvia.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral_relations/, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 19 Reuters, "Belarus, Latvia Expel Each Others' Diplomats as Row over Journalist's Arrest Deepens," 24 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-latvia-expel-each-others-diplomats-row-over-journalists-arrest-deepens-2021-05-24/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 20 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "Latvia and Lithuania Mark a Century of Diplomatic Ties," 12 February 2021, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/latvia-and-lithuania-mark-a-century-of-diplomatic-ties.a392032/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, "Lithuanians Believe That Latvia Is the Friendliest Country and Russia Poses a Major Threat, a New Survey Finds," 29 January 2019, <https://www.urm.lt/default/en/news/lithuanians-believe-that-latvia-is-the-friendliest-country-and-russia-poses-a-major-threat-a-new-survey-finds>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 22 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 23 LRT, "Lithuania and Latvia Disagree over Maritime Boundary," 15 April 2019, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1048887/lithuania-and-latvia-disagree-over-maritime-boundary>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Police

Law enforcement in Latvia falls under the interior ministry. The three main law enforcement bodies are the State Police, Security Police, and State Border Guard. The State Police is responsible for public safety, crime prevention, and criminal investigations.²⁴ As of 2018, the force employed over 6,800 police officers and had a budget of approximately USD 174 million. In 2019 the State Police initiated a series of reforms to make it more agile, professional, and responsive to its mission requirements. The reforms emulate the police structures of Scandinavian countries and include the creation of a strategic planning unit and increasing officer salaries.^{25, 26}

The Security Police is responsible for combatting organized crime, economic crimes, terrorism, gang crimes, counterfeit currency, and smuggling drugs and weapons. The body is also responsible for protecting national and local government officials and institutions. The State Border Guard controls and guards Latvia's land and maritime borders, conducts customs duties, and prevents illegal border crossings of people and goods.²⁷

Military

The National Armed Forces of Latvia (Nacionalie Brunotie Speki) consist of the Land Forces (Latvijas Sauszemes Speki); the Naval Force (Latvijas Juras Speki), which includes the Coast Guard (Latvijas Kara Flote); the Air Force (Latvijas Gaisa Speki); and the National Guard. The total military personnel strength is 6,500 active-duty troops and 8,200 reservists. Military service is voluntary, conscription having been abolished in 2007.²⁸

The Land Forces are comprised of 5,500 active-duty troops. Equipment strength consists of 310 armored vehicles, 45 self-propelled artillery pieces, and ten towed artillery pieces. The Naval Force and Coast Guard have 500 active-duty personnel and 11 patrol vessels, and six mine warfare vessels. The Air Force has 500 active-duty personnel and four helicopters.^{29, 30}

Since 1993 the Latvian military has been in a partnership with the Michigan National Guard. The partnership includes personnel exchanges and participation in large-scale military exercises.³¹ Latvia joined NATO in 2004. Since 2017 it has hosted a Canada-led NATO multinational battlegroup of 1,500 troops.³² Each year the Latvian military conducts the Namejs military exercise, consisting of combined maneuvers and tactical drills to prepare for combatting hybrid threats.³³

24 OSCE Polis, "Latvia," n.d., <https://polis.osce.org/country-profiles/latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

25 Public Broadcasting of Latvia, "Reforms Aim to Streamline Latvian Police Force," 28 November 2019, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/reforms-aim-to-streamline-latvian-police-force_a339956/, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

26 European Commission, "Recommendations for Organizational and Functional Changes in the State Police of Latvia, Including Designing New Organizational Structure and Recommending the Required Number of Employees," 2020, http://tap.mk.gov.lv/doc/2020_11/IEMZinop2_SRAP.2024.pdf, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

27 OSCE Polis, "Latvia," n.d., <https://polis.osce.org/country-profiles/latvia>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

28 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

29 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

30 Global Fire Power, "2021 Latvia Military Strength," 2021, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=latvia, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

31 Ashley Goodwin, "Michigan National Guard, Latvia Strengthen Partnership," National Guard, 15 June 2021, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/2658655/michigan-national-guard-latvia-strengthen-partnership/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

32 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

33 Baltic Times, "Armed Forces to Hold Namejs Military Exercise in All Latvia," 21 August 2021, https://www.baltictimes.com/armed_forces_to_hold_namejs_military_exercise_in_all_latvia/, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

In 2020 Latvia spent 2.27% of GDP on military expenses, exceeding the 2% minimum agreed upon by NATO members. Military inventory consists of aging Soviet-era stockpiles as well as more modern second-hand European and U.S. weapons and equipment.³⁴ In 2018 the U.S. State Department approved Latvia for the purchase of four UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters for an estimated cost of USD 200 million.³⁵

Cybersecurity

Latvia has become highly reliant on the use of computers. About 98% of Latvians use the internet once a week and about 80% use it daily. A quarter of government services are available electronically, and nine-tenths of bank transactions take place online. Cyberattacks have been on the rise in recent years and have become even more prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an increased reliance on the internet for work and commerce. In the first half of 2021, authorities detected almost as many attempted cyberattacks as during all of 2020. Ransomware attacks targeting small and medium enterprises are the most prevalent.^{36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41}

Latvia is a frequent target of malicious cyber activity originating in Russia. Russian intelligence services have reportedly carried out email phishing attacks against Latvia's defense and foreign ministries in attempts to obtain internal information. In the run-up to Latvia's 2018 parliamentary elections, hackers took control of a popular Latvian social media site and defaced it with propagandistic pro-Russia messages and images.^{42, 43, 44, 45} In addition to the Russian threat, Latvian security officials see cyberattacks originating in China as a growing cybersecurity issue.⁴⁶

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- 34 Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," *World Factbook*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 35 Aaron Mehta, "Latvia Cleared to Buy Black Hawks," *Defense News*, 3 August 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/08/03/latvia-cleared-to-buy-black-hawks/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 36 Europa.eu, "Cyber Security Strategy of Latvia 2014–2018," n.d., <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/topics/national-cyber-security-strategies/ncss-map/lv-ncss>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 37 Alexander Welscher, "More than a Virus: Pandemic and Online Security in the Baltic States," *Public Broadcasting of Latvia*, 12 April 2021, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/business/more-than-a-virus-pandemic-and-online-security-in-the-baltic-states.a399930/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 38 Māra Jākobsone, "Latvia–Cybersecurity Strategy 2019–2022," *Digital Skills & Jobs Platform*, 18 May 2021, <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/actions/national-initiatives/national-strategies/latvia-cybersecurity-strategy-2019-2022>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 39 Preses Relīze, "Cyber Attacks Increase Sharply," *Magnetic Latvia*, 27 August 2021, <https://labsoflatvia.com/en/news/cyber-attacks-increase-sharply>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 40 Overseas Security Advisory Council, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, U.S. Department of State, "Latvia 2020 Crime & Safety Report," 1 May 2020, <https://www.osac.gov/Country/Latvia/Content/Detail/Report/68f60169-ff0c-49d8-8e1c-189455570680>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 41 Statista, "Internet Usage Frequency among Individuals in Latvia between 2018 and 2020," n.d., <https://www.statista.com/statistics/379083/internet-usage-at-home-latvia/>, retrieved on 2 November 2021.
- 42 Reuters, "Latvia Says Russia Targeted Its Foreign and Defense Bodies with Cyber Attacks," 8 October 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-latvia-russia-cyber/latvia-says-russia-targeted-its-foreign-and-defense-bodies-with-cyber-attacks-idUSKCN1M1SB>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 43 Krista Viksnins, "Cyberwarfare in Latvia: A Call for New Cyberwarfare Technology," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 23 June 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/06/cyberwarfare-in-latvia-a-call-for-new-cyberwarfare-terminology/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 44 Eesti Rahvusringhääling, "Baltic States Report Recent Increase in Information and Cyber Attacks," 22 April 2021, <https://news.err.ee/1608187222/baltic-states-report-recent-increase-in-information-and-cyber-attacks>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 45 Stephen Jewkes and Oleg Vukmanovic, "Suspected Russia-Backed Hackers Target Baltic Energy Networks," *Reuters*, 11 May 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-baltics-cyber-insight/suspected-russia-backed-hackers-target-baltic-energy-networks-idUKKBN1871W9?edition-redirect=uk>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 46 LRT, "Latvian Intelligence Names China, Russia a Threat," 13 May 2020, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1177615/latvian-intelligence-names-china-russia-a-threat>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.

Issues Affecting Stability

In recent years, Russia has increasingly acted to intimidate and destabilize Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania as part of its overall tactics to undermine and weaken the West. The three Baltic states have been unique among former Soviet republics in their success at slipping away from Russian influence and integrating into Western Europe. The three countries joined the NATO military alliance and the European Union within 15 years of independence. Russia justifies its geopolitical interest in the Baltics by its need to protect ethnic Russians, who make up sizeable minorities in all three countries. Moscow has repeatedly protested Latvian language, education, and citizenship laws seen as disenfranchising Russian speakers. Russia offers automatic Russian citizenship to Latvians of Russian descent.^{47, 48, 49, 50}

In contrast to its military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, Russia has restricted its efforts to control Latvia and the other two Baltic states primarily to soft-power tactics based on diplomacy, culture, and civil society. Moscow has cultivated networks of influence in the Baltics by incentivizing or bribing political and business elites into furthering its interests. Russian-funded media outlets regularly spread propaganda and disinformation. Examples include fabricated stories about NATO soldiers committing rape or spreading COVID-19. Many Russian speakers in the Baltics are receptive to Russian disinformation, as it stokes their frustrations and strengthens perceptions of being marginalized. In 2020, Latvia and Lithuania banned the Russian television broadcaster RT due to its alleged connections to a Russian propagandist. The Baltic countries have attempted to create their own Russian-language broadcasters as an alternative to Moscow-controlled channels.^{51, 52, 53}

Economic pressure is another tool at Russia's disposal. In the early 2000s, Moscow temporarily restricted its hydrocarbon flow to Latvia on two occasions as part of conflicts over Russian control of the Latvian port of Ventspils and Latvian education laws seen as restrictive to Russian speakers. In 2017 a notable reduction of cargo flow from Russia to Latvian ports coincided with Latvia's voiced opposition to the building of a Russian-led natural gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea. Although still largely dependent on Russian energy, Latvia has taken steps to diversify its hydrocarbon suppliers. In 2020, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland launched a joint natural gas market after the completion of a pipeline carrying gas from Finland to Latvia. A massive Soviet-era underground storage facility at Incukalna in central Latvia can provide an 18-month supply of natural gas to the country in case of an emergency.^{54, 55, 56, 57}

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- 47 Michael Birnbaum, "In Latvia, Fresh Fears of Aggression as Kremlin Warns about Russian Minorities," *Washington Post*, 27 September 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-latvia-fresh-fears-of-aggression-as-kremlin-warns-about-russian-minorities/2014/09/26/b723b1af-2aed-44d1-a791-38cebbbadbd0_story.html, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
- 48 Matt Cesare, "Russian Encroachment in the Baltics: The Role of Russian Media and Military," Foreign Policy Research Institute, 14 December 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/russian-encroachment-in-the-baltics-the-role-of-russian-media-and-military-2/>, retrieved on 25 October 2021.
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Latvia and its two Baltic neighbors perceive Russia as a military threat. In recent years Russia has been bolstering its military presence in Russian and Belarusian territory along the borders with the Baltic states and in the enclave of Kaliningrad between Lithuania and Poland. The three Baltic states are substantially reliant on NATO to counterbalance the Russian military threat. Since 2004, NATO member aircraft have patrolled the three countries' airspace as part of the alliance's Baltic air policing mission. In 2020, the region was a prominent part of Defender Europe, NATO's largest military exercise on the continent in 25 years.^{58, 59, 60, 61, 62}

Outlook

Latvia views its security, stability, and territorial integrity as dependent on its continuing integration with Western institutions. The ever-present political and economic threats posed by Russia have been exacerbated by the disruptions and uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic. Military support from NATO and increasing participation in Europe's energy marketplace are crucial for countering Russian influence. Domestically, Latvia's Russian-speaking population has the potential to undermine stability due to growing frustrations with non-Latvian language restrictions and the inflammatory effects of Russian disinformation and propaganda.^{63, 64, 65, 66}

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Latvia in Perspective

Security Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. Present-day relations between the United States and Latvia are characterized by mistrust and animosity that date back to the Cold War. True False
2. Ties between Latvia and Belarus have been strained in recent years. True False
3. Latvia does not have a formal police force, relying instead on the Baltic tradition of local citizens' public safety councils. True False
4. Latvia has become highly reliant on the use of computers. True False
5. In recent years, Russia has increasingly acted to intimidate and destabilize Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania as part of its overall tactics to undermine and weaken the West. True False

Latvia in Perspective

Security Assessment Answers

1. False:
In recent decades, Latvia has emerged as a close U.S. ally and partner. Latvia has contributed to U.S.-led military operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and the two countries share strategic security goals for the east Baltic region.
2. True:
Ties were strained in 2020 after Latvia joined most of Europe in not recognizing the legitimacy of Belarus's presidential elections that year. In 2021, Latvia froze diplomatic relations with Belarus over Belarus's detention of a dissident journalist.
3. False:
Law enforcement in Latvia falls under the interior ministry. The three central law enforcement bodies are the State Police, Security Police, and State Border Guard. The State Police is responsible for public safety, crime prevention, and criminal investigations.
4. True:
At least 98% of Latvians use the internet once a week. A quarter of government services are available electronically, and nine-tenths of bank transactions take place online.
5. True:
Russia justifies its geopolitical interest in the Baltics by its need to protect ethnic Russians, who make up sizeable minorities in all three countries.

Latvia in Perspective

Further Readings and Resources

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Latvia in Perspective

Final Assessment

“To receive a certificate of completion for this course, please complete the final assessment on the DLIFLC website.”