



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

The Baltic state of Latvia covers 24,938 square miles (64,589 square kilometers) and is somewhat larger than West Virginia. Latvia is mostly low and flat. It features numerous lakes, rivers, and dense forests of fir, pine, birch, and aspen trees. The Daugava River divides Latvia in half: to the south and west of it lie the grain-rich plains of the Kurzeme and Zemgale regions and to the east and north, plains give way to the hills and lakes of the Vidzeme and Latgale regions. The Daugava was historically a trade route linked with Russia's Volga and Dnieper rivers. Today, the Daugava is a major source of hydroelectric power. Latvia's capital, Rīga, was founded in 1201.

Because of its northern location, Latvia experiences broad seasonal variations in weather and sunlight. Midsummer days can last seventeen or more hours, while December days last no longer than six. The climate is moderated somewhat by the warm Gulf Stream, but snow is common in the winter. Winter temperatures average 24°F (-4°C) but can drop as low as -4°F (-20°C). Inland areas are colder. In summer, rain is common and the mild temperatures rarely climb above 86°F (30°C).

History

Records of settlements in the Baltics date back to at least 2000 BC. Ethnic Balts eventually dominated the region and then divided into various groups. Settlers in the area prospered between the second and fifth centuries AD by trading amber (fossilized resin), among other things. For

many years, people generally lived in free association, but Teutonic knights invading from Germany in the 13th century established the Livonian Confederation in much of what is present-day Latvia and Estonia. They created German feudal estates and introduced Christianity to the inhabitants. Armies directed by Russian czar Ivan the Terrible invaded in 1558, and Livonia was partitioned between the Polish-Lithuanian state and Sweden. Russian expansion in the early 1700s eventually brought all of Latvia under the rule of Peter the Great. Throughout this time, German barons owned the land and the local peoples worked as serfs on their estates.

In the 19th century, intellectuals and Latvian students abroad helped awaken a sense of Latvian nationality. Writers, teachers, and other leaders collected and published thousands of folk songs and poems and wrote about Latvian culture and language. Many groups formed during this time, among them a group of socialists that eventually (in 1905) led a peasant revolt against German landowners and Russian oppression. Czarist troops crushed the rebellion and continued an ongoing policy of Russification.

When Germany occupied half of Latvia in World War I, Latvian volunteers formed the Latvian Riflemen to halt the German advance. In the wake of the Russian Revolution (1917), Latvia declared independence (18 November 1918) and set up a provisional government. The Riflemen supported Lenin, fought in the Red Army, and returned as heroes at the end of World War I. Latvians were divided between support for Kārlis Ulmanis's provisional government and the Bolsheviks. The Riflemen were also divided, and many eventually fought fellow Latvians who remained loyal to the Soviet cause. At the same time, the soldiers fought German

troops attempting to topple Ulmanis in favor of a pro-German government. The Germans were driven out in 1919, and Russia recognized Latvian independence in 1920.

With a new constitution (*Satversme*) and a newly elected parliament, the country quickly flourished economically and culturally. However, democracy was cut short in 1934 when President Ulmanis dissolved the *Saeima* (parliament), declared a state of emergency, and later established authoritarian rule. In 1939, the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty between Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin consigned Latvia to the Soviet sphere of influence. The Red Army occupied the country in June 1940. Within a year, the Soviets executed or deported thousands of people from Latvia. The Nazis invaded the following month, but Russian troops returned in 1944. At least 130,000 Latvians fled with the retreating German army to Sweden to escape the Soviets. Most of these people eventually settled in Europe, North America, and Australia.

The Soviets annexed Latvia and the other Baltic states, a move never recognized by Western nations. Thousands more people were deported, and ethnic Russians were encouraged to settle in the region. The Soviets collectivized all farmland and built many factories for newly arriving Russian workers.

In the late 1980s, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reform) allowed people to organize and show renewed support for greater independence. After the Latvian parliament redeclared independence in May 1990, Soviet troops intervened. However, with the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, parliament reaffirmed the 1920 constitution and set up a provisional government.

Democratic elections in 1993 brought Guntis Ulmanis (Kārlis Ulmanis was his great uncle) to power as president. In 1999, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga became president, the first woman president in eastern Europe. Latvia has since made several major reforms that have allowed it to enter NATO and the European Union (EU), although ongoing global economic turmoil has left Latvia with one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe and forced the country to impose severe budget restrictions. Austerity measures have been met with fierce opposition and, in 2010, resulted in the departure of the largest coalition party.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Latvia's population of 2.2 million is shrinking at a rate of 0.6 percent a year because of a low birthrate and high emigration rate. Most people live in cities. Ethnic Latvians comprise 59 percent of the population, while Russians total nearly 28 percent. Belarusians (3.6 percent), Ukrainians (2.5 percent), Poles (2.4 percent), Lithuanians (1.3 percent), and others also live in Latvia. Post-World War II Russian immigrants live mostly in the cities of Rīga and Daugavpils. "Old Believers" are concentrated in Rēzekne and Latgale. They settled in Latvia during the 17th century after refusing to accept reforms to the Russian Orthodox Church and are well integrated into Latvian society. They generally speak Latvian

and have citizenship rights.

The government has encouraged non-Latvians to leave Latvia. Some have left, but the majority remains. Citizenship is granted to ethnic Latvians, pre-1940 residents (and their descendants) of all nationalities, and residents who pass an extensive exam on Latvian language and government. Latvian citizenship is necessary to vote and hold government jobs.

Naturalization has been a particularly important issue for the large number of ethnic Russians in Latvia, many of whom have been unable to vote or hold office because they cannot pass citizenship requirements. A 1998 amendment made the naturalization process easier, but 2006 saw the Latvian language requirements strengthened, resulting at times in strained relations between Latvia and Russia.

Language

Latvian is an Indo-European language related to Lithuanian. It uses the Latin alphabet with numerous diacritical marks. Although Latvian is now the official language, restoring it to dominant use will take time, as many people speak only Russian. Russian was the official language before Latvian independence in 1991, and many people speak it as their first language. Russian is still used in commerce and everyday life, but more people are learning Latvian. Many people also speak English or German.

Religion

Most Latvians are Christian. Because of religious oppression during Soviet rule, more than half of all people do not identify themselves with any particular church. Lutherans (20 percent) are found primarily in Kurzeme, Vidzeme, and Zemgale. Catholics dominate Latgale. Fifteen percent of the population attends the Russian Orthodox Church. With religious freedom restored, churches are being reopened, more people are expressing their beliefs, and new congregations are being established. Some Latvians continue to practice pre-Christian rites that focus on nature-based deities.

General Attitudes

In public and with strangers, Latvians are reserved, professional, and formal. Among friends and family members, they are warm, inviting, and trusting. People often make new acquaintances by networking with mutual friends. After decades of avoiding public debate, Latvians are enjoying a new era of expression. They have become comfortable with vocalizing personal convictions and ideals; they engage in lively discussions about politics, culture, sports, and a number of other topics.

Like others who suffered under Soviet occupation, Latvians are proud that their culture has persevered. Older generations fondly recall the days when Rīga was called the Paris of the North (for its architecture and social life) and had an economy to rival those of larger European nations. Nostalgia for that era kindled hope in Latvian hearts throughout the Soviet years. Children were taught at home to have pride in Latvian culture. This patriotism and focus of purpose are now helping Latvians rebuild their society.

Personal Appearance

Latvians prefer European fashions and tend to dress well. Even young people favor dressier clothing over jeans for school and social gatherings. Men wear suits, pressed shirts, and ties to work. Women wear nice dresses. Informally, people wear clean and neat slacks, sweaters, shirts, skirts, and dress pants. People usually wear multiple layers of clothing in winter. In summer, men wear slacks and women wear shorter skirts. When gardening at summer cottages, Latvians prefer to wear swimsuits and shorts.

Women enjoy jewelry; older women wear traditional Latvian items made with silver and amber. Latvia's coast is known as the Amber Coast; early in the morning, people sometimes comb the beaches on the west coast for pieces of amber.

Traditional attire is an important part of any folk festival. For women, this includes wool skirts, white linen blouses, and wool vests decorated in ways that reflect a person's home region. Men wear wool slacks and long wool jackets.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Latvians shake hands when they greet, being careful to make and hold eye contact. To show special respect or deep friendship, men and women might add a light kiss. It is considered impolite for people to shake hands across a doorway; instead, one is expected to step into the room with the other person before shaking hands. To introduce themselves, Latvians state their name and surname; Russians state their name and father's name. Titles such as *kungs* (Mr.) and *kundze* (Mrs.) are added if a person is introducing someone else. In this case, the title follows the name, the ending of which also changes. So one introduces a Mr. Kalns as *Kalna kungs*, for example. Friends address each other by first name, but different endings are used for different purposes. For example, to call to a friend named Jānis, one would say *Jāni!* To express affection or to talk to a child, Latvians add a diminutive ending (*-īts* or *-iņš* for males; *-ina* or *-īte* for females). So, Maija can be called *Maijina*, Jānis might be *Jāniņis*, and Valdis might be *Valdiņš*.

Gestures

Latvians freely use hand gestures to emphasize verbal expressions. Otherwise, they are reserved with their hands. People generally do not wave, since they greet (with a handshake) only people they know. Direct eye contact connotes honesty and sincerity.

Visiting

Latvians prefer to visit by invitation rather than spontaneously. Rural Latvians and older urban residents tend to entertain at home, while younger adults visit in bars, clubs, and cafés. Home gatherings are relatively small.

Guests dress up and usually arrive promptly or just a few minutes late. Visitors remove their shoes at the door, sometimes replacing them with slippers that the hosts offer. Guests then present the hosts with a gift. Latvians love flowers, which are given only in odd numbers, since even

numbers are reserved for funerals. A great variety of flowers are sold by street vendors and at markets. Guests might also give their hosts an alcoholic beverage, apples, cakes (*kūkas*), meat-filled pastries (*pīrāgi*), or small sandwiches (*maizītes*).

Hosts usually provide guests with plenty of food served in several courses. Presentation—how the food looks—is very important. Along with the soup, meats, desserts, coffee, and drinks that fill the evening, Latvians enjoy lively conversation. It is not uncommon for people to break into song during social gatherings. Latvia boasts more than 200,000 folk songs, and many are known by heart. Guests usually say good-bye a few times in the process of getting ready to leave. Kisses and handshakes accompany a final good-bye.

Eating

Families eat meals together when possible. A typical breakfast includes tea, milk, or coffee, and one or more of the following: bread and butter, vegetables, cold cuts, porridge, pancakes, bacon, ham, or sausages. Lunch is eaten sometime between 1 and 3 p.m. and is for many the main meal of the day. It consists of three courses: soup (*zupa*), the main course with meat (*gaļa*) and potatoes (*kartupeļi*), and dessert (*saldais ēdiens*). Bread is served with every meal. Latvians eat a light dinner after 6 p.m.

Latvians eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. They keep napkins on the table. Rīga's restaurants offer a wide variety of international cuisine. Traditional Latvian fare includes cabbage soup (*kāpostu zupa*), potatoes, pork steak (*karbonāde*), and juice (*sula*) and coffee. Russians also favor beet soup (*borsch*) and Russian soup (*soljanka*). The check is paid at the table upon request. Tipping is not common in rural areas but is becoming standard in Rīga restaurants.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Families tend to have one or two children. Chores often vary by gender, with girls helping their mothers cook, wash dishes, or tend the garden and boys helping their fathers with home repairs and, in rural areas, farming. Because of housing shortages, three generations often share a single home. Newlyweds often move in with one set of parents to save money. The elderly live with family members whenever possible. Grandparents often care for grandchildren while both parents work. Extended family members try to help each other financially when necessary.

Housing

In urban areas, apartment living is most common. Large (up to 12-storey) apartment blocks, built in the mid-20th century, dominate. In private houses, one family typically shares between two and three bedrooms. At night, the living room couch (*dīvāns*) folds out as a bed. Siblings usually share bedrooms according to gender and are allowed to decorate their rooms as they like. Bigger houses are often split up between several families. Houses in small villages are larger

than their urban counterparts and tend to have identical floor plans, since many villages were constructed entirely between the 1960s and 1980s. Houses are made from concrete, adobe, or sometimes wood. A person's identity is tied to the family's home region. It is uncommon for Latvians to choose to move away from the area where they were born. Even if young people seek jobs or education in Rīga, they return to their hometowns for holidays and summers.

Dating and Marriage

Young Latvians begin dating while in high school. They enjoy dancing at clubs or discos, getting together for coffee at a café, or attending sporting events. Most people marry in their early twenties and begin a family shortly thereafter. Although more wedding ceremonies are being held in churches, most are secular events attended by a few close friends and relatives. In rural districts, wedding ceremonies tend to be big events. The groom wears a dark, formal suit, and the bride wears a white gown and holds a white bouquet.

A matchmaker, or *vedējpāris* (literally, a “matchmaking couple”), plays an integral role in the ceremony and the newlyweds' life. Traditionally, the *vedējpāris* introduced the groom and bride. Today, this is an honorary position for admired friends. The *vedējpāris* helps make wedding arrangements, serves as the ceremony's witnesses, and symbolically helps the new couple make the transition from single life to married life. After the ceremony, the newlyweds leave in a car decorated with greenery and flowers.

Life Cycle

Though increasingly uncommon, a pregnant woman may not discuss her condition openly or go out in public during the last few months of her pregnancy in order to protect her baby from the “evil eye,” a glance believed to bring harm. Sometimes the baby will not make his or her first public appearance until roughly one month old. Christening is the most important ritual associated with early childhood.

When someone dies, it is customary to place items in the coffin that may be useful in the next life, such as a comb and mirror. Mirrors are sometimes considered keys for entry into the kingdom of the dead. Cremation is becoming more common in cities due to changing traditions and the shortage of cemetery space.

Diet

Staple foods in Latvia include soup, potatoes, red meat, poultry, and fish. Imported summer fruits (pineapples, bananas, and oranges) and locally grown produce (onions, potatoes, beets, cucumbers, apples, mushrooms, and berries) give variety to the diet. Rye bread (*rupmaize*) and other whole-grain breads are preferred to white bread (*baltmaize*). Latvians drink beer and soft drinks at room temperature. Cold drinks are considered unhealthy. In addition to vodka, brandy, and wine, some Latvians consume *balzāms*—a thick mixture of herbs and alcohol that is drunk alone, with coffee, or is poured over ice cream. It is said to have medicinal value.

Recreation

Favorite summer activities for Latvians include picking berries and mushrooms and relaxing at summer cottages. Most urban Latvians own simple cottages with nearby sauna huts. Family members of all ages may go into the sauna several times in an evening. Extensive gardens around the cottages allow families to produce their own vegetables and fruits, which are often made into tasty jams and preserves. The most popular sports in Latvia are soccer, volleyball, basketball, hockey, biathlon (Nordic skiing and shooting), motocross racing, cycling, fishing, boating, hunting, hiking, and orienteering (cross-country race in which each participant uses a map and compass to navigate along an unfamiliar course). For vacations, people may work on household repair projects, visit friends and family, or travel to the countryside or abroad.

The Arts

In the fall, people go dancing or attend concerts and theater productions. Singing is a national pastime in all seasons. Folk festivals that take place throughout the year feature dance, song, and poetry that celebrate Latvian culture. Prominent art institutions include the Rīga Ballet, the National Symphony Orchestra, and the Rīga Dome Boys Choir. Modern Latvian literature became prominent in the 1800s. Published in 1888, *Lacplesis (The Bear Slayer)* is the national epic poem.

Amber jewelry is a well-known Latvian art form. Others include weaving, metalwork, ceramics, leatherwork, native costumes, and wood carving. Fine arts suffered during Soviet rule because of government control, but since Latvia's independence, artists have worked to create a distinct Latvian style.

Holidays

Official holidays include New Year's Day, Easter (Friday–Monday), Labor Day (1 May), Mother's Day (second Sunday of May), Whitsunday, *Līgo* Day and *Jāņi* (Midsummer's Day, 23–24 June), Independence Day (18 Nov.), Christmas (25–26 Dec.), and New Year's Eve (31 Dec.).

For Easter, people color eggs by boiling them along with onion skins and wildflowers. At the Sunday family meal, each person selects an egg and takes turns cracking it against others' eggs. Amid laughter and much strategy, the person with the last egg to crack is deemed the winner. *Jāņi* is the year's most festive holiday. Held on the summer solstice, it marks the beginning of the summer's “white nights,” when the sun sets for only a few hours. Food is prepared weeks in advance. Businesses close for two days. Huge bonfires are lit, and revelers attend parties, dances, and concerts. They sing songs and many stay up all night.

For public holidays, Latvians fly flags, attend speeches, and have parades. Flag masts carry black ribbons on commemorative days: 25 March (for victims of communism), 8 May (for victims of World War II), 14 June (for victims of 1941 deportations), 4 July (for victims of anti-Semitic genocide), and 11 November (Veterans' Day). Latvians also celebrate birthdays and name days, which commemorate the saint for which a person is named. From June through August, each village or congregation appoints a Sunday for visiting

family graves. Most people take great care in tending grave sites, decorating them with fresh flowers.

SOCIETY

Government

Latvia is a parliamentary democracy. Delegates to the nation's 100-seat *Saeima* (parliament) are elected by the people to four-year terms. The *Saeima* elects the president (currently Valdis Zatlers), who is head of state. Then the president selects a prime minister (currently Valdis Dombrovskis), who leads the government. The prime minister forms the government, the structure of which is ratified or rejected by the *Saeima*. All citizens may vote at age 18.

Economy

Latvia has privatized its companies and state industries. The government is also returning collectivized land to previous owners or their descendants, encouraging joint ventures with Western businesses, and seeking foreign trade. Forest products account for the bulk of current exports, followed by textiles and foodstuffs. The transition process to a market economy was painful at first, with many people losing their jobs. Serious problems included tax evasion and a banking crisis in 1995, which made many Latvians wary of keeping their money in the bank. Although Russia used to be Latvia's biggest trading partner, Latvia has increased trade with more lucrative markets in Western Europe. The years between 2004 and 2007 brought strong economic growth to the country, aided by an educated workforce, a good industrial base, excellent ports, and other resources that are allowing people to achieve personal and societal goals. However, the global financial crisis of 2008 hit Latvia hard, sending the economy into recession. The national currency is the *Lat* (LVL).

Transportation and Communications

Most Latvians own private cars, and the use of public transportation is decreasing. Latvia's extensive rail and bus systems connect most locations. Ferries, trolleys, trams, and taxis are also part of the transportation network. Most Rīga homes have phones, although smaller cities and rural areas often lack private lines. More common are cell phones, which most of the population uses. Internet use is also common. Several television stations and numerous radio stations deliver news and entertainment throughout Latvia. Most people also read a newspaper.

Education

Children begin attending elementary school (grades 1–4) at age six. They are required to attend through primary school (grades 5–9). Three optional years of secondary school (grades 10–12) are available through trade schools, university-track high schools, or more general secondary schools. In 2004, a law was passed mandating that the majority of classes be taught in Latvian, even in schools attended primarily by Russian speakers. Several institutions of higher learning, including the University of Latvia, offer

degree programs. Some higher education programs are free, but students must compete for positions by examination. Otherwise, students can pay tuition at private and some state-sponsored schools. Many people eventually complete postgraduate work.

Health

Latvia's public healthcare system is accessible to all residents but lacks funding and supplies. Rural hospitals and clinics suffer most from these deficiencies. It costs very little to visit a doctor, but prescribed medications may be too expensive for some people. Private medical and dental clinics offer more modern care at prices the average worker cannot afford.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	2,217,969 (rank=141)
Area, sq. mi.	24,938 (rank=123)
Area, sq. km.	64,589

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	48 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	22 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$14,500
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 100% (female)
Infant mortality rate	9 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	67 (male); 78 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).