



## LATVIA

<b>EU MEMBER SINCE</b>	2004
<b>OTHER MEMBERSHIPS</b>	NATO, Schengen Area, Bologna Process
<b>CURRENCY</b>	€ (EURO) - since January 1, 2014
<b>CAPITAL</b>	Riga
<b>AREA</b>	64,589 sq km
<b>POPULATION</b>	2,178,443 (July 2013 est.)
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	Latvian
<b>RELIGION</b>	Latvian 59.3%, Russian 27.8%, Belarusian 3.6%, Ukrainian 2.5%, Polish 2.4%, Lithuanian 1.3%, other 3.1% (2009)
<b>GDP</b>	\$ 13,729 (2011)
<b>GNI</b>	\$ 19,090 (2011)
<b>SGI</b>	N/A
<b>CPI</b>	49 out of 100 (2012)
<b>ARCHITECTURE</b>	Latvian Gothic, Baroque, Historicism, Art Nouveau, Stalinist
<b>LITERATURE</b>	Rainis, Andrejs Pumpurs
<b>MUSIC</b>	Daina, Music for kokle; Pēteris Vasks, Imants Kalniņš, Perkons, Prata Vetra (Brainstorm), Astro'n'out, Triānas Parks
<b>PAINTING</b>	Bernhard Borchert, Hyman Bloom, Vija Celmins, Kārlis Padegs, Vilhelms Purvītis, Jānis Tilbergs
<b>CUISINE</b>	Sorrel soup, Rujpmaize (dark bread), Griķi (boiled wheat), Stovetie kaposti (sweet sauerkraut), Pelekie zirni (grey peas) with sour cream, Maizes zupa (bread pudding), kiselis (fruit pudding with milk), piragi (filled pastries). <b>Delicacies:</b> Fried lamprey in jelly
<b>DRINKS</b>	Ruguspiens (curdled milk), kefir (cultured milk), kvass (yeast drink), birch juice, beer (especially honey beer), Riga Black Balsam (herb alcoholic drink)
<b>CONSUMPTION</b>	12.50 equivalent liters of pure ethyl alcohol per capita per year (WHO, 2005)
<b>SPORTS</b>	Ice hockey, basketball, soccer

Robert A. Saunders *On Latvia*

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A fiercely independent nation on the eastern rim of the Baltic Sea, Latvia (*Latvija*) is known for its picturesque and cosmopolitan capital Riga, unspoiled landscapes and commitment to biodiversity, and strong adherence to folk traditions.

The low-lying country of Latvia is divided into four well-defined [geographic regions](#), each with its own cultural traits. In the east of the country is Kurzeme (Courland), a region dominated by windswept Baltic coastlines and Hanseatic links to northern Europe. Vidzeme, or the “Middle Land,” includes the capital, the Jūrmala beach resort, several medieval cities, and the hilly northern tier of the country. South of the capital is the Zemgale region, which with its broad plains and fertile soil is the agricultural heart of the country. The easternmost region is known as Latgale, a rugged area influenced by its proximity to Russia. Possessing the classic four seasons, the climate is a mixture of maritime continental, with wet winters and warm summers. Latvia borders Estonia in the north, Russia in the east, and Belarus and Lithuania in the south. Ethnic Latvians, who make up 60% of the population, speak an Indo-European tongue most closely related to Lithuanian. The Russian minority accounts for one-quarter of the population and the Russian language is widely used, despite efforts to limit its influence in the post-independence period.

Historically, Latvians practiced Lutheranism, though Catholicism is common in the east of the country and most Russians identify with Eastern Orthodox Christianity. However, most modern-day Latvians eschew religious identification, though adherence to pre-Christian cultural and spiritual practices is quite strong in the country (including a neopagan revival movement known as [Dievturība](#)). In fact, the summer solstice festival of [Jāņi](#), replete with pagan-era fire and fertility rites, is one of the country’s most important holidays.



General view of Riga © EU 2013

Latvians tend to be quite reserved in dress and mannerisms, with visible displays of emotion and gesticulation being rare. Latvian men often wear the Namejs ring, a symbolic marker of ethnicity (given to young men as a sign of manhood), while women may display the characteristic braid in their hair and clothing. Like their Baltic neighbors, Latvians are singing enthusiasts and song competitions are an important part of the national fabric. Latvians are fond of picking mushrooms, berries, and flowers, the latter being given as gifts (always in odd numbers) on a variety of occasions. Ice hockey is the national sport, with a devoted following across the nation; basketball is also popular, not surprising given the generally tall stature of Latvians.

### Recent History

Like their Lithuanian cousins, the Latvians are one of only two remaining Baltic peoples. Christianized under force by Teutonic knights who later incorporated the region into the Hanseatic League, the Latvians have lived under imperial rule since the 12th century. Following the collapse of the German-dominated Livonian Confederation, the country came under Polish-Lithuanian suzerainty before passing to the Swedish crown and then being incorporated into the Romanov Empire.

Independence from Russia came with the end of World War I; however, like the other Baltic Republics, Latvia was annexed by the USSR on 5 August 1940 following a steady build-up of Soviet troops in the country (a byproduct of the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). During World War II, Latvia was occupied by Germany, with some citizens (particularly those who had been part of Latvia's quasi-fascist *Pērkonkrusts* movement in the interwar period) volunteering for or being conscripted into pro-Nazi militias such as the Latvian Legion and the Latvian Auxiliary Police. Over 75,000 Latvians of Jewish origin perished in the Holocaust. Following the Soviet re-occupation of Latvia, more than 40,000 Latvians were deported or executed (15,000 had been deported three years prior). Others chose to take up arms against the Soviet forces, engaging in a prolonged guerrilla campaign.

In the post-war period, Latvia experienced a massive influx of migration from other parts of the Soviet Union, particularly Russians and Belarusians, thus lowering the representation of ethnic Latvians in the state to barely 50 percent by 1989. The beguiling city of Riga, with its *Art Nouveau* buildings, "western" flavor, and historic Old Town, proved particularly attractive to retiring military officers. With its well-developed light industrial sector and proximity to Western markets, Latvia emerged as preferred site of high technology manufacturing during the late Soviet period, with significant investment in the electronic, communication, and automobile industries. The promise of well-paid jobs increased the demand for skilled labor from other parts of the USSR, further diluting the Latvians' demographic majority.

Beginning in 1987, Riga's [Freedom Monument](#) became a regular site for nationalist/pro-independence rallies. Capitalizing on a groundswell of public sentiment against Moscow (particularly related to environmental activism), the Popular Front of Latvia (*Latvijas Tautas fronte*) emerged as the primary vehicle for Latvia's national revival. The most violent episode occurred in mid-January 1991, a period known as the "Days of the Barricades," when Soviet Special Forces (OMON) clashed with Latvian nationalists following an earlier declaration of the restoration of Latvian independence. While support for independence in Latvia never reached the same levels as was the case in neighboring Lithuania and Estonia, nearly three-quarters of the population supported leaving the union by March 1991. Following the abortive Soviet coup in August, Latvian independence was recognized by the international community.

Since independence, Latvian politics have been characterized by robust competition between multiple and protean parties, often resulting in coalition governments. The independent politician [Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga](#), a long-time resident of Canada, served as president from 1999 until 2007; her pro-European, internationalist approach helped bring Latvia into greater contact with the transatlantic community. After several years of rapid growth, the 2008-2009 global economic crisis hit Latvia particularly hard, resulting in dissolution of the [Saeima](#) (Parliament) following government deadlock on austerity measures. In 2014, the [fatal collapse of a large supermarket](#) in the capital triggered a political upheaval that brought down post-independence Latvia's longest-serving prime minister, Valdis Dombrovskis, and

further soured relations between the right-wing and Social Democratic/Russian minority parties.

After independence from the USSR, Latvia moved to redress the ethnic imbalance which had been created by Soviet-era immigration to the republic. Like Estonia, the country chose to issue [citizenship](#) to those people with Latvian ancestry (*jus sanguinis*) or whose ancestors were resident in the republic prior to 17 June 1940. Those who did not meet either criterion could obtain citizenship through proving proficiency in the Latvian language and meeting other requirements. This decision created a sizeable minority of (mostly Russophone) “non-citizens” in the country. Latvia has also imposed certain restrictions on the use of the Russian language in the country. This situation has resulted in a thorny relationship with Moscow, resulting in Russia reducing the amount of natural gas it ships via Latvia. Relations hit a new low during celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II when Russian president Vladimir Putin and Vīķe-Freiberga [traded barbs over the historical interpretation](#) of the Soviet “liberation” of the Baltics.

### **The EU Connection**

Following independence from the USSR, Latvia moved quickly towards integration with the European Union and applied for EU admission in 1995. On 20 September 2003, the Latvian people voted in favor of accession by a margin of two-to-one. Along with nine other states, Latvia joined the EU on 1 May 2004. On 21 December 2007, Latvia became part of the Schengen Area. In the first half of 2015, Latvia will take over the rotating [Presidency](#) of the Council of the European Union.

Latvia adopted the euro on 1 January 2014, abandoning the *lats* to become the eighteenth member in the Eurozone. The move to the new currency was not universally popular in the country, given the uncertainty surrounding the financial status of countries like Greece; however, further economic integration with Europe is expected to maintain Latvia’s profile as the fastest-growing economy in the union.

In an environment shaped by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and Russian military maneuvers on the Latvia’s eastern border, citizens came out in large numbers and bucked European trends to vote for mainstream, pro-EU parties in the 2014 European Parliament elections. A sign of the nation’s continuing commitment to EU integration, the vote continues Latvia’s strong pro-Europe position which is supported both by ethnic Latvian parties (which view the EU as a bulwark against renewed Russian influence) and Russophone blocs (which see EU oversight as a tool for guaranteeing minority rights in the country).

### **Cultural Traits**

Like their Baltic neighbors, Latvians are deeply attached to their traditional folk songs known as *dainas*. Dating back a millennium, these artifacts of cultural identity are rich in symbolism, and formed a key part of popular protest to Soviet and other forms of imperial rule over the past two centuries. The themes of this oral art revolve around farming, seasonal cycles, and other aspects of the natural world. The [Song and Dance Celebration](#), held every five years since 1873, is a national showcase of the talents of the nation’s vocalists. The event is included in UNESCO’s list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Latvia also plays host to the annual [New Wave](#) music competition every summer, featuring up-and-coming pop stars from across the former Soviet Union and further afield. Support and enthusiasm for the arts runs high in the country, with theater-going being a popular pastime for those living in urban areas.

Riga, the country’s capital and largest city, is an architectural gem, sporting more 800 examples of *Jugendstil* architecture, as well as a wide greenway around the historical center (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Riga was designated a European Capital of Culture in 2014, but also regularly hosts other European-wide cultural events and festivals.

Latvians are fond of family gatherings, and tend not to miss a chance to celebrate a loved-one’s birthday or name-day. Festivals in the countryside are also common, with a variety of seasonal events bringing together friends and families for singing, bonfires, and outdoor drinking sessions.

Latvia is a sporting nation and one which is vastly overrepresented in international competition given its small population, with superstars in ice hockey (Sandis Ozoliņš), tennis (Ernests Gulbis), basketball (Andris Biedriņš), and long-distance running (Jeļena Prokopčuka), among other sports.

### **Food and Wine**

Latvian cooking is influenced by both German and Slavic cuisine, and it is common to find local variants of Weiner Schnitzel, blini, and shashlik on most menus. However, there are few characteristic dishes, including grey peas with bacon (*pelēkie zirņi ar speķīti*), vegetable tarts (*sklandu rauši*), and groats porridge (*bukstiņbiezputra*). Latvians strive to make the best use of local ingredients, many of which they grow in their own small plots. Caraway seeds are a frequent additive to dishes, especially the revered summer solstice cheese (*Jāņu siers*). Baking bread and home-made pastries are still common in many Latvian families. Most famous are *pīrāgi*, oblong loaves filled with onions and bacon.

Traditional beverages include *rūgušpiens* (curdled milk) and *kefīrs* (cultured milk), as well as copious amounts of tea. Latvians are fond of beer-drinking, which goes back many centuries. The most prominent breweries are Aldaris, Cēsu, and Lāčplēsis. Latvia’s signature alcoholic beverage is [Riga Black Balsam](#), a medicinal liqueur bottled in clay containers.

