

Latvia in brief

Republic of Latvia, abbreviated: **Latvia**.

The name "Latvia" originates from an ancient Baltic (Indo-European) tribe - the Latgalians (in Latvian: *latgaļi*), who formed the ethnic core of the Latvian people.

Country Code: LV

The Republic of Latvia was founded in 1918. It has been continuously recognised as a state by other countries since 1920 despite occupations by the Soviet Union (1940-1941, 1945-1991) and Nazi Germany (1941-1945). On August 21, 1991 Latvia declared the restoration of its *de facto* independence.

National Holiday

November 18, the date of the proclamation of Latvia's independence.

Geography

Latvia is the central country of the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). On the world map Latvia is to be found in North-eastern Europe, on the east coast of the Baltic Sea. The landscape of the country is marked by lowland plains and rolling hills. Most of the countryside is less than 100 metres above sea level. There are thousands of rivers and lakes in Latvia.

Area: 64,589 sq.km or 24,937 sq.miles.

Regions: Kurzeme, Zemgale, Vidzeme, Latgale.

Total national border length: 1,862 km.

Length of Latvia's Baltic coastline: 494 km.

1 km = 0.62 mile; 1 m = 39.37 inches

Borders

Latvia borders Estonia, Russia, Belarus and Lithuania.

It is situated on a trading cross-roads and has long since served as a bridge between Western Europe and Russia.

Climate

Latvia's weather is governed by a moderate oceanic climate, with changing high and low pressure and a considerable amount of precipitation.

Summer: June - August. Winter: December - February.

The warmest month: July. The coldest month: January.

The average temperature in summer: 15.8°C (in the capital 16.1°C); in winter: -4.5°C (in the capital -3.8°C).

The average precipitation amount in summer: 195 mm; in winter: 116 mm.

Nature

Latvia is situated in a nature zone between the vegetation of Northern and Central Europe. Latvia is a country of splendid and diverse natural landscapes. Forests cover 44 percent of the territory. The larger forest tracts are to be found in the northern part of Kurzeme. Here it is still possible to enjoy the beauty and uniqueness of nature untouched by man.

Latvia distinguishes itself with a large variety of flora and fauna (total approx. 27.7 thousand species).

Population

Latvians are the indigenous people of Latvia.

The ethnic mix of the population of Latvia is largely the result of massive post-war immigration, which resulted in a decline in the share of ethnic Latvians from 77% in 1935 to 52% in 1989.

Population in 2005: 2,306,400

Ethnic composition (2004): 58.6% Latvian, 28.8% Russian, 3.9% Belorussian, 2.6% Ukrainian, 2.5% Polish, 1.4% Lithuanian, 0.4% Jewish, 1.8% other nationalities.

Official Language: Latvian.

The Latvian language is a Baltic language, which belongs to the Indo-European family of languages. The Latvian language is considered one of the oldest of the Indo-European (European) languages. It is a non-slavic and a non-germanic language, similar only to Lithuanian.

Most Common Foreign Languages: English, Russian, and German.

Education

The state guarantees free primary and secondary (high school) education. More than 90% of children attend state schools which provide free education. 9 years of primary education are obligatory. The most of the students attend state-universities. Apart from state-financed educational institutions, there are also private schools and private universities in Latvia. Latvia also has state-financed ethnic minority schools or classes where courses are presented in Belorussian, Estonian, Hebrew, Lithuanian, Polish, Roma, Russian and Ukrainian.

Largest Religious Confessions:

Evangelic Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox.

Since the Reformation movement in the 16th century, the Lutheran church has played a leading role in Latvia.

Government

Type of Government: democratic, parliamentary republic. Legislative power is in the hands of a single chamber parliament - the *Saeima*, consisting of 100 deputies. Parliamentary elections take place every 4 years.

The country's head of state is the President, who is elected by the *Saeima* for a period of 4 years. The President signs laws, chooses the Prime Minister (who heads the government) and performs representative functions.

Electoral System: proportional representation. There is universal suffrage for Latvian citizens over 18 years of age.

Memberships: European Union, NATO, United Nations Organisation, Council of Europe, World Trade Organisation, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Council of the Baltic Sea States, etc.

Foreign Policy

Since the restoration of independence in 1991, Latvia has been pursuing full economic and political integration into European and world structures. A key foreign policy priority is active and constructive membership in the European Union and NATO.

Capital City

Nearly one third of Latvia's population (732 thousand) lives in the capital city Rīga. Rīga, the oldest still existing medieval city, was founded in 1201. The value of Rīga's cultural and historical significance has been recognised by the fact that its old city centre has been included in UNESCO's list of the world's most important cultural and natural sites.

Ports

Latvia's three major ports are Ventspils, Rīga and Liepāja.

Ventspils is one of the busiest ports in the Baltic Sea region and is among the leading European ports in terms of cargo turnover.

The Most Prospective Production Sectors:

information technologies, electronics and mechanical engineering, chemical and pharmaceutical industries, timber and construction, food processing industry, textiles industry, fishery and agriculture.

The Main Trade-Partners: other member states of the European Union.

Currency

Latvian national currency is the lats (LVL), 1 lats consists of 100 santims.

Latvian Foods

Latvia's most popular national foods are usually considered to be caraway cheese, grey peas with bacon, bacon-filled pastries made from yeast dough and a special rye bread prepared according to ancient recipes.

Most Important Traditional Festival

The annual celebration of the summer solstice, known as *Jāņi* is generally viewed as the most important Latvian holiday. *Jāņi* is celebrated on June 23 and 24. These days of celebration mark the summer solstice with a colourful array of ancient traditions whose origins date back thousands of years.