

# Social integration in Latvia

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## Citizenship

Almost 80% of the people living in Latvia today have Latvian citizenship. Latvia has adopted all necessary legislation relating to naturalisation and citizen rights, and in keeping with EU policies and standards, ensures that it is fairly and equitably implemented.

The fundamental principles of the *Law on Citizenship* (adopted in 1995) are based on the Latvian Constitution and laws that were in place during the period of independence (1918-1940) prior to the Soviet and Nazi occupations (1940-1991). Consequently, holders of Latvian citizenship prior to 1940 and their descendants were granted citizenship automatically after 1991. The *Law on Citizenship* also determines how the remainder of Latvia's permanent residents, regardless of their past or present citizenship status, may become citizens. The requirements for citizenship are the same as those that enable full participation in national life: *knowledge of the Latvian language and Latvia's history*.

## Naturalisation

The Law provides for the granting of citizenship within a one-year time frame. In practice, the procedure takes no more than three to six months. Interest in naturalisation and the rate at which citizenship is granted remain consistently high. Since the start of the naturalisation process in 1995 until April 2005, altogether 97,664 naturalisation applications have been received and 90,613 persons have been granted Latvian citizenship, including 11,204 underage children. Children born to non-citizens in Latvia after the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991 are entitled to Latvian citizenship automatically.

The Government has adopted a number of legislative and proactive measures to sustain the naturalisation process and encourage non-citizens to apply for citizenship. During ten years since the beginning of the naturalisation process in 1995 up until the beginning of 2005, the number of permanent residents without

citizenship has decreased from 29% to 19%.

## Language

In 1999, a new *State Language Law* was adopted to ensure the protection and promotion of Latvian as the official state language. The Law sets very strict limits on state involvement in the private sector, where language use is regulated only in cases where legitimate public interests are affected. Knowledge of the Latvian language is one of the conditions for citizenship. According to the data of the Naturalisation Board around 90% of applicants pass the naturalisation tests at the first attempt.

While Latvian is the official state language, de facto use of other languages is supported in Latvia's multiethnic society. Latvians live among and work with many ethnic minorities, some of whom have been present in Latvia for many centuries. These communities have developed their own cultures and identities, which the Latvian state helps preserve and maintain. Because of the large Russian-speaking population, state and private Russian-language TV, radio, books, newspapers and magazines are readily available. English, German and the Scandinavian languages are also commonplace.

## National Programme – "Integration of Society in Latvia"

The National Programme "Integration of Society in Latvia" incorporates the political, judicial, social, educational and cultural dimensions of integration policy, and reaffirms that the integration of society is a government priority.

Reflecting a renewed focus by the government on integration issues, the Secretariat of Minister of Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs was established in November 2002. The Secretariat has focused efforts to promote multi-dimensional dialogue among the various ethnic communities in Latvia.

The *Law on the Society Integration Foundation (SIF)* was adopted by the Saeima (Parliament) on July 5, 2001 and

entered into force on September 1, 2001. The Government continues to fund the SIF. In 2003, the government increased SIF financing to approximately EUR 2,700,000 and to EUR 5,860,000 in 2004. The SIF budget for 2005 is EUR 4,143,000. In 2003 82% of State Budget financing for the SIF

was allocated to ethnic integration projects, and similarly in 2004. Since its establishment in 2001, the SIF has financed 535 integration projects. A total of EUR 8,000,000 has been allocated directly to institutions and projects dealing with integration in 2004.

### **Ethnic composition of the population of Latvia**

	<b>Residents</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Citizens</b>	<b>%</b>
Latvians	1,354,656	58.8	1,351,413	99.8
Russians	660,084	28.7	338,334	51.3
Belarusians	88,230	3.8	27,450	31.1
Ukrainians	58,973	2.6	12,612	21.4
Poles	56,451	2.5	40,440	71.6
Lithuanians	31,696	1.4	17,415	54.9
Jews	9,698	0.4	6,407	66.0
Estonians	2,532	0.1	1,504	59.4
Roma	8,467	0.4	7,860	92.8
Other	32,148	1.4	12,589	39.2
Total	2,302,935	100	1,816,024	78.9

Source: The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs January 1, 2005.