National minorities in Latvia: Then and Now
The existence of every country is based on a territory and the people who occupy that territory. Historically, various tribes, nationalities and nations have inhabited the territory of Latvia. Throughout the centuries, our land was occupied by many foreign armies, Latvia’s regions used to be parts of other countries – that is how the history of Latvia was formed.

The ethnical composition of our country was also formed during these centuries. The process by which traditional national minorities appeared in the territory of Latvia began in 13th century, when German merchants, the Catholic church and orders of knights began crusades against the inhabitants of the Eastern Baltic territories, including the inhabitants of Latvia – i.e., Baltic and Finno-Ugric tribes. The Latvian nation was formed over the course of centuries, and it coexisted with communities of Baltic Germans, Russians, Jews, Poles as well as Estonians and Lithuanians. In the biggest towns, especially in Riga, a multicultural environment was established. Although there were economic and social differences among the nationalities living there, they never turned into ethnic conflicts. Tolerant coexistence of various nations was one of the advantages of the Eastern Baltic region. At the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th century, the number of Latvia’s inhabitants reached 1.93 million: 1.31 million, or 68%, of them were Latvians. Among the other large national groups there were 8% Russians, 7% Germans, 6% Jews, 4% Poles, 3% Lithuanians and Estonians.

**Origination of national minorities in the territory of Latvia in the 13th – 19th centuries**

- Germans, 13th century
- Jews, 18th century
- Lithuanians, 18th century
- Latvians
- Russians (orthodox), 19th century
- Russians (Orthodox persecuted in Russia), 18th century
- Poles, 17th – 19th centuries
- Jews, 17th – 19th centuries

**Religions in the territory of Latvia at the end of 19th century**

- Lutherans
- Catholics
- Orthodox
- Old Believers

- Cities/towns and villages where the number of Judaists exceeds 25%

**St. Peter’s Lutheran Church. Riga, beginning of the 20th century**

**Orthodox Cathedral of the Nativity. Riga, beginning of the 20th century**

**Holy Trinity Orthodox Church. Riga, beginning of the 20th century**

**Our Lady of Sorrows Church. Riga, beginning of the 20th century**
In the 1920’s and 1930’s minorities (Russians, Jews, Baltic Germans, Byelorussians, Lithuanians, etc.) constituted a quarter of the inhabitants of Latvia. In such a situation, it was especially important to have a balanced and tolerant national policy that was based on the principles of liberalism and democracy. Latvia’s achievements in national policy in the period between the world wars were evaluated as very good by international society. The Republic of Latvia ensured cultural autonomy of the minorities. Although the minorities in Latvia did not have extraterritorial governing institutions, legislation of the Republic of Latvia guaranteed them the same national and cultural infrastructure as to the titular ethnicity – national schools, societies, cultural institutions, periodicals in the native language, etc. Many of the national communities (Baltic Germans, Jews, Russians, Poles, and Byelorussians) were represented in the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia with MPs elected from the national parties.

The Law on Nationality of the Republic of Latvia was adopted on 21 August 1919. At the moment of adoption, the Law was considered as one of the most liberal and democratic citizenship laws in the world.

The political platform of the Latvia’s People’s Council. Adopted on 18 November 1918. Article 4 of the first official document of the Republic of Latvia sets forth the attitude of the emerging country towards ethnic minorities.

1. Rights of Non-residents
2. National minorities which are represented in the Latvia’s People’s Council participate in the interim government.
3. The cultural and national rights of national groups are set forth in the fundamental laws.

**Table of Nationalities in 1935**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Ethnic majority, %</th>
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<td>Ethnic minority, %</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationalities</th>
<th>Ethnic majority, %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russians</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuanians</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byelorussians</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germans</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Most notable ethnic-minority public officials and civil servants**

- **Mordehajs Dubina** (1889-1956), notable Jewish political and social activist. Member of the Latvia People’s Council, member of the Constitutional Assembly, member of the 1st to 4th Saeima. Died in a Soviet forced labour camp.
- **Mērķtīja Kājasnātāva** (1886-1941), notable political and social activist of the Russian Old-Believers in Latvia, participated in the Battles for Liberation, member of the 1st to 4th Saeima. Died during the Soviet repression.
- **Paule Simans** (1875-1944), notable Baltic German political and social activist. Member of the Latvia People’s Council, member of the Constitutional Assembly, member of the 1st to 4th Saeima.
- **Teodors Maiķapars** (1878-1944), a notable Latvian Karaita industrialist, active in various social spheres. Director and co-owner of the Maiķapars company, a doctor. Worked for Latvian Russian public organisations, used to be a doctor in the Defence Air Force. Died during the time of German occupation.
- **Konstantīns Jezavitovs** (1889-1945), Latvian Byelorussian, active in various social spheres including culture, pedagogue. K. Jezavitovs had a leading role during the national rebirth of Byelorussians in Latvia, he was a headmaster of the Byelorussian Gymnasium in Ludza, chairman of the Byelorussian Teacher’s Society, organiser and editor of several Byelorussian periodicals. He has written several books on Byelorussians in Latvia.
- **Augusts Lēbers** (1865-1948), a notable Latvian Baltic German, active in various social spheres. Senator of the Latvian Supreme Court 1918 – 1938, the first dean of the Law and Economics Department of the University of Latvia, co-author of the Civil Law of the Republic of Latvia adopted in 1937.
AFTER World War I (1914 – 1918), when the two empires collapsed – the Russian empire and the German empire – it was possible for the first time to proclaim the statehood of Latvia. However, the freedom of the Republic of Latvia had to be won in hard battles. In Latvia’s army, alongside the Latvians there were also soldiers from other nations living in Latvia who fought for the freedom of their country during the Battles for Liberation (1918 – 1920). At the end of these battles, the highest military award in the Republic of Latvia – the Lāčplēsis Military Order – was awarded also to many foreign citizens of the Republic of Latvia: 47 Germans, 15 Russians, 11 Lithuanians, 9 Poles, 6 Estonians, 4 Jews, and 3 Byelorussians.

**Lāčplēsis Military Order cavaliers, foreigners**

- Stepans Cvetkovs, corporal of the Daugavpils 8th infantry regiment. Russian, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order
- Konstantins Čiēvskis, sergeant of the Rēzekne 5th infantry regiment. Polish, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order
- Maksis Grīnguts, sergeant of the Cēsis 5th infantry regiment. Jewish, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order
- Jānis Anis, sergeant of the Cēsis 5th infantry regiment. Estonian, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order
- Semjons Arhipovs, corporal of the Valmiera partisan unit. Russian, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order
- Zāmuéls Hops, sergeant of the Sigulda 7th infantry regiment. Jewish, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order
- Nikita Ivanovs, private first class of the Daugavpils 8th infantry regiment. Russian, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order
- Nikolajs Kapustins, private of the Latgale partisan unit. Russian, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order
- Pēteris Krasikovs, corporal of the Tukums 13th infantry regiment. Russian, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order
- Jakovs Seļenovs, lieutenant of the Daugavpils 8th infantry regiment. Russian, holder of the III Class Lāčplēsis Military Order

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**Minority policy in the Republic of Latvia in the period between the world wars**

After World War I (1914 – 1918), when the two empires collapsed – the Russian empire and the German empire – it was possible for the first time to proclaim the statehood of Latvia. However, the freedom of the Republic of Latvia had to be won in hard battles. In Latvia’s army, alongside the Latvians there were also soldiers from other nations living in Latvia who fought for the freedom of their country during the Battles for Liberation (1918 – 1920). At the end of these battles, the highest military award in the Republic of Latvia – the Lāčplēsis Military Order – was awarded also to many foreign citizens of the Republic of Latvia: 47 Germans, 15 Russians, 11 Lithuanians, 9 Poles, 6 Estonians, 4 Jews, and 3 Byelorussians.
Dramatic changes took place during World War II. In the autumn of 1939 Baltic Germans started to emigrate from Latvia; those were the consequences of the criminal policy implemented by the USSR and Germany. In June and August of 1940, the statehood of Latvia was destroyed by the Soviet occupation. The first repressions against the inhabitants of Latvia began. During the first year of the Soviet occupation, many politicians and social activists who were Latvian citizens belonging to Russian, Jewish, Polish and other communities living in Latvia were killed or deported. On 22 June 1941, warfare began in Latvia. The Soviet occupation was replaced by the German occupation. During the four years of German occupation, the local Jewish community in Latvia was completely destroyed.

Emigration of Baltic Germans and the Jewish holocaust completely destroyed two ethnic groups that had played a significant role in Latvia’s economy and culture.
At the end of World War II, the territory of Latvia was occupied for the second time. Already during the first years after the war, Soviet authorities started to implement a deliberate and accelerated russification policy, thus trying to create a single soviet nation. On the pretext that workers were needed in the new industrial sites, a large number of mostly Russian-speaking people from various regions of the Soviet Union were brought to Latvia voluntarily or by force. Since a large contingent of the Russian army was located in the territory of Latvia, retired military personnel also remained in Latvia. That led to catastrophic changes in Latvia’s ethnic situation. By 1989 the percentage of Latvians in their own land had decreased to 52% (in comparison with 1935, when Latvians constituted 77%).

Decrease in the proportion of Latvians between 1935 and 1989

In the period between 1935 and 1989, the ethnically homogeneous territory where the proportion of Latvians is more than 90% (dark green on map) shrank significantly. In 1935 this homogeneous territory included all of Vidzeme and almost all of Kurzeme and Zemgale; however, in 1989 only small, scattered regions in the northern and western parts of Kurzeme, some places where Vidzeme and Latgale meet and some pagasts were homogenious territories. It should be taken into consideration that the six mainly Russian populated pagasts in the Eastern part of the Abrene district, which was the district with the smallest number of Latvian inhabitants in 1935, was annexed to Russia in 1944. In all cities and in the majority of towns, the ethnic composition of inhabitants was mixed; in 8 of the largest cities and towns there were fewer Latvians than Russians.
Changes in Latvia's ethnic situation as a result of the Soviet occupation

Custody camps in the USSR for Latvian deportees (GULAG)

Under the terror of the Soviet occupation powers, 119,000 inhabitants of Latvia were repressed between 1945 and 1953. Of these, 43,000 were deported to Siberia and other remote regions of the USSR on 25 March 1949.

Thus began the “painful road” to Siberia for thousands of Latvia’s inhabitants.

Ethnical composition of the inhabitants of Riga, 1925 – 2004

Breakdown of inhabitants of Riga according to the year of construction of their apartments

During Soviet times the new apartments were mostly allocated to the new-comers from Russia, and Latvians had to continue living in old overcrowded flats without amenities.
After the restoration of Latvia’s statehood, concurrently with the restoration of the national and local authorities, issues regarding the relations with national minorities and the large number of non-citizens that was the result of the Soviet Union’s ethnic policy in Latvia, had to be dealt with. In order to decrease the number of non-citizens, the Citizenship Law adopted on 22 July 1994 envisaged the possibility for non-citizens to naturalise. Initially it was planned to have a so-called “window system” that would allow annually only the people of certain age to submit a request for naturalisation. Naturalisation began on 1 February 1995. For that purpose the Naturalisation Board was established. However, this process was slow, and some gaps in the Citizenship Law were revealed that were criticised by international institutions.

In 1998 a new Citizenship Law came into force that cancelled the “window system” and gave the right to naturalise for everyone willing to do so. Now the number of those who want to naturalise increases every year, in particular after Latvia’s accession to the EU. By 31 March 2005, 90,613 persons have naturalised. Regarding naturalisation rate, Latvia ranks among the leading EU Memberstates.

Main migration flows from Latvia, 1939 – 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Latvia emigrants</th>
<th>Estonia</th>
<th>Lithuania</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>8,500</td>
<td>80,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The number of persons who, by an order of the Cabinet of Ministers, have received Latvian citizenship after naturalisation (1995 – March 2005)

Number of naturalised persons:
- 2007: 3,000
- 2008: 2,500
- 2009: 2,000
- 2010: 1,500
- 2011: 1,000
- 2012: 500
- 2013: 250
- 2014: 125

Number of non-citizens at the beginning of the year, thousands:
- 2005: 700
- 2006: 650
- 2007: 600
- 2008: 550
- 2009: 500
- 2010: 450
- 2011: 400
- 2012: 350
- 2013: 300
- 2014: 250
- 2015: 200

Explanation of the charts: types of citizenship held in Latvia
- Citizen of Latvia - a person having Latvian citizenship
- Non-citizen - a citizen of the former USSR or his/her child who is living in the Republic of Latvia or is temporarily absent and who meets the following requirements: 1) as of 1 July 1992 has been registered as living in the territory of Latvia or whose last registered place of residence as of 1 July 1992 was the Republic of Latvia or who has a court decision certifying that he/she has lived permanently in the territory of Latvia for at least 10 years; 2) is not a citizen of Latvia; 3) is not and has not been a citizen of any other country.
- Alien - a citizen (national) of a foreign state
- Stateless person - a person who is not considered a citizen (national) in accordance with the laws of any state.
On 19 March 1991 the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia adopted a law On the Free Development and Rights to Cultural Autonomy for Latvian National and Ethnic Groups. This law guaranteed equal human rights to all inhabitants, and the rights for all minorities living in Latvia to maintain their national traditions and to establish their national societies. Adoption of the law promoted the formation of national cultural societies and establishment of ethnic minority schools in Latvia. After the restoration of independence, alongside with the already existing Latvian and Russian schools, six Polish schools, two Jewish schools as well as Ukrainian, Byelorussian, Lithuanian, Estonian and other minority schools and classrooms were established; as well as for Roma ethnic minority classrooms were formed in Ventspils and Sabile. At the moment there are more than 200 NGOs of ethnic minorities registered in Latvia – Russian, Byelorussian, Ukrainian, Jewish, Bulgarian, Roma, Lithuanian, Estonian, Liv, German, Yakuitian etc. These organisations formally differ from other NGOs by the special aims stated in their articles of incorporation – protection of ethnic minority rights, maintaining of their ethnic identity, promotion of the intercultural dialogue.
Latvia has always been a multi-religious country, where largest religious denominations have traditionally lived in harmony. There are no religious wars and conflicts in Latvia’s history. Today the Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Russian Orthodox and Old-Believers are regarded as traditional religious denominations in Latvia.

Largest denominations in Latvia in the 21st century

- Catholic
- Russian Orthodox
- Lutheran
- Old-Believers
- Other religions

Religious affiliation of Latvia’s inhabitants, 2002

- Catholic: 25%
- Russian Orthodox: 22%
- Lutheran: 20%
- Other: 7%
- Not stated: 6%