

Society integration in Latvia

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The Latvian society is multicultural. The Latvian Constitution and legislation guarantee and protect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities to preserve and develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity. Latvia not only protects, but also widely supports national minority languages, education and culture.

After the restoration of Latvia's statehood in 1991, the rights of people belonging to national minorities were also renewed, including citizenship, and the naturalisation and integration of the Soviet era immigrants began. Society integration became one of the top priorities for the Government of Latvia.

Latvia has ratified major international human rights instruments, consulted with international human rights experts and followed the recommendations of various international organizations (United Nations, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Council of Europe etc.) during the drafting of relevant legislation. This has helped to ensure that Latvian legislation and practice fully conform with the international standards and practice.

The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia enshrines the basic principle that persons belonging to national minorities have the right to preserve and develop their language, ethnic and cultural identity. Further implementation of the principle is stipulated by the 1991 Law "On the Unrestricted Development and Right to Cultural Autonomy of Latvia's National and Ethnic Groups" providing that state institutions should promote the creation of material conditions for the development of the education, language and culture of national and ethnic groups residing in Latvia through allocating funds from the national budget for such purposes.

According to the data in January 2023 by the Central Statistical Bureau, 24% of Latvia's population are ethnic Russians, but a significant proportion (12.6%) is composed of representatives of other nationalities (e.g. Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Roma, etc.). 60% of Latvia's population are Latvians. 2.5% of the population have chosen not to indicate their nationality.

Citizenship policy in Latvia

After the renewal of Latvia's independence based on the principle of state continuity, in 1991 Latvia renewed the citizenship for those inhabitants of Latvia who had it on the day of Latvia's occupation, namely, on 17 June 1940, and their descendants, regardless of their ethnicity. At the same time, the Latvian authorities faced the situation where large number of persons who had immigrated to Latvia during the period of illegal Soviet occupation and lost their USSR citizenship after the dissolution of the Soviet Union were residing permanently in Latvia. These people had never been citizens of the Republic of Latvia and had never went through the naturalization process. After the renewal of Latvia's independence *de facto*, these persons had to naturalize as any other foreign citizen wanting to acquire citizenship of Latvia.

In 1995 a special temporary status was established for former USSR citizens – "former citizens of the USSR without the citizenship of the Republic of Latvia or any other country" (so called Latvia's non-citizens) as a temporary status, which eases the way of acquiring citizenship. This status is not related to language, ethnicity or belonging to a national minority.

Latvian non-citizens enjoy equal protection under the law both in Latvia and while living or travelling abroad, and are the only group of persons, beside citizens, who are granted permanent residence in Latvia *ex lege*. They can permanently reside in a foreign country while retaining all rights and privileges, inter alia, to travel freely and to return back to Latvia at any time. Non-citizens enjoy the majority of political rights - the only significant difference between Latvian citizens and non-citizens is the right to vote and to work in the civil service or occupy posts directly related to the national security.

Latvian non-citizens cannot be regarded as stateless persons. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees distinguishes these two categories, because the amount of the rights guaranteed to non-citizens is considerably larger than the rights of stateless persons under the 1954 UN Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. According to the latest data by Central Statistical Bureau there are 160 stateless persons in Latvia.

Naturalization

To facilitate the naturalization and obtaining the Latvian citizenship, the Latvian Government introduced amendments to the Citizenship Law in 2013, simplifying the rules for obtaining citizenship, while the 2019 amendments ended the situation where a non-citizen status could be granted to a new-born child.

The structure and content of naturalization exams have been adapted to the functional use of the language; the Latvian language and history exams have been simplified; the accessibility of the naturalization process has increased; the number of documents to be submitted has decreased and the process of considering naturalization applications has been optimized.

The most recent amendments towards obtaining the Latvian citizenship were introduced in 2019 when the Latvian Parliament accepted the law "On the Termination of the Granting of the Status of a Non-citizen to Children". According to this law, as of 1 January 2020 children with parents who are both non-citizens are automatically granted Latvian citizenship at birth, unless parents agree for assigning their child the citizenship of another country. Adoption of this law confirms that society integration policy in Latvia is aimed at ending the status of non-citizen as well as it confirms that the least protected groups such as children are taken care of.

In view of the latest statistics (2023) there are 2 058 836 inhabitants in Latvia, of which 1 734 565 Latvian citizens; 187 404 non-citizens, representing 9% of the population. Since 1996, when the proportion of non-citizens was 27%, their number has gradually decreased.

Education reform and education policy in Latvia

The Latvian education reform commenced in the middle of 90ties with the aim to increase the usage of the official state language in all levels of education and was one of the means to remedy the devastating consequences of the illegal occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union. As a result of Russification and migration policies of the occupying power, the schooling system in Latvia was almost completely segregated. Two distinct schooling systems existed in Latvia - the Russian and the Latvian, each having its separate curricula.

In 1998, a new Education Law in Latvia was adopted. The education reform commencing thereof has been a carefully and duly considered process advanced by two fundamental aims – the strengthening of the use of the Latvian language, which is the only official, constitutionally embodied language in the country, and the integration of the Latvian society. The reform seeks to promote consolidated society and equal opportunities for all school graduates, avoiding any form of discrimination. The principal aim of the reform is to ensure that all school graduates have equal command of the Latvian language for a successful and competitive entry into labour market in Latvia or for the continuation of their studies.

The transition to the official language in education has been very gradual and proportionate, and has successfully increased the command of the official language. As a result of the reform, the usage of the official state language has been increased in different education stages, meanwhile throughout the reform processes bilingual education programmes have been preserved, guaranteeing that persons belonging to national minorities can develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity in accordance with the Constitution of Latvia.

The education reform in national minority education institutions is closely related to a larger reform in the Latvian education system – a transition to competence-based approach to learning.

The Latvian Constitutional Court has assessed the compatibility of the various aspects of the education reform concerning the national minorities with the Constitution and Latvia's international human rights commitments, and has recognized that the reform does not discriminate persons belonging to national minorities.

Latvia has presented its education reform concerning national minorities to different international organizations such as the UN special rapporteurs, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Council of Europe Venice Commission. In 2020 the Venice Commission admitted that the education reform in Latvia is not discriminatory in relation to persons belonging to

national minorities. The aim of the reform is said to be legitimate, and representation of national minorities in the reform process is admitted to be reasonable.

The Latvian language policy

Latvian is the only official language in Latvia, which is the only country in the world where the Latvian language can develop and fulfil its functions. The status is determined by the Constitution and the Official Language Law. The language policy is characterised by “National Language Policy Guidelines for 2021-2027”, which emphasise that the aim of national language policy is to ensure the protection and development of Latvian, its sustainability and existence in the linguistic diversity of the world.

Language policy is aimed at preservation, protection and development of the Latvian language, but at the same time provides for the integration of persons belonging to national minorities in the society of Latvia by securing their rights to use their native or any other language.

As the Latvian language is the only official language, the State has the duty to ensure that everyone who does not know the official language, has the opportunity to learn it. The understanding of the official language is not regulated in the private communication; however, it is required when working in the public sector. To enable everyone concerned to fulfil these requirements, Latvia provides state-financed Latvian language courses. The knowledge of the Latvian language is indispensable for allowing persons belonging to national minorities to actively and meaningfully participate in the public life, political debate and democratic processes.

According to the study of the Ministry of Culture “Participation of national minorities in democratic processes” in 2017, 64% of minority representatives in the age group up to 34 value their Latvian language to be good or very good, in the age group 35-44 – 56%, while at age 45 or over – less than 40%. More than 40% of minority representatives aged 55 or over do not know Latvian or only have basic knowledge. Therefore, it can be concluded that the knowledge of the Latvian language of minority representatives is constantly improving, expanding the opportunities for participation and thus also promoting the integration of society.

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