

LATVIA (*Latvija*)



Latvia is in northeastern Europe on the Baltic Sea. It is a member of both the European Union and NATO. Latvia recently gained international notoriety for its dramatic budget cuts after the European economic crisis; economists debate over the merits of government austerity, but Latvia is currently among the fastest growing economies in Europe. About 45% of Latvia is covered by trees and 38% is farmland; forest products and agricultural production make up a significant portion of Latvia's economy, while the importance of pharmaceuticals, robotics, and information technology is growing. Latvia's national choral song festivals have given it a reputation of "the land that sings"; in 2014, Latvia will host the World Choral Games.

QUICK FACTS

Population: 2 million

Area: slightly larger than West Virginia

Capital: Riga (pop. 700,000)

Languages: Latvian (official)

EDUCATION

Since 1991, the education system has undergone a variety of reforms, including a shift to active and conscientious learning in place of rote-learning. Nine-year basic education is compulsory (ages 7-16). Secondary education can take the form of general education or vocational training. Grading is on a 10-point scale (10 = with distinction, 5 = satisfactory, 1 = very, very weak). The literacy rate for individuals 15 years and older is 99.8%. About 80% of the population has completed secondary education, and one fourth have college-level education. Nearly all persons in Latvia speak at least two languages fluently; 54% are trilingual, and 13% speak four or more languages. Students from Latvia often place high in international math and science competitions.

RELIGION

There is no state religion in Latvia. Most of the population rarely, if ever, attends church services. While the government reports that a majority are atheists, religious organizations claim otherwise: 294 Lutheran congregations claim a membership of 714,000; 250 Roman Catholic congregations claim 500,000, and 122 Russian Orthodox congregations claim 370,000. Small, but active congregations include Old Believer Orthodox, Baptist, pagan (Dievturi), Seventh Day Adventist, Mormon, Methodist, Pentecostal, Muslim, Judaism, and others.

ETHNICITY

The word, "Latvian" can denote citizenship, ethnicity or language. According to the 2011 census, 84% of the population are citizens; 295,000 (14%) are noncitizen permanent residents, and 47,000 are citizens of other countries, mostly Russia. Noncitizen residents include former citizens of the USSR who choose not to naturalize as Latvian citizens; they share nearly all rights of citizens, except for voting and civil service employment. 62% of the population self-identifies as "Latvian", and 27% as "Russian"; others as Belarusian, Ukrainian, Jewish, Polish, Lithuanian or Estonian. 20% of marriages are multiethnic. Ethnic identity may also be tied to a region of Latvia such as Latgali or Livonian. Most people under 40 speak Latvian fluently.

FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & CUSTOMS

Three generations often live in the same home, with parents working and grandparents caring for children. Recently marriage has become less important; more than half of Latvian couples live together under common law arrangements. Although the population is highly urban, many travel to family farmsteads on the weekends. Jāņi, or Midsummer's eve, is a two-day national holiday celebrated with traditional foods and activities in the countryside. While hockey and basketball are the favorite sports, school sports are not common, and singing in choirs is a national pastime. Latvians are often characterized as reserved and formal. Small talk does not play a large role in communications, and friendships may take longer to develop.





CONTEMPORARY LATVIA

Situated on the Baltic Sea, the territory of Latvia has been coveted by great powers throughout history. German and Russian powers dominated the region through the 20th century. In 1918, Latvia declared independence from the Russian Empire; however, during WWII, the country was caught in the “bloodlands” between Nazi Germany and the USSR, and illegally annexed by the latter for five decades. In the late 1980s, reforms led by Mikhail Gorbachev opened space for political protests such as the 1989 Baltic Way demonstration for independence, a 2 million-strong human chain stretching from Tallinn, Estonia, through Riga, Latvia, to Vilnius, Lithuania. The first free national elections were held in 1990. The newly elected governments declared independence from the USSE. The Baltic nonviolent independence movement of 1988-1991 is known as the Singing Revolution.

In 2004, Latvia joined NATO and the EU and has sent troops to operations in Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan. In the early 2000s, Latvia was among the fastest growing economies in the EU; much of this growth was concentrated in the real estate market, and Latvia was thus one of the hardest hit countries during the 2008 financial crisis. Unemployment soared, and hundreds of thousands of economic migrants left the country. While Latvia is now the fastest growing economy in Europe, it faces a demographic crisis as people continue to leave and birthrates remain low. Latvia, like many states on the EU's eastern borders, remains dependent on gas and oil imports from Russia.

Latvia ranks 48th among world countries in human development indicators (life expectancy, education, and income), but the population has mixed feelings about the country's current well-being. Freedom of the press and investigative journalism ensures that corruption scandals stay in public view, and politicians are generally not highly regarded. Political integration of the Russian-speaking population has also presented many challenges. Nevertheless, in the larger European and former Soviet context, Latvia has made significant progress.



LATVIANS IN THE USA

There are three groups of Latvian immigrants in the U.S. The first (old Latvians), began to arrive in the late 1800s. Second, about 40,000 WWII the 1990s. Around 90,000 individuals in the US identify as Latvian or Latvian-American. Latvian communities in Seattle/Tacoma offer church services, Saturday school and community activities, such as folk dancing.



The Latvian flag is one of the older banners in the world; a medieval chronicle mentions a red standard with a white stripe being used by Latvian tribes in about 1280 .



Traditional Latvian weaving

NAMES

Surnames usually have both masculine and feminine versions, therefore members of the same family can have different endings on their surnames. (EX: Apsītis/Apsīte; Bērziņš/Bērziņa). Most male names end with “s” or “š” and most female names end with “a” or “e.” When addressing a male directly, the “s” is usually dropped. Many Latvians have internationally familiar names such as Roberts and Laura. Common male Latvian names include: Valdis, Jānis (YAHN-is), Mārtiņš (MAR-tinsh). Common female Latvian names include: Madara, Lelde (LELL-day), Maija (MY-ya). “J” is pronounced as an American “y.”

FAMOUS LATVIANS

A few famous Latvians include: Māris Štrombergs (Olympic gold medalist, BMX bicycle racing), Andris Biedriņš (Golden State Warriors), Elīna Garanča (opera mezzo-soprano), Ulyana Semyonova (first non-US woman in the NBA Hall of Fame), Gidon Kremer (violinist) and Pēteris Vasks (composer). Walter Zapp produced the world's first high resolution mini spy camera (VEF Minox) in Riga in 1937.

LATVIAN WORDS

Hi.....	Sveiks/Čau
Bye	Sveiki/Atā
Good morning	Labrīt!
Yes	Jā (Yaa)
No	Nē (Neigh)
Please/You're welcome ..	Lūdzu (LOO-dzu)
Thank you	Paldies (Paldeeis)
I do not understand	Es nesaprotu
Do you understand?	Vai jūs saprotat?

USEFUL LINKS

[The World Factbook: Latvia](#)
[BBC Latvia Profile](#)
[National Geographic Guide: Latvia](#)
[Baltic Times](#)