

Latvia

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Capital: Riga
Population: 2.0 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$21,820

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2014*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Electoral Process	1.75	1.75	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75
Civil Society	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75
Independent Media	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	2.00
National Democratic Governance	2.25	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.50	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.00
Local Democratic Governance	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25
Judicial Framework and Independence	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75
Corruption	3.50	3.25	3.00	3.00	3.25	3.25	3.50	3.25	3.00	3.00
Democracy Score	2.14	2.07	2.07	2.07	2.18	2.18	2.14	2.11	2.07	2.07

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Latvia has eased into calmer waters after the tremendous turbulence caused by the recent global economic crisis, when the country's gross domestic product (GDP) plunged by 24.1 percent and the official unemployment rate jumped to 20.5 percent.¹ Although precrisis prosperity levels have not yet been reached, the above-average growth of the last three years and the positive future growth trajectory predicted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are strong signals of stabilization. While Latvia still has among the highest rates of inequality and poverty in the European Union (EU) and popular discontent with the government is high, the previously large contingent of emigrants searching for employment abroad has slowed down significantly.

The government in 2013 finalized plans for Latvia to join the Eurozone—a group of countries using the euro currency—and the country is expected to adopt the new currency in January 2014. Harmony Center, a party that draws much of its support from Latvia's ethnic Russians and which opposes Eurozone membership, performed well in local elections held in June. Its strong performance in Riga, the capital, allowed Harmony Center leader and Riga mayor Nils Ušakovs to continue presiding over the affairs of the capital city.

On 21 November, Latvia was shaken by the deadly collapse of a supermarket roof in a Riga suburb, which killed 54 people. The event precipitated a flurry of finger-pointing and claims of shoddy workmanship, failed official oversight, shortcomings in legal regulations, and bribery in the construction business. In an attempt to calm the situation, Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis resigned unexpectedly on 27 November, but remained in his position until an interim leader is found to govern until elections set for late 2014.

National Democratic Governance. In 2013, the government finalized plans for Latvia to join the Eurozone, despite low popular enthusiasm for the initiative. The government also adopted amendments to the citizenship law, extending the possibility of Latvian citizenship to many ethnic Latvians living abroad, as well as to some resident noncitizens. Opinion polls show low public trust in the Saeima (parliament), owing largely to the economic struggles many people continue to experience. Due to the stability of the ruling coalition under challenging circumstances, *Latvia's national democratic rating improves from 2.25 to 2.00.*

Electoral Process. Municipal elections for 119 regions were held in June without any major problems. At 46 percent, voter turnout was lower than in previous years; however, the relative contentment of participating voters was reflected in the reelection of many incumbents. Harmony Center maintained control of the city

council in Riga, while a party headed by Aivars Lembergs—or one of the handful of powerful businessmen who have exerted influence on the country's politics for many years—won nearly 70 percent of the vote in Ventspils. *Latvia's electoral process rating remains unchanged at 1.75.*

Civil Society. The number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including those with the official status of public benefit organization, is rising, but civil society groups struggle for financial sustainability. State funding of NGOs is not transparent; a weak culture of voluntary work and private donating also represent key obstacles. Civil society groups are involved in the crafting of public policy to some extent, but civil servants in some cases ignore NGO advocacy. *Latvia's rating for civil society remains unchanged at 1.75.*

Independent Media. Financial pressures have resulted in the merger of a number of independent media outlets, while others have seen changes in ownership or senior editorial staff in recent years. Despite a growing advertising market, newspaper outlets suffered significant losses in 2013. Following a large financial loss at Latvian Independent Television (LNT), which the Swedish holding company Modern Times Group (MTG) had acquired in 2012, MTG announced in October that LNT and another Latvian station it controlled, TV3, beginning in 2014 would only be available to cable-television subscribers. Due to ongoing media consolidation and the poor economic environment for independent journalists and media outlets, *Latvia's rating for independent media declines from 1.75 to 2.00*

Local Democratic Governance. Public opinion polls reflect a much higher level of trust in municipal governments than in the national government. Since July 2013, elected council members cannot work in municipal executive organizations. Some local government representatives criticized the national government for being out of touch with local governments' priorities. *Latvia's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 2.25.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. Latvia provides fair protection for fundamental rights; however, violations related to excessive length of trials or inappropriate procedures for pretrial detention are commonplace. In 2013, important reforms to the court system continued in an effort to improve professionalism, but suspected wrongdoing by some judges still generated mistrust. Conditions in prisons remain unacceptably poor and an August report by the Council of Europe Committee Against Torture (CAT) highlighted violence among prisoners and the lack of proper healthcare as particular problems. *Latvia's rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 1.75.*

Corruption. Latvia in 2013 saw moderate progress in its ongoing struggle against corruption, as well as some setbacks. So-called administrative corruption has gradually diminished and the business environment has improved. Anticorruption

legislation is fairly comprehensive but whistleblower protection remains poor, and a draft law on lobbying transparency is bogged down in disputes. The Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) suffered from damaging internal struggles during the year. The length of court proceedings, too, continues to hinder Latvia's fight against corruption. *Latvia's rating for corruption remains unchanged at 3.00.*

Outlook for 2014. Entry into the eurozone on 1 January 2014, will present some challenges for Latvia. A majority of Latvia's population opposed adopting the euro currency, and most people expect a jump in prices despite protective regulations established by the government. The economic growth trajectory indicates that Latvia will reach the precrisis level of prosperity in 2014. Strained relations between the ethnic Latvian and ethnic Russian communities are unlikely to improve, and national elections set for October 2014 could inflame tensions in both camps. The leadership of the nationalist National Alliance party has already called for unity among ethnic Latvian-majority parties, but with little resonance. Thus there is a fair probability that the predominantly Russian-oriented Harmony Center will be included in the next ruling coalition. If it is forced to once more remain in opposition ranks, there could be sharp Russophone reactions and increased ethnic discord.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
2.25	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.50	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.00

The three-party, right-leaning coalition government comprised of former president Valdis Zatlers's Zatlers Reform Party (ZRP), Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis's Unity bloc, and the conservative National Alliance worked in relative harmony during the year, apart from brief conflicts over a few policy issues. These included disagreements over more funding for child support, limited quotas for Latvian residence permits in the case of non-European Union (EU) property investors, and the inclusion of an optional ethnic identity category in passports. Coalition members also clashed in November, when Dombrovskis refused to expel the sitting justice minister, Janis Bordans, as demanded by his former party.² National Alliance expelled Bordans from its ranks on 1 November, claiming he had become inappropriately involved in the activities of another political force, the Democratic Patriots' movement, which had recently announced its intention to form a new party. Bordans maintains the reasons were more complicated, and connected to his "meddling" in important economic interests.³

The governing coalition remained united in its drive to join the Eurozone—the group of nations that uses the euro currency—even though opinion polls showed euro adoption to be unpopular among a majority of Latvian residents. Nevertheless, lawmakers in January 2013 approved a bill to move forward with the adoption and the EU approved the initiative in July, setting up Latvia to adopt the euro at the start of 2014.⁴

Relative stability in the parliament was backstopped by the conciliatory and cautious leadership style of Prime Minister Dombrovskis. On 30 August 2013, he became the longest continually serving democratic prime minister in Latvian history, having taken office in 2009.⁵ However, on 27 November, Dombrovskis unexpectedly announced his resignation as prime minister to accept political responsibility for the deadly tragedy in the Riga suburb of Zolitude, where 54 people were killed when a supermarket roof collapsed. He remained in his position in a caretaker capacity at the end of the year. The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 2014.⁶

The government in May amended the Latvian Citizenship Act to allow dual citizenship for Latvians living abroad. The move was largely a response to a spike in emigration from Latvia to higher-wage countries such as Great Britain, Germany, and Norway. The law also conferred citizenship upon noncitizen and stateless children who were born in Latvia after August 1991 and remained permanent residents. A provision that would have required the parents to promise they would teach their child the language and raise them as Latvian patriots did not pass.⁷

About 14 percent of Latvia's residents are noncitizens—many of whom are ethnically Russian and speak Russian as their primary language—and the government faces continuing criticism, as nonresidents are ineligible to hold public office or vote either at the national or regional level.⁸ Nonresidents not granted citizenship through recent amendments to the citizenship law have a special temporary status and can acquire citizenship through a naturalization process; calls for automatic citizenship have been ignored by the government so far. Between 1995 and September 2013, 140,725 individuals acquired Latvian citizenship, according to Latvia's Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs.⁹ All residents of Latvia may vote in the Latvian Noncitizens' Congress, but the organization has no official political powers.¹⁰

Despite ethnic polarization, the predominantly Russophone Harmony Center party has been quite successful in recent years. In tandem with an allied, ethnic Latvian party, Harmony Center elected a majority of deputies to the Riga city council in the June municipal elections. In addition, Harmony Center head Nils Ušakovs, who is ethnically Russian and draws much of his support from Latvia's ethnic Russian population, has held the mayorship of Riga since 2009, providing Latvian Russophones with a prominent center of power and patronage.¹¹

According to a Latvian opinion poll conducted in April 2013, only 10 percent of respondents expressed trust in the Saeima, and just 12 percent in the cabinet.¹² Trust in other public institutions aside from the legislature and cabinet is significantly higher, with 55 percent of respondents in a 2012 poll expressing confidence in the Constitutional Court, 51 percent in the state police, and 48 percent in the church. According to the same poll, 45 percent of respondents expressed confidence in local governments, 45 percent in prosecutors, 43 percent in the ombudsman, 41 percent in the media, and 34 percent in the president.¹³

The government's unpopularity is largely fueled by continuing economic insecurity that persists in many regions of Latvia in spite of the rapid economic growth of the past two years. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has projected a 4 percent growth in Latvia's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2013, and 4.2 percent in 2014.¹⁴ In addition, the dissatisfaction reflects a wide gap between expectations of the government by many of Latvia's residents and the realistic capabilities of the administration. An extensive opinion study by the marketing and public opinion research center SKDS, published in February 2013, found that most of Latvia's residents—while voting for right-leaning parties—preferred a greater role for the state. The study highlighted a disconnect in which even though a majority of people participating demonstrated a socialist-leaning orientation and leftist belief system, many who held such beliefs also indicated that they tended to vote for right-leaning parties.¹⁵

A November 2012 opinion poll showed a widespread feeling that government officials have inflated salaries and that these should be cut back; the poll showed that 75 percent of respondents recommended a wage cut for lawmakers, 66 percent recommended cuts in cabinet members' wages, 63 percent said the prime minister's salary should be reduced, and 56 percent said the president should earn less.¹⁶

The average monthly salary for ministers is 1180 LVL (\$2,400), about double the average income in Latvia.¹⁷

Latvia's free-market economic credentials are stable. The World Bank *Doing Business* report, released in October, ranked Latvia 24 out of 189 countries and territories.¹⁸ The national debt is under 40 percent and is being repaid through market bonds, and the budget deficit is below 2 percent.¹⁹ The Fitch credit rating agency raised Latvia's standing almost immediately after the positive signal for membership by the eurozone leadership. Experts have praised Latvia for implementing sharp austerity measures to overcome a deeply debilitating economic crisis, saying the resulting economic stabilization restored investor confidence in the country.²⁰

Electoral Process

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1.75	1.75	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75

Representatives to the 100-seat Saeima are elected to four-year terms, and the president is elected by the Saeima. The next Saeima elections are set for October 2014, and the next presidential election will be held in May 2015. Local elections are held every four years, with the latest round taking place in June 2013. European Parliamentary elections are held every five years, with the next elections for eight Latvian deputies planned for May 2014. Only Latvian citizens can participate in national, local, and EU parliament elections. All elections of the last two decades have been considered fair with only minor problems, which were duly investigated by the Central Elections Commission (CVK).²¹

The 1 June municipal elections were uneventful and orderly in all 119 electoral districts. In contrast to parliamentary and European Parliament elections, voters had to be registered in their place of residence or where they had property holdings 90 days prior to the election date. Despite preelection polls predicting high turnout, only 46 percent of voters voted compared to 53.8 percent in 2009.²² The polls also showed that the most urgent issue Latvians wanted local governments to confront was unemployment, followed by the state of local roads, social welfare, and healthcare programs.

Of the 8,725 candidates running for office, roughly 60 percent were men and 40 percent were women, and the average candidate age was 44.8 years.²³ Preelection campaigning was allowed from 2 February until 1 June—except for paid television advertising, which was prohibited for a month before the elections. According to polling agency SDKS, 86 percent of residents supported the ban on paid television advertising by political parties, which was intended to focus the campaign on substance.²⁴ Voters could cast a ballot up to three days before the actual election date.

Elections in Riga to 60 city council seats were a major focus of media attention. The contest was mainly between a coalition led by the Russophone mayor Nils Ušakovs and his Harmony party—which also included the ethnic Latvian party

Gods Kalpot Rigai (Proud to Serve Riga)—and Dombrovskis’s Unity bloc, led by former editor of the newspaper *Diena*, Sarmīte Ēlerte. At 55.5 percent, voter participation in Riga was above the national average. Harmony Center and its partner party won a majority and improved their standing by two seats, from 37 to 39, while Unity’s representation decreased to 9 seats, from 14 previously. The nationalist National Alliance, which had not previously held seats in the city council, won 12 seats.²⁵

The victory of mayor Ušakovs and his Harmony party has generated concerns among many observers that parliamentary elections set for October 2014 could inflame tensions between ethnic Latvian and Russophone parties and voters. The National Alliance has raised the possibility of uniting all ethnic Latvian-majority parties, but this idea has not been embraced by the major parties.²⁶

In another notable race, the For Latvia and Ventspils party—led by Ventspils mayor Aivars Lembergs—won 69.4 percent of all votes in Ventspils.²⁷ Lembergs, who is among the powerful figures widely regarded as oligarchs, has been implicated in numerous corruption schemes, and criminal proceedings against him are ongoing. Elections to the Latvian Noncitizens’ Congress—a movement advocating for voting rights for those without a Latvian citizenship—were also held in June, though the organization has no official political powers. All Latvian residents are eligible to vote for representatives to the body.²⁸

Civil Society

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75

The Latvian constitution protects the right to form associations, political parties, and trade unions. The right for workers to strike is also constitutionally protected.²⁹ Many professional, industrial, and social associations operate in Latvia. The number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has been increasing, as of July 2013, there were 17,550 registered in the country, amounting to approximately 8 organizations per 1,000 inhabitants.³⁰ Most media outlets consider civil society groups independent and reliable sources of information and commentary.

NGOs can apply for public benefit organization status, which allows their donors to receive income tax deductions. The status can be awarded if activities of the organization are deemed to serve the public good in line with legally defined criteria.³¹ According to the State Revenue Service, in 2011, this legal arrangement reduced government income tax revenue by approx. 12.6 million LVL (approx. \$23 million).³² During 2013, 227 NGOs received public benefit organization status. Of them, 109 of them were charity organizations, 65 were organizations focused on civil society issues, and 62 were sports organizations.³³ It is a common practice among entrepreneurs to fund their own NGOs that host annual charity events, but which otherwise revolve around their founders’ hobbies and do not undertake any other significant civil society initiatives.³⁴

While Latvia's GDP is growing, economic recovery after the financial crisis has been slow in practice, and financing of NGOs through private donors still has not reached levels sufficient for a sustainable, proactive civil society. Even though numerous NGOs count highly trained professionals as staff members, many lack sufficient administrative and financial resources and struggle to produce empirically-supported studies to assist policymakers.³⁵ Many NGOs are financed by state institutions or state-owned companies, but the distribution of public funds to NGOs has been criticized for a lack of transparency.³⁶

In 2013, the finance ministry drafted new rules to regulate how state institutions provide financing to private entities.³⁷ Meanwhile, the welfare ministry has been working on new regulations on social entrepreneurship that would provide additional ways for active civil society organizations to maintain financial stability in the future.³⁸ While NGOs can participate in public procurement, they are banned from participating in some of the tenders.³⁹

Latvian officials in 2012 drafted new regulations on voluntary work, which, if adopted, would define such work and the restrictions on it, as well as the rights and duties of volunteers and NGOs.⁴⁰ Supporters of the law hoped that the new regulations would encourage more people to participate in volunteer work, which does not have a long tradition or broad social support in Latvia.⁴¹

Latvia has several online platforms for public participation in policy making. Among them is the internet platform *Mana Balss*, or *My Voice*, which allows people to submit their own policy initiatives and collect signatures of support. If an initiative wins support from 10,000 backers, it will be admitted to discussion in the parliament. Since the *Mana Balss* project was launched in 2011, a total of 11 separate initiatives have collected more than 10,000 signatures, and 2 have subsequently become law after debate in the *Saeima*. During the last year and a half, 25 percent of the Latvian population has used *Mana Balss*, and 11 initiatives have been proposed in 2013, receiving more than 35,000 signatures collectively.⁴² The project receives some support from the Latvian government, as well as from the governments of Norway, Lichtenstein, and Iceland.⁴³

Musuvlsts.lv, meaning "Our State," is another platform that allows the crowdsourcing of policy ideas. In 2013, one of the discussions focused on the idea of introducing a preamble for Latvia's constitution. The initiative was also debated in the *Saeima*, and critics have pointed to the exclusion of civil society in the discussion as well as the proposal's emphasis on the role of ethnic Latvians in forming the state.⁴⁴

NGOs are able to participate in the process of policymaking, but problems, such as the lack of expertise and administrative capacity, hinder meaningful contributions.⁴⁵ In some cases, public officials ignore NGO advocacy or decline to seek input from NGOs.⁴⁶ However, the National Tripartite Cooperation Council—a group that encourages cooperation between employers, government bodies, and trade unions—played a major role in reaching an agreement to increase the minimum wage in Latvia starting in 2014.⁴⁷ The government amended the procedures for public participation in the development of new legislation in

2013 and codified the obligation of state institutions to post certain information online in a timely manner.⁴⁸ Some state institutions have come up with their own initiatives to involve civil society in government operations. For example, the State Chancellery in 2012 launched an internet tool, *Mazināsīm slogu kopā*, or “Let’s Reduce the [administrative] Burden Together,” where citizens can submit examples of ineffective bureaucratic procedures.⁴⁹

In general, the Latvian education system is free of political influence and propaganda, although recently a debate has been developing regarding the language of instruction in kindergartens and regarding history classes taught in Russian-language schools—including the usage of textbooks from Russia in those classrooms.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, in 2012, Latvia also ranked 12th in the world gender equality index.⁵¹

Independent Media

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1.50	1.50	1.50	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	2.00

Latvia’s constitution and laws protect media freedom, and there is a wide acceptance of the need for an independent media by the national and local governments and by a vast majority of the population. For two decades Latvia had a very diverse range of media outlets in both the Latvian and Russian languages, but economic pressure and changing media orientations have forced many of them to consolidate or close operations in recent years. In spite of economic constraints, people in Latvia have access to a broad spectrum of news outlets, and several insightful investigative journalism programs are broadcast on television. Re:TV, a new television outlet for Latvian-language regional programs broadcast online, appears to be receiving increasing popular attention.⁵²

The newspaper sector has suffered great losses in recent years due to continuously decreasing advertising revenues and advertisers’ increased focus on broadcast and internet outlets. Even though total media advertising rose by 3 percent in the first half of 2013, the revenue of newspapers declined by 9 percent.⁵³ Economic pressures have forced journalists to undertake increased tasks for lower pay, resulting in a rapid turnover of reporters and management. The leading Latvian newspaper organization, *Žurnāli un Diena*, or *Diena Enterprises*, has suffered losses of over 10 million LVL (\$19.6 million) in the last five years and almost 4 million LVL (\$4 million) in 2012 alone.⁵⁴ As a result of the squeeze from advertisers and plunging readership, the daily *Diena* has gone through eight different editors in the last five years. For example, the well-known pollster, Aigars Freimanis, began as editor in January 2013 but quit four months later. Gatis Madžīņš, coopted from Latvian TV, replaced him in the post.

Changed ownership patterns due to financial pressures on the media market have resulted in increased consolidation. In 2012, the Latvian Competition Council

allowed the Riga Commercial Port (RTO) to obtain a controlling package of shares in Diena Enterprises and take over the daily *Diena*. The final shareholders in this venture have not been publicized, and the newspaper has allegedly been controlled by oligarchs since the acquisition.⁵⁵ Economic pressures have forced changes in newspaper ownership at other outlets, including at *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze* and *Latvijas Avīze*, as well. The Russian newspapers *Chas* and *Vesti Segodnya* merged in 2012, while the Russian-language *Telegraf* is owned by an offshore company since 2010. The Riga city council voted in October to set aside funding for a free monthly bilingual newspaper to reach its constituents.⁵⁶

Two of Latvia's major TV channels merged in 2012, when the Swedish holding company Modern Times Group (MTG) bought out Latvian Independent Television (LNT). Despite the consolidation, the newly acquired LNT suffered losses worth 2.2 million LVL (\$4.3 million) in 2012.⁵⁷ The loss was apparently the catalyst for an October 2013 announcement by MTG that starting in 2014, LNT and another Latvian station it controlled, TV3, would only be available to cable television subscribers. The move will affect the 7 percent or so of viewers who cannot afford to pay for broadcasting packages or satellites, and instead rely on free stations.⁵⁸

A major controversy arose in 2013 regarding the proposed merger of the public service television and radio outlets. Latvian public radio stations, which account for almost half of the national radio audience, opposed the move. Supporters argue that the blending of two news organizations could save money. The merger, which was worked out by over 200 experts in 45 separate meetings, would proceed over 5 years and cost 42 million LVL (\$81.7 million).⁵⁹

The major Russian-language television station in the Baltic region, Pervi Baltiiski Kanal (PBK), primarily shows programs produced in Russia. Many in the Baltics view its broadcasting as a troubling incursion of Russia's soft power. On 4 October, the PBK program *Chelovek i zakon* (*Man and the Law*), aired a dubious interpretation of the January 1991 Vilnius shootings, which took place during Lithuania's process of separation from the Soviet Union, drawing protests from the Latvian and Lithuanian media supervisory organizations. The media holding group Baltijas Mediju, PBK's broadcaster, subsequently removed the program from the airwaves in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, saying authorities would "evaluate it."⁶⁰

In the first half of 2013, 73 percent of Latvian residents used the internet, while 61 percent used it daily. Among those aged 15 to 19, the daily access rate was 95 percent.⁶¹ Indeed, all national newspapers and many regional newspapers have a presence on the internet. They compete with a number of multinational-owned digital news websites such as TVnet.lv, Apollo.lv, and Delfi.lv—which rarely expend any effort at news research and instead recycle news provided by two of Latvia's major news outlets, Leta and the Baltic News Service (BNS).

Local Democratic Governance

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
2.50	2.50	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25

The responsibilities of municipal governments are broad, and include the oversight of primary and secondary education, social assistance (except pensions and family care benefits), healthcare, water supply and sewage works, local roads, and a portion of the country's housing. Following 2009 reforms that consolidated more than 500 local units into a smaller number of municipalities and cities, 39 municipalities still have fewer than 5,000 people, and local administrations in most of these areas are not able to fulfill all the mandated functions, let alone improve the development of their areas. Accordingly, the Saeima has tasked the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (VARAM) to assess and propose changes to improve local decision-making.⁶² Ahead of the elections, in February, the parliament approved an initiative to reduce the number of deputies in local governments to reflect the size of local populations. The 39 smallest constituencies thus saw their council representation reduced to 9 people each.⁶³

Local governments receive much higher trust ratings than many other state organizations; according to recent polling data, 45 percent of respondents trusted them.⁶⁴ The reelection of two-thirds—or 79 of 119 municipal mayors—by their respective councils in June's municipal elections also served as a measurement of satisfaction with their work. The level of trust reflects a greater degree of personal interaction between inhabitants and council representatives and a wider flexibility and cooperation between deputies of different political persuasions at the municipal level. Political party adherence has been fluid; of the 79 reelected mayors 27 had had changed their political allegiance since the previous round of local elections.⁶⁵

Since 1 July 2013, elected council members cannot work in municipal executive organizations. Subsequently, five elected deputies in Riga from the Harmony Center-led coalition resigned from their elected posts in order to take lucrative positions and lead city departments.⁶⁶

All municipalities depend on funding from personal and business taxes, but because of uneven wealth and industrial distribution, an equalization fund allows for the transfer of money from wealthier to the more impoverished municipalities. Only 16 local governments will be paying out funds under the measure, while 92 will be receiving benefits. The city of Riga will pay out 15.9 percent of its budget, amounting to about 55 million LVL (\$106 million).⁶⁷ In an apparent move to strike a balance with the equalization payments, Riga has decided to lower public-transportation charges for card-carrying Riga inhabitants, and double fees for outsiders. Opponents of the plan managed to collect 10,000 signatures on Mana Balss, thus sending the initiative for debate in the parliament. Nevertheless, the differentiated pricing plan is set to take effect at the start of January 2014.⁶⁸

The central government in 2013 faced some criticism from local authorities for purportedly being out of touch with citizens' concerns and local governments' priorities. Andris Jaunsleinis, chair of the Latvian Association of Local and Regional

Governments, in August criticized numerous policies of the central government, including the government bailouts of major companies such as Parex Banka, Latvijas Krājbanka and Liepājas Metalurģs, following the outbreak of the global economic crisis. Jaunsleinis claimed the money should have been used to fix the country's roads. He also asserted that the lowering of personal income taxes by the government in 2012 was "a major mistake," and expressed concern over a government proposal to privatize the water supply as well as heating companies.⁶⁹ The deputy executive director of Latvian Large Cities Association, Maris Kučinskis, in August claimed that there is a municipal crisis in the Saeima because none of the deputies have worked in local governments, and stated that the mainstream political parties are out of touch with the needs of ordinary people.⁷⁰

Judicial Framework and Independence

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75

Latvia provides reasonable protection for most fundamental political, civil, and human rights in both law and practice. The country's judiciary includes courts of first instance, regional courts, the Supreme Court, and the Constitutional Court. A Judicial Ethics Commission established in 2008 is responsible for reviewing suspected ethics violations and providing counsel to judges.⁷¹ In 2009, rules that required a rigorous selection procedure for first-time candidates for judicial posts were adopted.⁷²

The Justice Ministry in recent years has also worked to introduce new digital tools to streamline court operations.⁷³ In 2013, a new system for the performance assessment of judges came into force.⁷⁴ Additionally, the Saeima adopted major amendments to the Law on the Judiciary.⁷⁵ Among other important changes, the amendments attempt to address the issue of delays by requiring chairpersons of courts to set goals for the average duration of cases. Additionally, court judgments now must be published, a reform aimed at increasing transparency.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, certain suspicions of corruption and unethical conduct in the courts linger on. In April, the weekly *Ir* published information suggesting illicit collusion between particular judges and certain companies that were undergoing insolvency procedures, in an apparent scheme by which the companies were able to secure waivers of debt.⁷⁷ The Constitutional Court in October requested that the prosecutor general conduct an inquiry into the actions of one such judge in connection with the allegedly corrupt insolvency procedures.⁷⁸ Also in October, a public prosecutor indicted the former chair of the Riga City Zemgale District Court, Ziedonis Strazds, who is suspected of collecting salaries paid out to nonexistent court employees.⁷⁹ In November, an appeals court upheld a guilty verdict for Vineta Muižniece, a now-suspended Constitutional Court judge who had been convicted of forgery in her earlier capacity as a member of parliament; she still had the opportunity to appeal to the instance of cassation.⁸⁰ In December, the government

gave conditional approval to several proposals aimed at reducing corruption among insolvency administrators, including one that made them subject to disciplinary liability. However, the amendments had not been adopted at the end of the year.⁸¹

Judicial independence in Latvia is generally respected. In 2009 and 2010, the parliament rejected two candidates for the Supreme Court even though they had satisfied all formal requirements and few had objected openly to them. In the case of administrative court judge Maris Vīgants, some claimed the vote was arranged at the request of Ventspils mayor Aivars Lembergs, following an earlier criminal case against him where Vīgants had been the sitting judge.⁸² In July, Justice Minister Jānis Bordāns refused to approve a second term for Judge Sandra Strence as chairperson of the Riga Regional Court, and instead used his legal authority to appoint another judge to the position.⁸³ Bordāns claimed that Strence had failed to oversee sufficient improvements in the court's performance, and cited previously undisclosed information from the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) regarding allegedly dubious decisions the court had issued during Strence's tenure. Nevertheless, the situation was sensitive because Strence had been selected as a suitable candidate by a competition commission, and the executive disregarded its decision.⁸⁴

Recent judgments by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) have highlighted abuses in the judiciary and law enforcement bodies in Latvia. Notably, in July, the ECHR found in the case of *Nagla v. Latvia* that police had searched a journalist's home and computer equipment without just cause. The police in 2010 had seized a computer and memory devices from the home of the journalist Ilze Nagla, who had covered a leak from a database of Latvia's state revenue service. The court ruled that police had lacked "relevant and sufficient" reason for the search and seizure.⁸⁵ In January, the ECHR ruled that a state-run care institution had held a disabled man against his will, without allowing him to challenge his confinement in court.⁸⁶ Other cases against Latvia included violations of the prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment, the right to a fair trial—especially those related to the excessive length of trials—and infringements on the right to respect for private life.⁸⁷

In July, the government appointed Ilona Spure as the new head of the state prison administration office. Previously, she had been the head of the administration's rehabilitation department. Spure replaced Visvaldis Puķīte, whose dismissal in June was related to numerous irregularities in public procurement.⁸⁸ Abuse in Latvian detention and prison facilities remains a concern. In October, the ECHR ruled against Latvia for a failure to protect from ill-treatment in prison a former police informant and convict for sexual offences against minors.⁸⁹ In August, the Council of Europe's Committee Against Torture (CAT) published a report from its 2011 visit to Latvia, which found that "persons in police custody continue to face a certain degree of risk of being subjected to ill-treatment," that violence among prisoners was a problem in all of the visited prison facilities, and that many inmates were denied proper health care.⁹⁰

The current ombudsman, Juris Jansons, has maintained social rights, such as the provision of free learning materials in schools, among his priorities and has kept

the public profile of the office quite high.⁹¹ Latvia only had a few infringement cases—for breaches of EU law—pending against it as of November 2013.⁹²

Corruption

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
3.50	3.25	3.00	3.00	3.25	3.25	3.50	3.25	3.25	3.25

Latvia in 2013 saw moderate progress in its ongoing struggle against corruption, as well as some setbacks. According to Transparency International's 2013 Global Corruption Barometer, 68 percent of respondents considered political parties corrupt or extremely corrupt, while 63 percent viewed public servants and civil officials in the same light.⁹³ A survey commissioned by the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) in November 2012 revealed that 34.7 percent of respondents had admitted at least some preparedness to bribe a public official, a slight improvement in comparison with 39.4 percent in 2007.⁹⁴

Latvia has seen a gradual reduction of so-called administrative corruption as well as improvements within its business environment. The World Bank's *Doing Business* assessment, released in October 2013, ranked Latvia 24 of 189 countries and territories, and showed progress within a number of indicators. For example, the time required for the registration of property fell from 55 days in 2004 to 18 days in 2013. Additionally, the cost associated with procedures to legally build a warehouse fell from 43.5 percent of income per capita in 2006 to 15.4 percent in 2013.⁹⁵ Such developments should help decrease incentives to engage in corruption.

Latvia's anticorruption legislation is fairly comprehensive. In September 2013, Latvia was invited to join the antibribery convention of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a mark of international recognition of the quality of Latvia's anticorruption criminal provisions.⁹⁶ In January, the Saeima amended the Law on Local Governments to prohibit elected members of municipal councils from simultaneously holding executive posts within the same municipality.⁹⁷ The amendments addressed the difficulties of some municipal councils to execute proper oversight of their own executive agencies; previously, elected politicians themselves could also be the managers they were tasked with supervising.⁹⁸ In April, the parliament approved provisions on administrative liability for procedural violations in public procurement, thus closing a major gap that for many years had undermined possibilities to apply penalties for infractions that fell short of being criminal offences.⁹⁹

Among remaining legislative weaknesses are poor protections for whistleblowers, insufficient requirements for competitive recruitment in government bodies, and incomplete transparency in lobbying. The Labor Law prohibits retaliation against employees who report administrative or criminal violations to competent bodies. However, a victimized whistleblower would have to seek compensation through potentially costly and lengthy court procedures and be prepared to carry the burden

of proof against defamation charges. Proposals to strengthen the legal protection of whistleblowers have met with reluctance from politicians, in part due to a lack of recognition of their importance in encouraging good governance.¹⁰⁰

Latvia lacks unified and clear principles for hiring in the public administration. In May 2013, the government approved a concept paper that proposed broader use of open competition for the selection of candidates.¹⁰¹ In August, the government approved amendments to the State Civil Service Law to ensure a more centralized, impartial, and merit-based selection of heads of public bodies.¹⁰² However, these policy initiatives have not yet materialized as laws adopted by the parliament.

During 2013, the KNAB unsuccessfully tried to reach an agreement with other public bodies on a draft law on lobbying transparency; the law would require public institutions to disclose information about lobbyists online.¹⁰³ There was uncertainty about how to distinguish between lobbyists and ordinary citizens who voice their grievances to state authorities, and the prospects of the bill's approval remain vague.

Institutionally, the KNAB is at the center of Latvia's anticorruption policy. The powerful, multifunctional agency has a strong performance record from the past but was bogged down by internal struggles during 2013, and some experienced investigators decided to leave the agency.¹⁰⁴ Notable new investigations in 2013 included a €120,000 bribe paid in connection with projects carried out by a municipal heating company in Daugavpils; three people involved in the case were taken into custody in February.¹⁰⁵ In June, the KNAB started an investigation into allegations of large-scale corruption at the State Revenue Service (SRS).¹⁰⁶

The length of court proceedings in complicated criminal matters represents a major stumbling block in Latvia's fight against corruption. A suspected major fraud scheme concerning digitalization of television in Latvia has remained in the court of first instance since 2007.¹⁰⁷ A complex corruption case against Ventspils mayor Lembergs has been in the court of first instance since 2008.¹⁰⁸ A simpler but nevertheless salient case of suspected bribery in the University Children's Hospital has been pending in the court of first instance since 2010. According to the prosecutor of that case, as of September, the court had managed to hear 2 witnesses out of 30 and the completion of the first-instance procedure was not expected even in a year's time.¹⁰⁹ The defendants hoped that the courts will apply Section 49.1 of the Criminal Law, which allows for milder sentences when the right to justice in reasonable time has been violated.¹¹⁰ Overall, few of the most prominent corruption cases have reached final court decisions.

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