The Lights Are On, but Nobody's Home: Reflections on Latvia's Migration Policy

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Over the past year, immigration-related issues have become more prominent in public discourse. In autumn 2025, the Riga State City Municipality launched raids aimed at curbing irregular migration. In December of the same year, a parliamentary investigative committee was established to examine problems in national and European Union immigration rules and in the work of executive institutions that lead to the mass arrival of third-country nationals in the Republic of Latvia (the Parliamentary Investigative Committee, or PIC). The committee published its final report in spring 2026. Although it may be assumed that views favouring immigration restrictions currently dominate political discourse, the issue has nevertheless caused disagreements among various stakeholders. In August this year, the new Immigration Law was returned for reconsideration; it was promulgated on 1st of September and entered into force on 15th September. Disagreements among coalition partners over migration point to the challenge of balancing restrictive measures with the needs of the economy.

Prolonged indecision in migration policy

Indecision in migration policy is evident not only in disagreements among stakeholders, but also in the policymaking process itself. For example, on 1st of September, the new Immigration Law was promulgated, while a plan to restrict immigration was placed on the Cabinet's agenda on the very same day. It cannot be argued that there has been insufficient time to formulate policy and adopt legislation: the Ministry of the Interior's 2018 conceptual report on immigration policy already stated that a new Immigration Law was needed. The Saeima began reviewing the bill in 2021, and the new law was promulgated in September 2026 - eight years after the original report's recommendation. Alongside the Ministry of the Interior's assessments, the Ministry of Economics has produced medium and long-term labour-market forecasts (most recently in 2024) and drafted policy-planning documents on human capital development, which were never adopted. The ambition to develop a National Human Capital Development Strategy was outlined in the declaration of Krišjānis Kariņš's government[1]; as of August 2023, it was still in the development stage.[2] The

[1] Declaration on the Intended Activities of the Cabinet of Ministers Headed by Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš (2022). Available: https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/media/14490/download?attachment Paragraph No. 170

[2] Progress in the Implementation of Measures Included in the Government Action Plan (2023). Available: https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/media/16773/download?attachment Paragraph No. 170.1.

declaration of Evika Siliņa's government states that immigration policy must be aligned with economic growth.[3] A progress report on the implementation of the Siliņa government's action plan, dated May 20, 2026, notes that - in the context of human capital development - an agreement was reached on a governance model for adult education. This model is included in the Human Capital Development Action Plan for 2026–2027 (previously, this document was intended to cover the 2025 - 2027 period). The draft action plan was withdrawn and replaced by a report titled "On Unified Governance for Adult Education Support Measures for Human Capital Development." This report does not address immigration issues at all, thereby successfully avoiding the need to make decisions in this policy area. However, as elections approach, immigration policy has gained prominence in public discourse and on the political agenda - primarily with calls to reduce the number of arrivals - though no consensus has actually been reached on this issue either.

"We'll adopt it, but it doesn't mean anything"[4] was the Prime Minister's remark at the Cabinet meeting on 22nd September, during consideration of a report on implementing the recommendations included in the PIC report. A recurring pattern has long been evident in migration policy: restrictive measures are proposed on the basis of a particular political position, but fail to withstand criticism from businesses and other stakeholders. As a result, decisions are not adopted and no strategy emerges. One of the central findings of the State Audit Office's audit, "Is Latvia's Work Permit Issuance System Effective?", is that Latvia lacks a strategy for attracting foreign labour based on labour-market needs. Similarly to the issue raised by PROVIDUS in December 2025 regarding the lack of a consistent migration policy, the State Audit Office also points to the absence of clearly defined policy.

One of the most recent examples of this pattern is the PIC report on restricting immigration, considered by the Cabinet on 22 September. It lists 71 measures to restrict migration, including issues already addressed in the recently adopted Immigration Law, which entered into force on 15th September this year. Although migration is widely debated, there is currently no comprehensive, data-based assessment of the impact of newcomers on the economy. Such impacts have been assessed only to a limited extent and in a fragmented manner. The Ministry of Economics has acknowledged that no comprehensive assessment has been conducted.[5] The State Audit Office's report notes that Latvia's requirements for recruiting workers create circumstances in which workers are posted from other countries,

[3] Declaration on the Intended Activities of the Cabinet of Ministers Headed by Evika Siliņa, 15 September 2023 (2023). Available: https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/media/16704/download?attachment Paragraph No. 29
[4] Cabinet of Ministers meeting, 22 September 2026. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fL2B1Q0Lt4&list=PLxxK65h4EFyfkjleZFt6jWxJ6etHK3CgV&index=1 (1:47:26)
[5] Information provided by the Ministry of Economics at the request of PROVIDUS.

meaning the state does not collect approximately EUR 5 million in labour taxes. These factors point to a lack of coordination in policymaking, hindering the development of a long-term strategic vision for migration policy.

What changes does the new Immigration Law introduce?

As noted above, the President promulgated the new Immigration Law on 1st of September this year; it entered into force on 15th September. The Saeima began reviewing the law in 2021 and adopted it on 20th August this year. Overall, the law can be described as a modernisation that incorporates several EU-level regulations while introducing a stricter immigration framework.

Residence permits

The new Immigration Law replaces Latvia's national permanent residence permit (PRP) with EU long-term resident status. This may limit, for example, Ukrainian civilians' ability to obtain permanent residence status in Latvia, since the law stipulates that a PRP is not issued to people with temporary protection status - that is, Ukrainian civilians. In this context, a draft amendment to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians is relevant, as it would allow Ukrainian civilians to obtain a PRP. Other changes concerning PRPs apply to people with refugee status, who previously received a PRP upon being granted refugee status but will receive a temporary residence permit (TRP) after the new Immigration Law enters into force.

Temporary residence permits (TRPs) are issued in accordance with an established procedure. In Latvia, TRPs have mainly been issued to Ukrainian civilians, employees and students. After five years of continuous residence in Latvia, a foreign national who has sufficient means of subsistence and has obtained an A2 level of language proficiency may obtain a permanent residence permit (PRP).

Stricter immigration requirements

The new Immigration Law introduces stricter requirements both for sponsors whose invitations or calls are used to issue visas or TRPs and for people applying for a TRP. Companies' ability to invite foreign nationals is restricted: an invitation may be refused if the sponsor is a temporary-work agency that is an inactive taxpayer, was established within the previous six months, or has been found by the State Revenue Service (SRS) to have breached tax obligations. Specific restrictions also apply to employers inviting low-skilled workers (occupations in major group 9 of the occupational classification). The same criteria apply: the company is an inactive taxpayer, was established within the previous six months, or has been found by the SRS to have breached tax obligations.

Stricter conditions also apply to visa issuance. A visa may be refused where there are reasonable doubts about the authenticity of documents, identifiable risks to public health, or where a person has been sentenced for a criminal offence, or a foreign national has been punished for a war crime or for publicly using symbols glorifying totalitarian regimes. Additional restrictions apply to citizens of Russia and Belarus.

Stricter requirements also apply to higher education institutions inviting third-country nationals to study. If 30% or more of the foreign students invited by an institution received a refusal of a long-stay visa in the previous calendar year, the institution may face a three-year restriction. A TRP for study purposes may be refused if the student has not made sufficient academic progress, including cases involving expulsion, repeated enrolment in a programme without successfully completing it, and other circumstances. Higher education institutions must notify the border guard if a foreign student is absent from studies without a valid reason for three consecutive days and cannot be reached.

TRPs issued in connection with investment

A foreign national may receive a TRP for up to two years after investing EUR 50,000 in the share capital of a company employing no more than 50 people, or EUR 100,000 in a company employing more than 50 people. A TRP may also be obtained by investing in start-ups with growth potential or in an alternative investment fund. Unlike the previous Immigration Law, the new law removes the former TRP investment route based on investment in real estate. The issuance of TRPs in connection with investment became a subject of debate in summer 2026, when the bill was returned for reconsideration.

Integration requirements

The new law establishes integration requirements for foreign nationals. Once the total period covered by their TRPs reaches 18 months, they must complete an early integration programme covering Latvian history and culture, as well as Latvian-language learning at basic A1 level. The foreign national must pay for the programme. The Cabinet determines the content and scope of these measures.

Human capital versus migration rhetoric

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), in its 2025 report on Latvia, outlines labour-force indicators and challenges relating to labour availability. Key factors include labour shortages across different categories caused by an ageing population. The Ministry of Economics provides a more detailed forecast of Latvia's labour supply. In December 2025, PROVIDUS highlighted the Ministry's labour-market forecasts, which project medium and long-term demand for highly qualified professionals, while in practice the largest occupational groups receiving TRPs are lower-skilled. A closer

look at the Ministry's growth-target scenario indicates that the labour force would need to reach at least 900,000 people per year, while demographic trends will affect the labour market. Although the Ministry forecasts that Latvia's population could fall to 1.76 million[6] by 2040, a study by the Latvian Strategy and Economic Research Institute (hereinafter: LaSER) on Latvia's demographic situation outlines scenarios in which low immigration and low birth rates could lead to an ageing population and economic stagnation.[7] At the same time, the Ministry forecasts an increase in immigration, with net migration projected to become positive as early as 2027.[8] Migration trends, however, show a more nuanced picture: for example, the numbers of issued TRPs and PRPs.

Year	Total number of first-time TRPs issued in the year	TRPs issued to Ukrainian civilians	Share of first-time TRPs issued to Ukrainian civilians
2021	8,041	0	0%
2022	18,477	10,424	56%
2023	27,266	17,307	63%
2024	15,807	6,783	43%
2025	15,739	6,042	38%

Year	Total number of valid TRPs	Valid TRPs held by Ukrainian civilians	Share of valid TRPs held by Ukrainian civilians
2021	46,572	0	0%
2022	56,725	9,724	17%
2023	76,735	26,395	34%
2024	85,978	32,365	38%
2025	81,640	30,200	37%
Change since 2021	+35,068	+30,200	86%

Tables No. 1 and 2. Number of first-time issued and valid TRPs. Source: Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA).

have remained relatively stable (see Tables 1 and 2). Changes in the numbers since 2022 are primarily attributable to the reception of Ukrainian civilians. Both the Ministry of Economics'

[6] Ministry of Economics (2024). Informative Report on Medium- and Long-Term Labour Market Forecasts until 2040. Available: https://www.em.gov.lv/lv/media/20607/download?attachment
[7] Vārpiņa, Z. (2026). Latvija 2040. Demogrāfiskā realitāte un nākotnes scenāriji. Available: https://domnicalaser.lv/latvija-2040-demografiska-realitate-un-nakotnes-scenariji/
[8] Ministry of Economics (2024). Informative Report on Medium- and Long-Term Labour Market Forecasts until 2040. Available: https://www.em.gov.lv/lv/media/20607/download?attachment

labour-market forecasts and LaSER indicate that this increase is temporary.[9] Among valid TRPs, Ukrainian civilians have accounted for more than one-third over the past three years. A breakdown by TRP category shows that the largest number of permits has been issued to people under temporary protection - that is, Ukrainian civilians - followed by workers and students (see Figure 3).

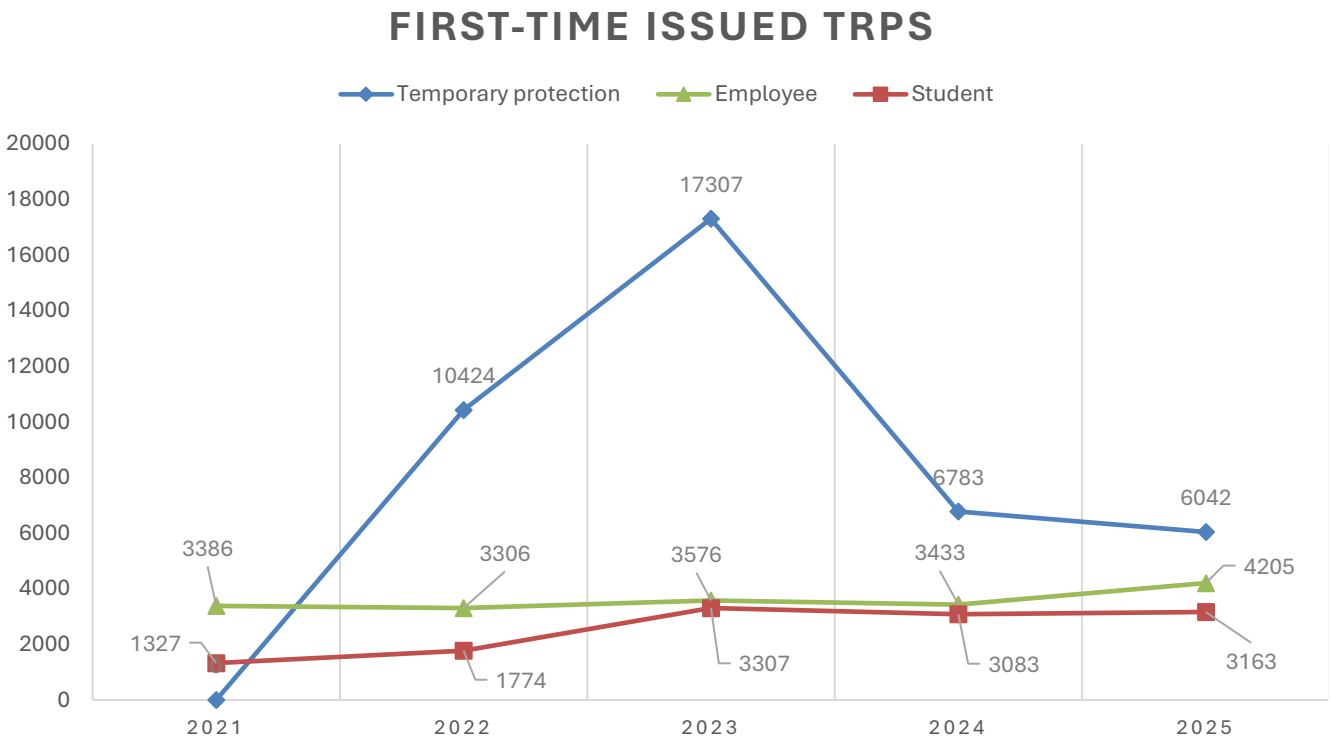


Chart No. 3. First-time issued TRPs, 2021-2025.Source: OCMA.

Among valid TRPs (Figure 4), the number in the 'worker' category has increased by 16% since 2021, while the 'student' category has grown by 38%; meanwhile, the 'real-estate investor' category has decreased by 61%. Figure 4 presents the most common types of valid TRPs. These data nevertheless indicate a shift in the structure of immigration, with a higher proportion of workers and students, alongside the unprecedented arrival of people from Ukraine since 2022. The data in Tables 1 and 2 clearly show that Ukrainian civilians account for most of the increase in arrivals.

[9] Vārpiņa, Z. (2026). Latvija 2040. Demogrāfiskā realitāte un nākotnes scenāriji. Available: https://domnicalaser.lv/latvija-2040-demografiska-realitate-un-nakotnes-scenariji/

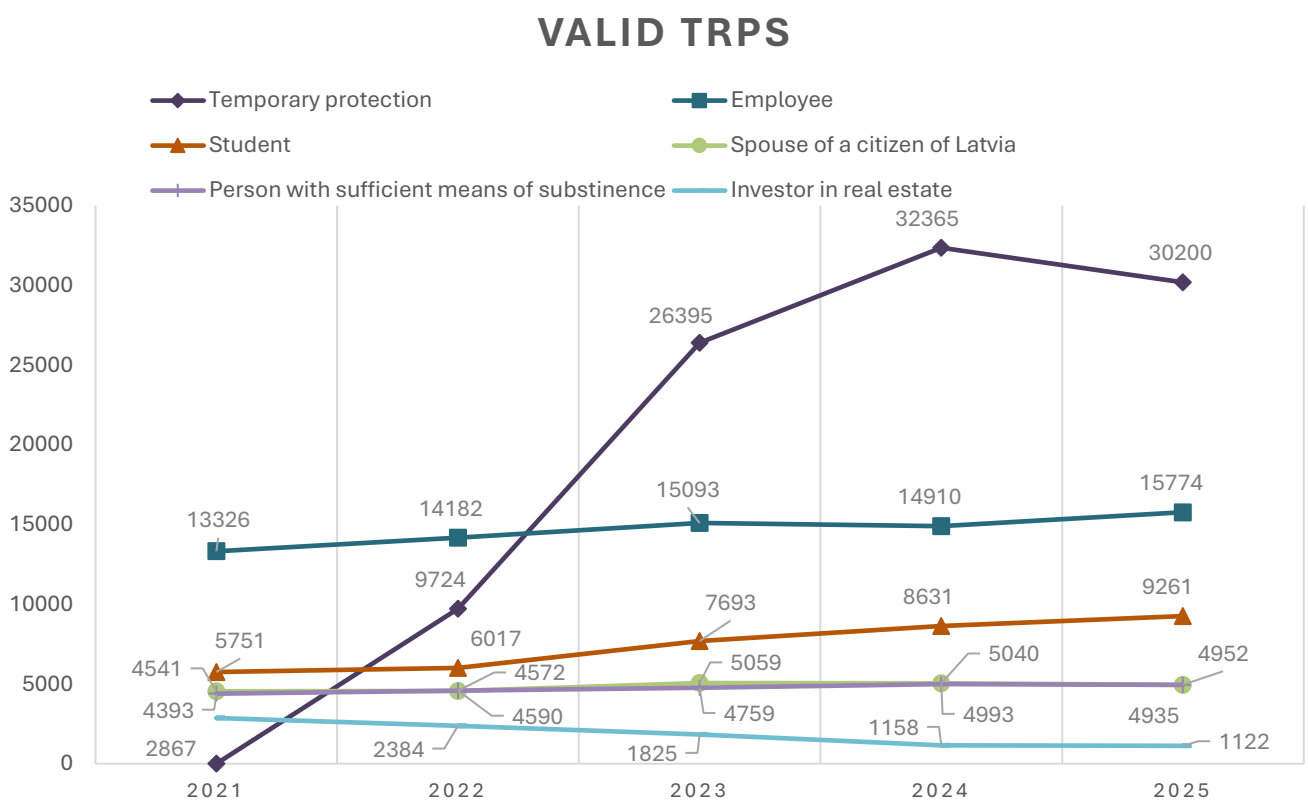


Chart No.4. Valid TRPs, 2021-2025. Source: OCMA

The number of valid permanent residence permits (PRPs) also points to structural changes. The number of permits in the categories of former Latvian citizens and non-citizens has decreased, while the number of EU long-term resident statuses has increased. This is linked to legislative amendments requiring some Russian citizens living in Latvia to renew their PRPs by obtaining EU long-term resident status and passing the state-language examination at A2 level. In addition, the number of people granted a PRP after five years of residence in Latvia has increased by 47%; this category accounts for 15% of all valid PRPs.[10] Obtaining a PRP requires continuous residence in the country and Latvian-language proficiency of at least A2 level.

[10] LETA (2025). Uzturēšanās tiesības Latvijā zaudējuši ap 500 Krievijas pilsoņi. Available: https://www.leta.lv/home/important/8C3EFC0B-6D71-4A4C-9304-8E15CA9DFC04/

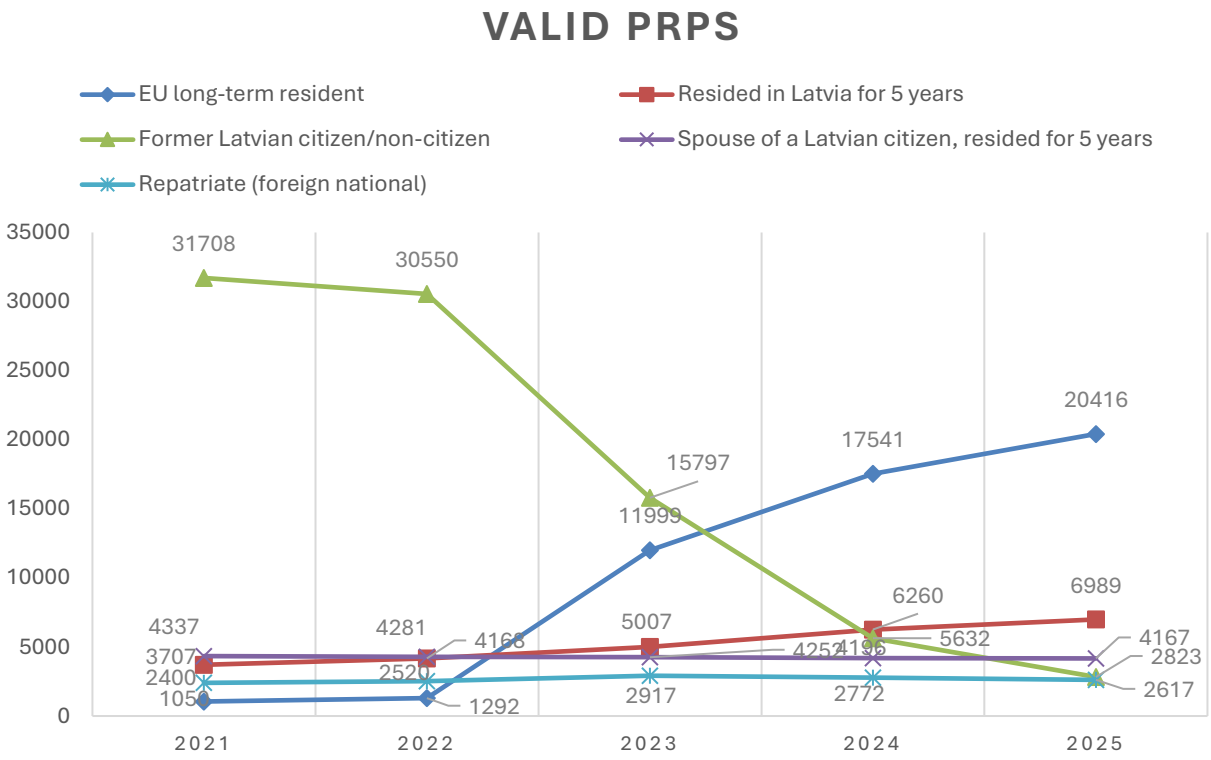


Chart No. 5. Valid Permanent Residence Permits (PRPs), 2021-2025. Source: OCMA.

What are political parties proposing?

During the pre-election period, migration-related issues have gained prominence. A number of political forces call for a migration policy described as strict, smart, intelligent, forward-looking, secure or by another favourable adjective, usually without clearly indicating what decisions in favour of or against immigration would actually entail. For this analysis, PROVIDUS compiled the short party programmes published on the Central Election Commission's website, on the assumption that shorter programmes highlight parties' priorities. Political parties' proposals on migration are primarily framed in terms of security, but economic considerations and the prevention of irregular migration are also prominent. There is some emphasis on attracting highly skilled workers.

Positions on migration policy in political party programmes[11]

Position	Political party	Rationale
Economic considerations	SV ; MMN; ZZS; AS; LPV; PRO	Establishing funds to meet different economic needs (funding study places for local students (SV); reviewing Wolt/Bolt to ensure taxes are paid in Latvia (SV); linking PRP issuance programmes to a fund promoting birth rates (LPV); issuing TRPs temporarily to qualified specialists unavailable in Latvia (MMN); prioritising skilled workers (ZZS); linking residence to employment and integration (AS); developing a forward-looking and secure migration policy to ensure dignified living conditions for people in Latvia and Europe (PRO).
Preventing irregular migration	MMN; ZZS; LPV; PRO	Greater involvement of the army and National Guard in border protection (MMN); a general commitment to prevent irregular migration (ZZS); an unprecedented fight against irregular migration (LPV); closing the eastern border to entry while allowing people to leave, and expanding immigration control (ASL); technological and physical security of the state border (PRO).

[11] Table of uses abbreviations based on party names in Latvian. They stand for following: Sovereign Power/Alliance of Young Latvians (SV); We Change the Rules (MMN); Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS); National Alliance (NA); United List (AS); Latvia First (LPV); New Unity (JV); New Conservative Party (JKP); Rising Sun for Latvia (ASL); The Progressives (PRO)

Comprehensive restrictions on immigration	SV; MMN; NA; Gobzems' List; ASL	Preventing the higher-education system from being used as a mechanism for importing cheap labour (SV); restricting third-country nationals' immigration (MMN); strict immigration rules, quotas for third-country nationals, preference for EU, NATO and OECD citizens in higher education, and opposition to EU decisions requiring Latvia to accept immigrants (NA); opposition to mass immigration and externally imposed migration quotas (Gobzems' List); encouraging third-country nationals to leave Latvia, stricter TRP issuance and foreign-student admission requirements, opposition to EU refugee quotas and other proposals that encourage immigration (ASL).
Integration requirements	AS; JKP	Linking residence permits to employment, integration and learning Latvian (AS); high integration requirements (JKP).

Chart No. 6. Political parties' proposals for shaping migration policy. Source: Central Election Commission (CVK).

What is the current reality?

Although nearly all stakeholders, from political parties to the Ministry of Economics, argue that Latvia needs to attract highly skilled workers, the data paint a different picture. Information from the State Employment Agency (SEA), the Ministry of Economics and the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) on labour-market imbalances points to

heavy-goods vehicle drivers (including those posted to provide services in other EU countries), construction workers and manufacturing workers as occupations experiencing the greatest shortages. However, OCMA data on employment rights granted in 2025 show that land and pipeline transport was by far the most common sector (9,604 permits), followed by labour recruitment and staffing (2,498), construction of residential and non-residential buildings (1,908), and specialised construction activities (1,036).[12]

OCMA data on occupations for which employment rights were granted in 2025 identify the following:

- Heavy goods vehicle driver (8,218)
- General labourer (2,596)
- Construction worker (1,719)
- Tractor-trailer truck driver (1,443)[13]

To employ third-country nationals in Latvia, the SEA issues opinions on their recruitment. As part of the procedure, employers must justify the need to recruit a third-country national by advertising the vacancy with the SEA, which checks whether local residents could fill the position. The SEA then decides whether to issue a positive opinion. In 2025, positive opinions for recruiting third-country nationals were most frequently requested for the following occupations:

- General labourer (8,091)
- Heavy goods vehicle driver (5,197)
- Construction worker (4,857)
- Factory worker (1,271)
- Tractor-trailer truck driver (1,245)[14]

These occupational data and the categories for which employers requested opinions reveal a **paradox** that PROVIDUS already highlighted in December 2025: **policy-planning documents and party programmes speak of immigration by highly skilled workers, while in practice Latvia attracts workers with medium or low skill levels**. The State Audit Office likewise notes that efforts to attract skilled workers do not correspond to actual labour-market demand.

[12] Meeting of the Saeima Citizenship, Migration and Social Cohesion Committee, May 20, 2026. Presentation by the State Employment Agency (SEA), the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) and the Ministry of Economics (EM). Available: https://titania.saeima.lv/livs/saeimasnotikumi.nsf/0/12C693AE68E578C8C2258DF70048EAF9?OpenDocument

[13] Ibidem

[14] Ibidem

Migration narratives

Raids aimed at eliminating irregular migration were launched by the Riga State City Municipality. Information on the results has been published only in fragments, mainly through statements by municipal officials. For example, in 2026, none of the meetings of the Riga City Council's Committee on Security, Order and Corruption Prevention addressed progress on the raids. Official communications about efforts to curb irregular migration have been contradictory. On the one hand, municipal and national officials have made statements about uncontrolled growth in migration, pressure on the capital from legal migration, and preventive measures to reduce criminal activity; at the same time, some stakeholders have concluded that legal migration is the greater issue. On the other hand, State Police Chief Armands Ruks said on the radio programme "Krustpunktā" that statistics show no overall increase in crime among newcomers.[15] In April 2026, the investigative journalism centre Re:Baltica also reported that newcomers in Latvia are suspected of crimes 2.4 times less often than Latvian citizens. At a 7th January meeting of the Parliamentary Investigative Committee examining problems in national and EU immigration regulation and in the work of executive institutions that lead to mass arrivals of third-country nationals in Latvia, OCMA chief Maira Roze stated that, by the end of 2025, the number of valid temporary and permanent residence permits held by third-country nationals - excluding Ukrainian civilians - had decreased since 2021.[16]

Public discourse on migration policy is dominated by narratives concerning crime, misuse of public resources and uncontrolled mass immigration. Particular attention is paid to irregular migration and asylum, making it important to examine the data. Figure 7 summarises asylum trends. The number of asylum applications has risen significantly since 2021, but the number of people granted refugee or alternative status has remained relatively low, especially when compared with overall migration figures such as the number of TRPs issued. People granted refugee or alternative status are among the smallest groups of newcomers by number. Between 1998 and 2025, fewer asylum applications were examined than the number of Ukrainian civilians received by Latvia in 2022.[17] In relation to immigration control and the legal basis for remaining in the country, data compiled by the magazine *Ir*

[15] Latvian Radio (2026). Krustpunktā: Interview with Chief of the State Police Armands Ruks. Available: https://lr1.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/krustpunkta/krustpunkta-izvaicajam-valsts-policijas-prieksnieku-armandu-ruku.a222266/ (31:00)

[16] Meeting of the Parliamentary Investigative Committee on Problems in National and European Union Immigration Regulatory framework and in the Work of Executive Institutions That Cause Mass Immigration of Third-Country Nationals into the Republic of Latvia, January 7, 2026. Available: https://video.saeima.lv/saeima.lv/20260107155301_saeima.lv.4_0 (05:00)

[17] Between 1998 and 2025, a total of 7,855 asylum applications were submitted. Source: OCMA (2026). Asylum Seekers. Available: https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/patveruma-mekletaju-statistika

show that, of 62,807 third-country nationals checked last year, expulsion proceedings were initiated against 47.[18]

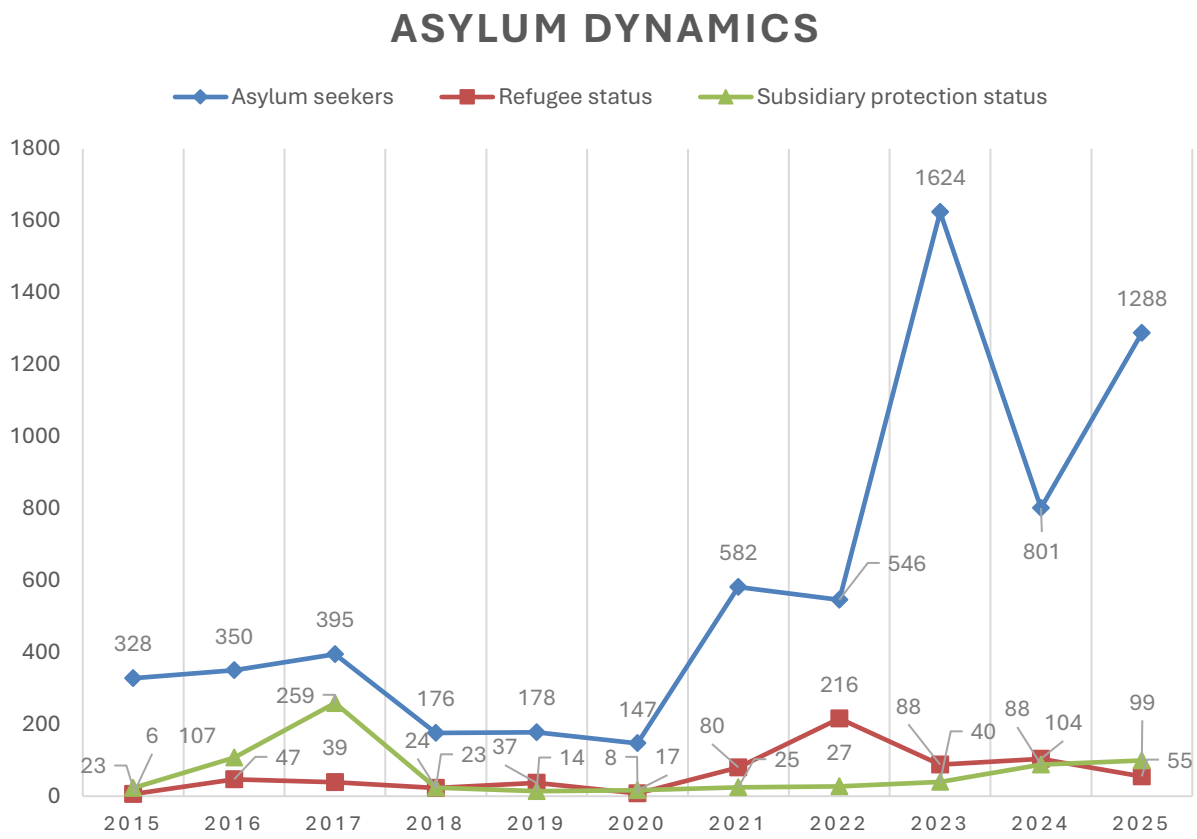


Chart No. 7. Asylum dynamics. Source: Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA)

As noted above, the role of newcomers in economic development has received less assessment and discussion. In an assessment published by the Ministry of Economics in May this year on the impact of Ukrainian civilians on Latvia's economy, the Ministry stated that their integration has partly alleviated labour shortages and contributed to the state budget. Their economic activity has had a positive effect on Latvia's GDP, generating an estimated EUR 350–360 million in added value.[19] In addition, the LaSER estimates that exports of higher-education services contributed EUR 385.2 million to Latvia's economy in

[18] *Ir* Magazine (2026). Mass Migration in Latvia: Politicians' Rhetoric vs. the Facts. Available: https://ir.lv/rubrika/tema/masu-migracija-latvija-politiku-retorika-pret-faktiem.222098

[19] Information provided by the Ministry of Economics at the request of PROVIDUS.

2024.[20] At the Cabinet meeting on September 22nd, the Minister of the Interior also noted that the PIC report represents, first, an initial attempt to shape immigration policy and, second, that preparing a comprehensive planning document and strategy may take time.[21]

Current political discourse on migration is, to some extent, the result of prolonged indecision in this policy area. The Ministry of Economics' proposed Human Capital Development Strategy is just one example of chronic lack of coordination, cooperation and communication among stakeholders. In the absence of a consistent vision, generalisations have largely filled the vacuum in migration policy. As elections approach, discourse is dominated by migration control, security and the selective attraction of highly skilled workers. Yet the data indicate that newcomers are mainly employed in medium and low-skilled occupations, have a positive fiscal impact, and have not contributed to an increase in crime rates among newcomers. Furthermore, none of the stages discussed above presents a clear vision for newcomers' integration. Thus, it is unclear not only what the long-term objective of migration policy is - or whether one exists at all - but also what is expected of newcomers in terms of their long-term integration into Latvian society.

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[20] Auers, D., Kraulis, I., Spuriņš, U. (2025). Ārvalstu studenti Latvijā: izaugsmes avots? Avaliable: https://domnicalaser.lv/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/LASER_202502_Web.pdf

[21] Meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers, September 22, 2026. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fL2B1Q0Lt4&list=PLxxK65h4EFyfkjleZFt6jWxJ6etHK3CgV&index=1 (1:33:00)