



Freedom in the World 2018

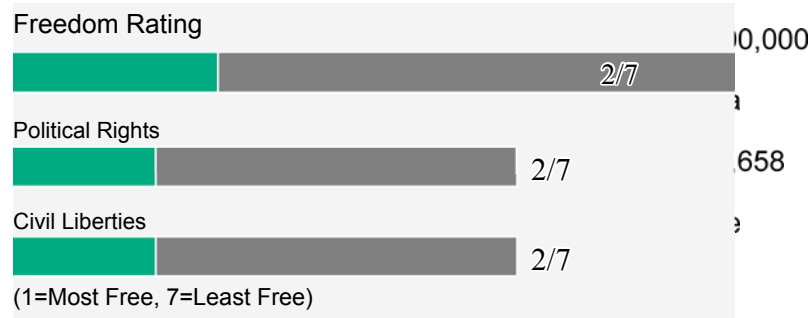
Latvia Profile

FREEDOM STATUS:
FREE



Freedom in the World
Scores

Quick Facts



Aggregate Score: 87/100 (0=Least Free, 100=Most Free)

Overview:



Latvia has successfully developed into a democracy since regaining independence in 1991. Elections are regarded as free and fair, and political and civil rights are generally respected in practice. However, Latvia is troubled by corruption and high income inequality, and a relatively high homicide rate.

Ratings Change:

Latvia's political rights rating declined from 1 to 2 due to the government's weak response to the "Oligarch Talks" scandal, which revealed the extent to which recent legal improvements have failed to loosen the grip of powerful businessmen on the political arena.

Key Developments in 2017:

- In June, transcripts of secretly recorded talks between politically powerful businessmen revealed the extent of their influence over Latvian media, business, and politics, shaking public confidence in state institutions.
- In June's local elections, an alliance between Harmony Center and the Honor to Serve Riga (GKR) party won a plurality of votes the capital. However, the results also indicated declining

support for Harmony Center, which seeks to represent the interests of Latvia's ethnic Russians.



- A proposal to reduce school instruction in languages other than Latvian sparked protests.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS:

35 / 40 (-1)

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 12 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

4 / 4

The parliament elects the president in a secret-ballot vote, and the president may serve up to two four-year terms. The prime minister is nominated by the president and approved by the parliament. Both the 2016 parliamentary confirmation of current prime minister, Māris Kučinskis of the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), and the 2015 election of president Raimonds Vējonis, former ZZS leader, took place according to legal requirements.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4



The Latvian constitution provides for a unicameral, 100-seat parliament (Saeima), whose members are elected to four-year terms. The 2014 parliamentary elections were viewed as competitive and credible, and stakeholders accepted the results. The polls saw a victory by the ruling conservative coalition, which is comprised of the Unity party, ZZS, and the nationalist National Alliance, which together took 58 percent of the vote. Harmony Center, which represents the interests of Latvia's ethnic Russians took 23 percent of the vote—won more votes than any other single party.

Elections to local councils took place in June 2017. Turnout was low, at just over 50 percent. The polls brought little change to the composition of municipalities' councils. An alliance between Harmony Center and the Honor to Serve Riga (GKR) party won a plurality of votes in Riga, the capital, but the results indicated declining support for Harmony Center.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

In general, the electoral legal framework is implemented fairly by the Central Election Commission (CEC) and regional and local election administrations.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 14 / 16 (–1)



B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

4 / 4

Latvia's political parties organize and compete freely. However, Latvian political candidates cannot run as independents, and those who belonged to communist or pro-Soviet organizations after 1991 may not hold public office. Parliamentary elections usually result in the entry of new political parties to the Saeima.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

Opposition parties compete freely and have a realistic chance of increasing power through elections. However, Harmony Center and its predecessors, mostly supported by Latvia's Russian-speaking population, have never been invited to participate in a coalition government.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 3 / 4 (–1)

In the summer of 2017, the political scene was shaken by the release of transcripts of talks between so-called oligarchs

Aivars Lembergs, mayor of Ventspils, and Ainārs Šlesers, former transportation minister, and their associates in 2009–11. The conversations—which were apparently recorded by Latvia’s Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) and leaked to the Latvian weekly magazine *Ir*, which released them—included discussions on their efforts to replace the general prosecutor and other officials, influence media outlets, and influence strategic Latvian companies, and some of the plans discussed were ultimately realized. Key political figures failed to respond meaningfully to the revelations. KNAB opened an investigation in response to the disclosures, but at year’s end had not issued related charges. A previous, long-running KNAB investigation against Lembergs and Šlesers had been closed in 2016. The lack of a powerful institutional response to the latest revelations of oligarchs’ influence over Latvian politics prompted protests, and undermined public confidence in the government.

Authorities and other observers continue to express concern about the presence of disinformation and Russian propaganda in Latvian media.

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 because the “Oligarch Talks” scandal revealed the extent to which oligarchic figures influence Latvia’s politics.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4

Approximately 240,000 of Latvia's registered residents are stateless persons, most of whom are ethnic Russians. They may not vote, hold public office, work in government offices, or establish political parties. Children of noncitizens born after August 1991 can gain Latvian citizenship if they reside in Latvia permanently and have never acquired citizenship in another state. Lawmakers in September 2017 rejected legislation that would have granted citizenship to Latvian-born children automatically.



Women hold 19 percent of seats in the Saeima and few senior-level political posts. Latvia has no gender equality law, though the government has undertaken some initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, and there are some associated protections in the country's labor laws.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 9 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 3 / 4

While elections are held on time and elected representative duly seated, Latvian governments are frequently fragmented and short-lived. Although the government is generally capable of developing and implementing policies, oligarchs have tended to exploit the fragility of government coalitions to influence its decisions.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 3 / 4

In recent years, the Latvian government has taken efforts to fight corruption and money laundering. Its admission to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2016 has raised international credibility. However, the investigative and auditing bodies have not been very successful so far in taming the corrupt behavior of politicians, due in part to institutions' inability to consolidate power within their own fields of competence



C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 3 / 4

The legislative framework for ensuring openness and transparency of the government is extensive. However, there is a notable lack of transparency in functioning of state companies, and in public procurement processes.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 52 / 60 (+1)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 15 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 3 / 4

While Latvian media outlets publicize a wide range of political views in both Latvian and Russian, government offices and courts sometimes interfere with media outlets' and reporters' work. The "Oligarch Talks" recordings released in 2017 revealed influence on Latvian media by Lembergs, who used

his influence to persuade government-controlled enterprises to purchase advertising space in the *Neatkarīga Rita Avīze* daily newspaper, which he controlled, and by Šlesers, who took over the liberal *Diena* daily newspaper and replaced the staff with journalists sympathetic to his now-defunct political party. In the tapes, the men expressed annoyance at radio journalists at the public broadcaster, whom they were apparently unable to influence.

Libel remains a criminal offense. Financial pressures have prompted changes in ownership or in senior editorial staff at numerous media outlets in recent years.

Authorities have occasionally restricted Russian radio and news websites, citing concerns about propaganda.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 4 / 4

Freedom of religion is generally respected. However, in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis, social pressure on the country's roughly 1,000 Muslims has increased.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 4 / 4

Academic freedom is generally respected. However, a number of potentially restrictive laws are on the books. In 2015, parliament adopted a law mandating that schools provide children a “moral education” that coincides with the values of the constitution, including traditional views of marriage and family life. A law that came into effect in January 2017 enabled the firing of teachers found to be “disloyal to the

state.” In addition, the government continued to voice an intention to reduce school instruction in languages other than Latvian, measures that would affect the country’s minority schools.



D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4 / 4

Private discussion is open and free. The public display of Soviet and Nazi symbols is banned.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 12 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is protected by law and generally respected in practice. A number of protests and demonstrations took place in 2017, including events opposing proposals to make most school curriculum Latvian-language, and to express dismay about corruption following the release of the “Oligarch Talks” transcripts.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 4 / 4

The government does not restrict the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). However, advocacy by NGOs is increasingly viewed as partisan activity.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 4 / 4

Workers may establish trade unions, strike, and engage in collective bargaining.

F. RULE OF LAW: 12 / 16**F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4**

While judicial independence is generally respected, inefficiency, politicization, and corruption within the judicial system continue to be problems. According to European Union (EU) polling, only about half of respondents from among the general public and companies agree that the courts in Latvia are independent.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 3 / 4

The legal system is widely considered corrupt and ineffective; according to EU polling, more people tend not to trust it than to trust it. By law, legal aid must be provided to people who cannot retain their own, but this is inconsistently enforced. Suspects are sometimes interrogated without the presence of a lawyer. Lengthy pretrial detention remains a concern. The justice system is overburdened and almost half of all criminal cases being investigated by the state police are over five years old.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

Latvia has one of the highest prison population rates in the EU. Prisons continue to suffer from overcrowding, and abuses of detainees and prisoners by law enforcement agents has been reported.



The rate of intentional homicides in Latvia is among the highest in the EU.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 3 / 4

Latvian laws do not offer specific protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (except in employment) or gender identity. Women often face employment and wage discrimination. Members of the country's Roma minority face discrimination in schools and workplaces. Unemployment is higher among ethnic Russians than ethnic Latvians.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 13 / 16 (+1)

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

Citizens and noncitizens may travel freely within the country and internationally.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4 / 4

Years of reform efforts have created an environment in which people may freely establish businesses and own property, though corruption can impede business activities.



Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because there are no significant impediments on people's ability to own property or engage in commercial activity.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

Domestic violence is not frequently reported, and police do not always take meaningful action when it is. Same-sex marriage was banned in 2005, and Latvia is one of six remaining countries in the EU that does not recognize same-sex partnerships.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Around 28 percent of Latvia's population was at risk of social exclusion or poverty in 2016, according to EU statistics. The shadow economy is extensive, and informal workers are vulnerable to labor abuses and being drawn into criminal operations. Under labor laws approved in July 2017, the monthly minimum wage will increase by €50 (\$57), to €430 (\$490), in 2018.

Men, women, and children continue to fall victim to human traffickers, who tend to transport them to other European

countries for forced labor or servitude. The government has increased efforts to provide services to victims of human trafficking, but victim services remain inadequate. A lack of awareness of human trafficking hampers the government's ability to respond to the problem.

**Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)****X = Score Received****Y = Best Possible Score****Z = Change from Previous Year****Full Methodology**

Sign up for our newsletter

SIGN UP

Follow us

[Subscribe](#) [Donate](#) [Events](#) [Contact Us](#) [Careers](#) [Privacy Policy](#)

© 2018 Freedom House