



Latvia is a comparatively small country in north-eastern Europe, whose present population is 2.2 million, inhabiting a land area of 65 thousand km<sup>2</sup>.

# THE PEOPLE OF LATVIA

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## Latvia: country and society

Latvia is one of the few countries whose population was larger 20 years ago, and even 100 years ago, than it is today. This is the effect of two world wars, deportations, emigration and a demographic crisis.

A majority (two thirds) of the population is concentrated in the cities, especially in the capital, Rīga, which is home to one third of the inhabitants. The rural population is mostly scattered on family farms, conforming to the historical pattern of individual farmsteads dispersed in the landscape, and in many cases quite isolated. Characteristically, in Latvia each farm has a name, in many cases a historic one.

This historical pattern of dispersed settlement reveals the origin of particular Latvian character traits: reserve, self-reliance, independence and persistence.

### The population of Latvia's cities, 2009 (thousands).

Rīga	713
Daugavpils	104
Liepāja	84
Jelgava	65
Jūrmala	55
Ventspils	42
Rēzekne	35
Valmiera	27

## Ethnic composition

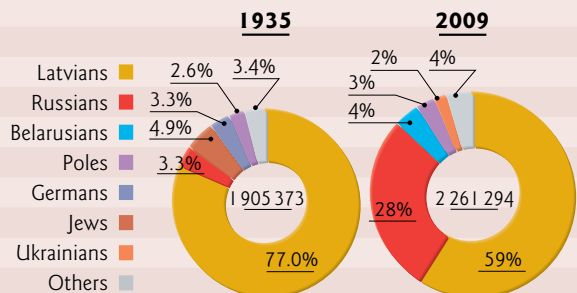
As in many parts of Eastern Europe, so too in Latvia, **ethnic consciousness is very pronounced**, sometimes even predominating over national or religious consciousness. This emerged from centuries of rule by the German nobility, when all Latvians were peasants and servants. Soviet oppression reinforced Latvian ethnic consciousness, since Latvians tend to contrast themselves with Soviet state and the large body of ethnic Russian immigrants who arrived during the Soviet era.

**Major changes in the composition of the population occurred during and after the Second World War.** Almost all Baltic Germans left Latvia at the outbreak of war. In 1941, the occupying Soviet authorities began mass deportations of people to Siberia. The subsequent Nazi German invasion brought virtual annihilation of the Jewish population, and the slaughter of the majority of the Roma. At the close of the war, several hundred thousand people fled from Latvia in fear of renewed Communist oppression and eventually found refuge in various countries around the globe: the USA, Canada, Australia, Germany, Sweden, etc. When the Soviet Army invaded Latvia again in 1944–45, the Communists resumed repression against the local population, culminating in 1949, when 45 thousand of the most prosperous farmers were deported to Siberia in a single day. To replace the depleted workforce and change the country's

ethnic composition, **Moscow organised the migration of many hundreds of thousands of Russians into Latvia. During the years of Soviet occupation, a total of at least 1.5 million immigrants arrived in Latvia, half of whom stayed to live.** Latvia's Russian population increased fivefold, while at the same time the Latvian population did not even regain its pre-war level.

The Soviet occupation changed Latvia's ethnic composition significantly: the proportion of ethnic Latvians fell from 80% before the WWII to 52% in 1989, and has increased to 59% in 2010. The proportion of Russians grew from under 9% before the WWII to 30% in 1989. The majority of Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles and Jews speak Russian, while the Lithuanians, Estonians and Roma are for the most part Latvian-speakers.

### The ethnic composition of Latvia (present-day borders)



When Latvia regained its independence, **a principle of inherited citizenship was applied**: all those who had been citizens of the Republic of Latvia in 1940, before the Soviet occupation, automatically regained Latvian citizenship, and it was bestowed automatically on all the direct descendants of the citizens. The people automatically granted Latvian citizenship also included hundreds of thousands of people from the minorities – Russians, Poles, Belarusians, Jews and others. The remainder of the population, i.e. those who had arrived in Latvia in recent decades and their descendants, were offered a choice of either applying for citizenship from their country of origin or becoming permanent residents of Latvia without Latvian citizenship ('non-citizens'). A small section chose the former option, and at present Latvia is home to 50 thousand foreign citizens, mainly Russian nationals. Most, however, chose the second option, which also envisages the possibility of naturalisation. This process is open to anyone who has lived in Latvia for at least five years and passes a test in knowledge of Latvian language and history. During the past decade, more than 100 thousand people have chosen to become naturalised as Latvian citizens, and Latvia currently has one of the highest rates of naturalisation among EU countries.

## The Latvians

### History

More than four thousand years ago, the area of present-day Latvia was settled by Finno-Ugric groups, and soon after the Proto-Baltic groups also arrived. A thousand years ago, the area of present-day Latvia was populated by four Baltic groups: the Latgallians, Selonians, Semigallians and Couronians, along with a Finno-Ugric group – the Livs. The Latvian people emerged later, through the consolidation of these five groups.

The area populated by the Latvians was conquered in the 13th century by German crusaders, who later established the Livonian Confederation. Latvia also came under Swedish and Polish rule, and in the 18th century it was gradually incorporated into the Russian Empire. On 18 November in 1918 the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed and within a year German and Russian forces were defeated, leading to Latvia's international recognition.

**In 1939, Hitler and Stalin, agreed that Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Finland would belong to Moscow's zone of influence, while Berlin would have control over most of Poland.** The two criminal regimes were quick to implement their pact: in September Germany and the USSR occupied Poland. Moscow immediately requested that Finland and the Baltic States agree to the establishment of Soviet military bases on their soil. The Baltic States complied, while Finland refused, and was attacked by the Red Army. After the Soviet forces invasion of the Baltic States in June 1940, Moscow annexed the three independent states to the USSR. Moscow established complete control over Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, and Communist terror began. The Nazi German occupation followed a year later. In 1944–1945, the Soviet forces reoccupied the Baltic States. Latvia regained its independence in 1990–1991, and in 2004 was accepted into the EU and NATO.

### Language

Latvian belongs to the Indo-European language family, and together with Lithuanian forms the Baltic language group, related to, but separate from the Slavic and Germanic languages. The Latvian language, like Lithuanian, retains **many elements of proto-Indo-European** both in terms of vocabulary and grammar.

**The total number of Latvian speakers slightly exceeds 2 million, and for 1.4 million of them it is their native language.** Following the restoration of independence, Latvian has been able to re-establish itself in all fields of life, including public administration, the armed forces and the police. 73.5% of the country's school pupils attend schools where Latvian is the language of instruction.

## The characteristics of the average Latvian

**Most Latvians belong to two North European physical types: Western Baltic and Eastern Baltic**, the first of which is distinguished by taller stature, the latter being distinguished by a more rounded face. Approximately two thirds of Latvians have light hair and grey, bluish or greenish eyes, the rest being of darker complexion, generally with brownish hair and eyes. However, in terms of physical features, Latvians would be very hard to distinguish from Estonians, Lithuanians, Swedes, Belarusians or the Russians living in adjacent areas. On the other hand, Latvian behaviour and mentality, and the sound of the language, all permit them to be distinguished quite clearly from people belonging to other ethnic groups.

Today, classical ethnographic differences in terms of dress, tools, vernacular architecture, cuisine and folklore have all but disappeared. On the other hand, certain distinctive traits have been retained. Thus, Latvians tend to make and wear more knitted garments than other peoples, especially gloves, caps and jumpers. Latvians tend to adorn themselves with few ornaments, and silver may be more widely worn than gold. The distinctive braided „Namejs” ring is worn as a Latvian ethnic marker. Women less commonly wear bright cosmetics, and in dress, too, Latvians favour restraint in colour and form. Dominant among colour tones are light, natural browns and greys, and Latvians rarely wear bright red, particularly in combination with light blue. Interestingly, in contrast to the Estonians and Lithuanians, the Latvians tend not to paint the traditional wooden buildings of their farmsteads, so the Latvian rural landscape is dominated by the grey colour of old wooden buildings.



Examples of Latvian Language Writing



**Latvians are extremely fond of flowers, which are given very commonly and are still the best mark of attention, being given not only to women, but sometimes also to men.** Tastes in flowers may vary, but there are some unwritten rules here as well. Thus, even numbers of flowers are usually placed at the grave, so for other occasions odd numbers tend to be given – three, five, seven or nine flowers.

**In addition to traditional birthdays, Latvians also mark a 'secondary' birthday – the namesday.** Each calendar day is devoted to one or more personal names, and on this day Latvians usually receive greetings and flowers, and guests may come without being specially invited. The most popular Latvian name is Jānis, followed by the male names Andris, Juris, Edgars,

### The commonest Latvian personal names and surnames

	Male names	Female names	Surnames
1	Jānis	Anna	Bērziņš
2	Andris	Marija	Kalniņš
3	Juris	Kristīne	Ozoliņš
4	Edgars	Inese	Jansons
5	Māris	Inga	Ozols
6	Aivars	Ilze	Liepiņš
7	Mārtiņš	Līga	Krūmiņš
8	Pēteris	Dace	Balodis
9	Ivars	Anita	Ēglītis
10	Kaspars	Ieva	Zariņš
11	Aigars	Iveta	Pētersons
12	Valdis	Diāna	Vītols
13	Uldis	Sandra	Kļaviņš
14	Kārlis	Aija	Kārklīš
15	Aleksandrs	Rita	Vanags

### The Latvian Song and Dance Festival

Latvians might be viewed as sceptical and rational, and dislike being rushed into any decision. **Among Latvians, there are more individualists who tend to rely solely on their own abilities, and fewer people willing to take risks.**



### Ligo Day (The Summer Solstice)

Traditional Latvian cuisine includes a variety of foods also found among the Germanic and Slavic peoples. Latvians attach considerable importance to traditional rye bread, especially of the

Māris and Aivars, while the most popular women's names are Anna, Kristīne, Marija, Inese, Inga and Ilze.

About half of all Latvian surnames are of Latvian origin. Most surnames refer to particular objects: thus, Bērziņš (Birch), Kalniņš (Hill), Ozoliņš (Oak) etc. Latgale has the greatest number of Latvians with Russian and Polish names, while German names occur most widely in Kurzeme.

In terms of behaviour, we may regard vociferous argument and discussion, with animated gesturing as uncharacteristic of Latvians. Much more commonly, **Latvians tend to be somewhat reserved and perhaps even uncommunicative. Any kind of fanaticism or exaggerated show of emotion is rare among Latvians.** Instead,

home-baked kind, also favouring so-called 'sweet-sour' bread. **In a relatively large number of Latvian families, pies, apple tarts and cheesecakes are still baked,** but today very few people still brew their own beer or make their own wine. Recent years have seen significant changes in the pattern of consumption of alcohol: the consumption of vodka and other strong alcohol has fallen rapidly, while beer and wine consumption is on the increase. Country people often tap birch sap in April, drinking it fresh or else fermenting it for the summer. Elder-generation Latvians spend a great deal of time in their fruit and vegetable plots, preparing stocks for the winter: jams and fruit juices, as well as marinated and pickled vegetables, particularly cucumbers and sauerkraut. **Wild mushroom and berry picking still attracts all generations of Latvians.** From July to September, many Latvians make trips to the forest to pick mushrooms and berries, even if they don't have the time to prepare them for the winter.

Latvians who take an interest in their cultural heritage **attach considerable importance to folksongs (dainas), usually sung by choirs, and to folk costumes. The song festivals combine both, regularly bringing together many tens of thousands of choristers and large audiences.** The traditional Latvian folk costumes that were widely worn up to the 19th century are preserved in museums, with hundreds of local variants. Many Latvians like having their own folk costume, which, however, they tend to wear only very rarely, on special occasions, such as the song festivals, the Midsummer celebrations or Jāņi, or when performing in choirs or dance ensembles.

The folksong has retained its everyday role to a greater degree. Although the number and variety of songs is not as rich as that recorded by folk song collectors in the 19th century, even in the present day, many Latvians belong to choirs. Also popular are songs of more recent origin: ballads that date back about a century, and very recent works by popular composers such as Imants Kalniņš and Raimonds Pauls. **Latvians are very fond of theatre, so that theatre attendance figures are comparable with the figures for cinema attendance.**

**Latvians are very tolerant of various religious denominations: in some cases, congregations from two or even three denominations make use of a single church, and Latvians have difficulty understanding the character of religious conflict elsewhere in Europe.** The majority of Latvians (70%) have traditionally been Lutheran, while 22% were Roman Catholics, concentrated mainly in Latgale. At the present day, the majority of Latvians are no longer affiliated with any particular denomination, and even among those who regard themselves as religious, most do not actually attend church regularly. Among those who belong to a congregation, the numbers of Lutherans and Catholics are approximately equal, with a smaller number of people belonging to other denominations, including the new 'non-traditional religions'. **Also worthy of mention is the religion dievturība, developed in the early 20th century, based on the traditional dainas and on the idea of re-establishing the pre-Christian ethnic religion of the ancient Latvians.**

**The most commonly celebrated festivals: Christmas, Easter, Jāņi (Midsummer) and New Year's Eve.** Jāņi, marked on the eve of 24 June, deserves particular mention. The majority of Latvians travel out to the country for this festival: a bonfire is lit at dusk on a hilltop, ideally where there are oak trees around. People flying over Latvia on Jāņi Eve probably enjoy a very impressive spectacle, since the whole country is dotted with hundreds and thousands of bonfires. In advance of the festival, special Jāņi foods – cheese with caraway seed and bacon pies – are prepared, and beer is provided. Girls make themselves garlands of wild flowers, while the lads have wreaths of oak leaves. Although the singing of traditional Jāņi songs is increasingly being replaced by recorded music and stage performances, it seems that practically every Latvian knows at least a few Jāņi songs with the characteristic līgo refrain. Those Jāņi merrymakers with sufficient endurance stay up for the dawn of Jāņi Day, having spent most of the night singing and dancing, while amorous couples go in search of the mystical 'fern blossom'.

## Ethnic minorities in Latvia

### The Russians.

The first centres of Russian habitation developed in Latvia 300 years ago, when hundreds of Old Believers from neighbouring areas of Russia sought refuge in Latvia from persecution in Tsarist Russia. Today, most of Latvia's Russian population consists of immigrants who arrived during the Soviet occupation, or their descendants. Russian is the most widespread minority language in Latvia, and is also the most widely used foreign language.

**The Jews and Roma**, or Gypsies, have lived in Latvia since the 16th century. Both ethnic groups suffered atrociously during the WWII. The largest numbers of Jews migrated to Latvia in the late 19th century from Russia. By the 20th century they numbered 142 thousand, or more than 7% of Latvia's total population.

Many Jews were exiled to Siberia during the first year of Soviet occupation in 1940. After Nazi Germany invaded Latvia, they ruthlessly wiped out virtually all those who had remained. Only 14 thousand Jews returned to Latvia after the war, and by 1970 the Jewish population had reached 37 thousand. Today the Jewish population numbers around 10 thousand.

The roots of the Polish minority in Latvia stretch right back to the late 16th century, when the lands populated by the Latvians came under the control of the King of Poland. The Poles played a particularly significant role in Latgale, where the majority of estate owners and priests were Polish. During the past century, Latvia's Polish population was around 60 thousand, representing 2–3% of the population. Five towns and cities in Latvia have state schools that teach in Polish.

**The Belarusians and Ukrainians** constitute Latvia's second and third largest ethnic minorities. Belarusians mostly live in south-eastern Latvia. Before WWII, the Belarusian population fluctuated in the range of 27–37 thousand. In the Soviet years, Latvia's Belarusian population grew substantially, due to massive immigration from Belarus, reaching 120 thousand by 1989. Today, there are about 80 thousand Belarusians.

Latvia's present Ukrainian population numbers 60 thousand, but most were born in Ukraine and arrived in Latvia in recent decades during the Soviet period. In Latvia, about 25 thousand people speak Ukrainian. In Riga there is a Ukrainian secondary school: the graduates are equally fluent in Ukrainian, Latvian and Russian.

### Ethnic, linguistic and national identification of Latvia's residents.

Identity	Ethnicity in documents	Ethnic self-affiliation	Native language	Language		Citizenship	Country of birth
				Language skills	of instruction at schools		
Latvian/Latvia	59.4%	60.3%	58.2%	79.0%	73.5%	82.5%	81.5%
Russian/Russia	27.6%	28.4%	37.5%	81.2%	25.8%	1.4%	9.6%
Belarusian/Belarus	3.6%	3.6%	0.8%	2.0%	0.0%	0.1%	3.2%
Ukrainian/Ukraine	2.5%	2.2%	0.7%	1.5%	0.2%	0.2%	2.2%
Polish/Poland	2.3%	2.3%	0.6%	1.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%
Lithuania/Lithuania	1.4%	1.3%	0.6%	1.0%	0.1%	0.2%	1.2%
Jewish/Israel	0.4%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Gypsy or Roma	0.4%	0.4%	0.2%	0.4%	0.0%	x	x
German/Germany	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	7.6%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
Estonian/Estonia	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%
Others	2.1%	0.9%	1.3%	1.3%	0.0%	15.3%	1.9%
Total	100%	100%	100%		100%	100%	100%

The first Roma people arrived in Latvia 500 years ago from Germany and Poland. In German-occupied Latvia the Roma were subjected to terror: about two thousand Roma were slaughtered. In the post-war years the Roma population grew rapidly, and is now approaching nine thousand.

**The Lithuanians and Estonians.** The neighbouring Lithuanians and Estonians share a similar history with Latvians. Of all minority groups, Lithuanians and Estonians are most completely integrated into Latvian society. Around 30 thousand residents of Latvia identified themselves as Lithuanians. Latvia's Estonian population grew in the late 19th century, reaching ten thousand, but presently numbers less than three thousand.

**The Germans and Poles.** German merchants and raiders arrived in Latvia almost a thousand years ago and by the 13th century the country was conquered by German crusaders. The Germans represented the ruling stratum, retaining control of property and power up to the early 20th century. By 1940, most Germans left and were re-settled, mainly in the areas taken away from Poland. After Latvia's forcible incorporation into the Soviet Union, the remaining 10 thousand Germans also left.

**The Livs, or Livonians are thought to be descended from the ancient Finno-Ugric inhabitants, and are Latvia's only indigenous minority: their ancestors have lived in Latvia at least as long as the Balts.** Before the WWII, the Livs numbered around a thousand, living in 12 fishing villages along the coast of northern Kurzeme. Today only about 170 people count themselves as Livs, while the language is actually understood by only very few of them. Although Liv is related to the other Finnic languages, neither the Estonians, nor the Finns can understand more than a few words of Liv. Today Liv is the rarest language in the European Union.

## FACT SHEET

## ON LATVIA

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