

## o. Introduction

- o.1 Together with Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia [*Latvija*] is one of the three Baltic states. Its territory covers about 64,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Most of Latvia's population (around 68% of its 2,309,339 inhabitants) resides in urban areas. Latvian cities and towns differ greatly in size. 21 cities have over 10,000 inhabitants, the three largest being Rīga (population of about 815,000), Daugavpils (approximately 117,500), and Liepāja (approx. 96,270).



- o.2 The Republic of Latvia is a parliamentary democracy. The Latvian Parliament (the *Saeima*) is a unicameral assembly. Its 100 members are elected for four years. It is the Saeima that elects Latvia's president. Like the members of parliament, the president is elected for a term of four years (a term that is once renewable). Latvia has a three-level administration. Apart from central government there are 26 districts (*Rajons*), 550 local authorities (70 cities and 480 *Pagasts*), and five economic planning regions that correspond very closely to historical regions: Latgale (East); Zemgale (South); Kurzeme (West); Vidzeme (North) and the Rīga region. The Latvian economy is still in transition. The main services contributing to the GDP (according to 2002 figures) are services (70%), industry (19%), construction (6%) and agriculture including forestry and fishery (5%). Unemployment (approximately 12%) remains a concern, especially since it is not decreasing despite rather rapid economic growth (an average yearly growth of 6% since 1996). In 2003 the average per capita income was just over one third of the EU average.

## 1. General aspects

The territory now known as Latvia has been inhabited since 9000 BC by ancient peoples of unknown origin. Around 3000 BC the Finno-Ugric Livs (called *libiesi* in Latvian) settled there. From the first half of the second millennium BC the ancient Baltic tribes arrived and started developing trading networks. In about 900 AD the Balts started to form specific tribal groups. Four groups can be distinguished: the Couronians (*kursi* in Latvian), Latgaliens (*latgali*), Selonians (*seli*) and Sengallians (*zemgali*). In the 13<sup>th</sup> century German crusaders conquered and christianised the pagan Baltic and Finno-Ugric tribes and reduced them to serfdom. In 1282 Riga joined the Hanseatic League. The cities of Cēsis, Limbaži, Koknese and Valmiera also joined this Northern German trading organisation at a later date. Around the 16th century the German crusaders lost power and significance. After the "Livonian War" (1558-1583) today's Latvian territory fell in the hands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Polish-Lithuanian rule only lasted until the Polish-Swedish War (1600-1629) after which Latvia was ruled by the Swedes for about half a century. After the Great Northern War (1700-1721) between Sweden and Russia today's Latvian territory became part of the Romanov Empire of Czar Peter the Great (Treaty of Nystad 1721) in which it functioned as one of the most developed provinces. In 1918, after the implosion of the Russian Empire, Latvia declared its independence and signed a peace treaty with Russia in 1920. The first period of Latvian independence came to an end after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed on 23 August 1939, for a few months later, on 17 June 1940 Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Army. Shortly afterwards German forces occupied Latvia, until 1944, when Soviet occupation brought Soviet rule to Latvia again. A large immigration of Russians as well as Ukrainians and Belorussians took place and Soviet-farming methods and collectivisation were introduced. It was only after certain more liberalist tendencies (*glasnost* and *perestroika*) transformed the communist regime in the mid-1980s that Latvia declared its independence on 4 May 1990 and was recognised as an independent state by the USSR on 21 August 1991. Since its independence Latvia has started a period of economic and social transition. In February 1999 it joined the World Trade Organisation, in March 2004 NATO and as of 1 May 2004 it is a full member of the EU.

## 2. Demographic data

2.1 In 2004 Latvia had 2,309,339 inhabitants. The following table lists the ethnic composition of Latvia's population. The table is based on rounded-off data taken from the 1989 census and data from the Board for Citizenship and Migration Affairs (1 July 2004).

**Table 1: Ethnic Composition of Latvia (1989 and 2004)**

	1989		2004	
	%	Number	%	Number
<b>Latvians</b>	52.2%	1,396,100	58.7%	1,356,081
<b>Russians</b>	34.0%	902,300	28.8%	664,082
<b>Belarusians</b>	4.4%	117,200	3.9%	88,998
<b>Ukrainians</b>	3.4%	89,300	2.6%	59,403
<b>Poles</b>	2.2%	59,700	2.5%	56,798
<b>Germans</b>	0.1%	2,900	0.2%	3,311
<b>Lithuanians</b>	1.3%	34,100	1.4%	31,840
<b>Jews</b>	0.6%	16,300	0.4%	9,820
<b>Roma</b>	0.3%	7,200	0.3%	8,436
<b>Other</b>	1.2%	31,900	1.2%	28,030
		2,657,000		2,309,339

Source: 1989 census and Board for Citizenship and Migration Affairs

Compared to the 1989 figures, the percentage of ethnic Latvians in the year 2000 increased whereas the percentage of most other ethnic groups (with the exception of the Poles and the Lithuanians) decreased or remained relatively stable. This can be explained by the fact that about 215,000 people emigrated from Latvia in the 1990s, of whom 16,000 were Latvians and 199,000 non-Latvians. Most of the non-Latvians were Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians living in Latvia as temporary workers, who moved back to their homelands because of non-favourable economic circumstances and also – as mentioned in sociological literature – because of the character of the Latvian Citizenship Law ( $\Rightarrow$  2.2.). The fact that many Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians moved back to their home-countries did not change the ethnic composition of Latvia dramatically. Latvians still account for only 58% of the total population and there still is a high proportion of Russians in Latvia mainly residing in the seven biggest cities in which they constitute the majority of the population.

- 2.2 In 1991, shortly after independence, the Decree of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia On The Restoration of the Rights of Citizens of the Republic of Latvia and Regulations for Naturalization [*Rezolūcija par Latvijas Republikas pilsoņu tiesībām un pilsonības iegūšanas pamatprincipiem*] restored citizenship only to those persons who had been citizens of Latvia between World Wars I and II, and their descendants. This resolution above all affected non-Latvians, many of whom had arrived after 1945 from several Soviet republics. It affected more than 60% of the large ethnic Russian minority and 1.6% of ethnic Latvians. Four years passed before a framework for the naturalization of non-citizens was established. In 1994 the Law on Citizenship [*Pilsonības likums*] entered into force. It introduced an ‘age windows’ timetable for application. Those people who were born in Latvia and aged between 16 and 20 could apply first. Other people had to await their ‘window’, the last of which was to ‘open’ in 2003. This system was abolished by amendments to the Law that were passed in a 1998 referendum. From that moment on all stateless children born in Latvia since 21 August 1991 were granted the right to receive Latvian citizenship at the request of their parents. A central issue of the current naturalisation process is language requirement. The applicants’ command of Latvian is measured by a written and oral test. Despite the fact that the liberalisation of the Law on Citizenship in 1998 led to a jump in the naturalisation rate, Latvia still has about 470,220 ‘non-citizens’. 467,733 of them are ethnic non-Latvians. The following table is based on data of the Board for Citizenship and Migration Affairs of 1 July 2004 and lists the residents of Latvia by ethnicity and citizenship.

**Table 2: Residents of Latvia by Ethnicity and Citizenship in 2004**

	Citizens	Non-citizens	Foreigners	Total	Percent
Latvians	1,352,733	2,387	961	1,356,081	58.7%
Russians	330,201	314,178	19,713	664,092	28.8%
Belarusians	26,281	60,818	1,899	88,998	3.9%
Ukrainians	11,440	44,319	3,644	59,403	2.6%
Poles	40,223	16,059	516	56,798	2.5%
Lithuanians	17,125	13,312	1,403	31,840	1.4%
Jews	6,424	3,079	317	9,820	0.4%
Estonians	1,470	750	310	2,530	0.1%
Others	19,259	15,318	5,200	39,777	1.7%
Total	1,805,156	470,220	33,963	2,309,339	100.0%

Source: Board of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, 01.07.04.

18 of the 100 MPs in the *Saeima* (elected 2002) are ethnic non-Latvians: 15 Russians, 1 Pole, 2 Jews and 1 Karelian.

- 2.3 Judging by provisional figures taken from the 2000 official census the most significant ethnic minorities in Latvia – with the exception of Lithuanians – show higher percentages of Russian as mother tongue in comparison to both Latvian and to the mother tongue corresponding to their ethnicity. This is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Mother Tongue of Ethnic Minorities**

ethnicity	Nr.	mother tongue corresponding to ethnicity	%	Other mother tongue					
				Latvian	%	Russian	%	Other	%
Latvian	1,370,703	1,311,093	96	1,311,093	96	48,242	4	11,368	1
Russian	703,243	664,743	95	31,141	4	664,743	95	7,359	1
Belarusian	97,150	18,265	19	6,347	7	70,717	73	1,821	2
Ukrainian	63,644	17,301	27	2,309	4	43,159	68	875	1
Polish	59,505	11,529	19	11,727	20	34,340	58	1,909	3
Lithuanian	33,430	13,187	39	14,203	42	5,437	16	603	2
Jewish	10,385	825	8	918	9	8,211	79	431	4
German	3,465	541	16	854	25	1,970	57	100	3

Source: 2000 Latvian census

Since 1996 the [Baltic Institute of Social Sciences](#) (BISS) publishes a (mainly quantitative) study on language use among non-Latvians each year. The studies of the BISS show that the significant means and efforts in improving the Latvian language skills (among others in the NPLLT; => 3.3.4.) are beginning to show results: while in 1996, 36% of non-Latvian speakers had good Latvian language skills and 22% did not know Latvian at all, the respective figures in the year 2000 were 41% and 9% (in comparison: about 85% of Latvians have a good knowledge of Russian). Fewer than 30% of people over 50 know the Latvian language well. Younger people, who acquired education after the restoration of independence, in general have a better knowledge of Latvian.

### 3. Language policy

- 3.1 According to Article 4 of the Latvian [Constitution](#) [*Latvijas Republikas Satversme*] “the Latvian language is the official language in the Republic of Latvia”. The Latvian language – that together with Lithuanian builds the East-Baltic group of languages and is spoken by approx. 1.55 million people worldwide – regained the status it was given in 1921 during the first period of Latvian independence. On 15 October 1998 the *Saeima* also incorporated a chapter on ‘Fundamental Human Rights’ in the Constitution. Article 114 of this chapter states that “persons belonging to ethnic minorities have the right to preserve and develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity”. These rights correspond to those mentioned in The Law on Unrestricted Development of National Minorities and Ethnic Groups of Latvia and the Rights to Cultural Autonomy [*Par Latvijas nacionālo un etnisko grupu brīvu attīstību un tiesībām uz kultūras autonomiju*] that was passed on 19 March 1991. They can also be found in the 1999 [Law on the State Language](#) [*Valsts valodas likums*].

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- 3.2 In 1989 the Latvian Supreme Council (today’s *Saeima*) adopted the Law on Languages of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia [*LPSR Valodu likums*]. The second law (Republic of Latvia Language Law; *Latvijas Republikas Valodu likums*) was adopted in 1992. The years between 1989 and 1992 served as a kind of transition period.

- 3.3 The 1989 Law on Languages stated that all state institutions were to use the state-language in their communication with the public as well as in their daily work. In their contacts with the authorities individuals were still allowed to use Russian and state documents continued to be used in Russian as well as in Latvian. In private life there was freedom of speech, though people were encouraged to learn Latvian: Latvian language instruction programmes were developed, self-teaching materials were brought on the market and some companies offered free language tuition during regular working-hours for non-Latvians. In March 1992 a State Language Centre [*Valsts valodas centrs*] was set up by the Latvian Council of Ministers and made responsible for the legal status of the Latvian language and the strengthening and use of the Latvian language. The Chief Certification Commission at the State Language Centre worked out language levels for different professions and it was the task of the State Language Inspection to supervise proficiency tests and the attestation commissions responsible for the language exams (cf. Official State Language Proficiency Certification Regulation [*Valsts valodas prasmes atestācijas nolikums*] (1992). It was now obligatory to use Latvian in official documents, place names and signs, amongst other things. It was still possible to use other languages in private documents, but fines were specified for such cases in which Latvian was not used in the prescribed way. From the early 1990s onwards the Latvian government started sending out language inspectors whose main task is to deal with complaints about violations of the Language Law. They act as a consultative unit. The Language Advisory Service also works actively, providing advice about the Latvian language free of charge.
- 3.4 A revised language law was written in the mid 1990s focusing more on the integration of minorities into Latvian society. The Law on the State Language that came into effect on 1 September 2000 ensures the integration of members of ethnic minorities into the society of Latvia, while observing their rights to use their native language or other languages (Art. 1,4). The Law among other measures ensures the maintenance, protection and development of the Latgalian written language (⇒ Other Languages) as a historic variant of the Latvian language (Art. 3,4) and officially recognizes Liv (⇒ Other languages) as an autochthonous language (Art. 4). For the purpose of the Law on the State Language all other languages are considered to be “foreign” (Art. 5). Further on the Law envisages that all state documents shall be in the state language only or shall be accompanied by a certified translation into the state language (Art 8). Unless a notary-certified translation into the state language is attached the Law prohibits state, municipal and judicial institutions from accepting written applications, statements and complaints from private persons in any language other than Latvian, except for some emergency situations. Moreover the Law states that place names in the Republic of Latvia shall be created and use thereof shall be in the official language (Art. 18,1). It says that there shall be set out in a passport or birth certificate, in addition to the name and surname of the person presented in accordance with the existing norms of the Latvian language, the historic family name of the person, or the original form of the personal name in a different language, transliterated in the Roman alphabet, if the person or the parents of a minor person so wish and can verify such by documents (Art. 19,2). Furthermore, the use of minority languages in the private sphere is not unlimited: state intervention into the private sphere to regulate language use is envisaged to a degree determined by a lawful interest of the public, e.g. in matters affecting public health, public safety and public order (Art 2,2). It is the task of the State Language Centre to supervise compliance with this Law. The State Language Centre itself is subject to the supervision of the Ministry of Justice (Art. 26).

- 3.5 By establishing the [Social Integration Foundation](#) at the end of the 1990s, whose task it is to implement the National Program 'The Integration of Society in Latvia', the Latvian government has tried to create favourable circumstances that will on the one hand help people in maintaining their language and on the other encourage them on to learn Latvian which they need for economic advancement, thus creating a diglossic use of Latvian and the minority language. The integration program provides approximately 1 million US dollars per year for ethnic minorities.
- 3.6 Education in Latvia is regulated by the Law on Higher Education Establishments [*Augstskolu likums*] (1995), the [Education Law](#) [*Izglītības likums*] (1998), the [Law on General Education](#) [*Vispārējās izglītības likums*] (1999) and the Law on Professional Education [*Profesionālās izglītības likums*] (1999). There are also regulations from the Cabinet of Ministers and instructions from the Ministry of Education and Science.
- 3.7 During Soviet rule the languages of education were Latvian and Russian. Russian was an obligatory subject in Latvian schools, but Latvian was not compulsory at Russian schools. Following Latvian independence minority schools were refounded and comparisons were made with the first period of Latvian independence in which minority languages were allowed in schools.
- 3.8 Several stages can be distinguished in the renewed introduction of minority languages in education: a transition period between 1989 and 1995, and three periods of education reform. In the transitional period, minority education was restored in eight languages (Russian, Belorussian, Ukrainian, Polish, Yiddish, Estonian, Romany and Lithuanian). Latvian was made an obligatory subject in all educational institutions and a proficiency test was designed in Latvian for graduates of minority schools. During the first period of education reform (1995-1999) an amendment to Article 5 of the old Education Law specified the role of the Latvian language in minority schools. In years 1 to 9 of basic education 2 subjects were to be taught in Latvian. In years 10 to 12 the number of subjects taught in Latvian had to be 3. The second period of education reform took place between 1999 and 2003 and followed the adoption of the new [Law on Education](#) (1998) that provides a basis for minority education. This law states that:
- Education in state and local government educational institutions is obtained in the official state language (Art. 9, 1). Education may be (acquired) in another language (1) in private educational institutions, (2) in state and local government institutions in which educational programmes for ethnic minorities are implemented, and (3) in educational institutions specified in other laws (Art. 9,2). The law states that the *Ministry of Education and Science* shall specify such educational programs, and the subjects of study in these programmes are to be taught in the official language.
  - Educational programmes for ethnic minorities shall be developed by educational institutions in accordance with State educational standards on the basis of general educational program models approved by the Ministry of Education and Science (Art. 41,1); these programmes shall include content necessary for acquisition of the relevant ethnic culture and for integration of ethnic minorities in Latvia (Art. 41,2) and the Ministry of Education and Science shall specify the subjects of study in the educational programmes for minorities which must be acquired in the official language (Art. 41,3).
  - the National Education State Inspectorate (a structural unit of the ministry) supervises the way in which educational institutions follow the law (Article 20) and the Ministry hires and dismisses school directors (Art. 15,25)

There has been some misunderstanding on the time available to implement the minority programs. According to a clarification made by the Ministry of Education in 1999, all classes in minority elementary schools must be taught on the basis of

the minority education program that the school has selected from the school year 2002/2003. The third period of the education reform started in 2004. In secondary schools the implementation of minority education curricula started as of September 2004 with year 10. Year 11 will follow in 2005 and year 12 in 2006. The change implies that 3/5 of classes will be taught in Latvian and 2/5 in the minority language (this is the so-called 60/40 norm). The proportion of 2/5 usage of minority languages in minority secondary schools was incorporated in a legally binding document on 13 May 2003. At that point the Latvian Government amended Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers On the State General Secondary Education Standard [*Valsts vispārējās vidējās izglītības standarts*]. The respective amendments to the Education Law followed on 12 August 2003. On 22 January 2004 the Saeima amended the Education Law, such that the subjects taught in minority languages may only be minority language subjects or subjects “related to minority identity and culture”. This would mean that only 10 to 15% of the curriculum could be taught in minority languages. The discussed reform will embrace the whole secondary school system in 2007. The minority system will have reached complete implementation in 2010 since students who started in 1999 will then have reached year 12. As far as universities and adult education is concerned it should be noted that courses in state-financed universities are conducted in Latvian, while a number of private educational institutions have language(s) of instruction other than Latvian. At university one can of course enrol in courses of the Slavic departments where languages such as Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian are taught.

- 3.9 Judging by the figures for the 2002/2003 school year provided by the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 733 schools in Latvia had Latvian as the sole language of instruction, 164 schools had Russian as a language of instruction (i.e. with a Russian-Latvian bilingual curriculum), and 148 schools had both classes with instruction in Latvian only, and classes with instruction in Russian as well (i.e. with a bilingual curriculum). There were 6 Polish and 2 Hebrew schools, 1 Ukrainian, 1 Estonian, 1 Lithuanian and 1 Belorussian school, and separate classes in 2 schools taught in Romany. Since 1998 matters relating to minority education are dealt with by the Integration Section of the General Education Department of the [Ministry of Education and Science](#) [*Izglītības un zinātnes ministrijas Vispārējās izglītības departamenta Sabiedrības integrācijas nodaļa*]. Upon the initiative of the Integration Section an *Advisory Council on Minority Education Issues* was established to improve communication between various parties involved in minority education. The following table (based on information by the Latvian [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)) shows the evolution of the total number of pupils by language of instruction from 1995/96 until 2003/04

**Table 4: Number of Students by Language of Instruction**

	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04
L	203,607	212,017	219,794	233,939	238,652	242,475	242,183	237,425	230,212
R	132,540	129,120	125,643	125,741	120,612	96,053	89,874	101,486	95,841
O*	1,513	1,664	1,817	2,042	2,168	2,331	2,479	1,397	1,305
T	337,660	342,801	347,254	361,722	361,432	340,859	334,536	340,308	327,358
%	60.3	61.8	63.3	64.7	66.0	71.1	72.3	69.8	70.3

L = Latvian; R = Russian; O = Other languages; % = % learning in Latvian

\* Note: in some minority schools the language of instruction is predominantly either Latvian or Russian

- 3.10 The number of pupils attending schools where Latvian is the medium of instruction (either in combination with a minority language or not) has increased over the last years and is now a little over 70%. In the 2003/2004 school year, 74.4



% of first-years began studies in Latvian. As scientific literature suggests this may be due both to legal measures (Language Law and regulations of the Education Law) and to parents seeking an education for their children that ensures for them increased opportunities for university study and greater competitiveness in the labour market. Since school is the main institution where non-Latvians learn Latvian lots of efforts were put in the National Programme for Latvian Language Training [*Latviešu valodas apguves valsts programma*]. This Programme, developed with the support of the United Nations Development Program, started in 1995 and covers five main fields: (1) teacher training, (2) development of new teaching materials, (3) LSL-courses (Latvian as a Second Language) for adults; (4) Integration activities and (5) development of the programme management. It is specifically meant to encourage non-Latvians and minority organisations to be socially active and to promote (linguistic) tolerance and understanding as essential elements for a future conflict-free development of the country.

- 3.11 No regulations exist regarding the language of publication in the field of printed media. The situation is different for radio and television. In 1995 Latvian parliament adopted a new [Radio and Television Law](#) [*Radio un televīzijas likums*]. Amendments on language issues were adopted in 1997 and 1998. According to Art. 19,5 the amount of broadcasting time in foreign languages in programmes produced by broadcasting organizations should not exceed 25% of the total volume of the broadcasting time in a 24-hour period. Russian radio stations which did not take into account the legal regulations were suspended by the Latvian National Radio and Television Council that also reprimanded Latvian TV channels that showed too many Russian-language films. The quotas for language use on radio and television were repealed by the Latvian Constitutional Court on 5 June 2003.
- 3.12 The [Law On Judicial Power](#) [*Likums par tiesu varu*], adopted on 15 September 1992 with amendments adopted up to 2001, states that judicial proceedings in the Republic of Latvia shall be conducted in the official language. A court may allow also another language to be used in judicial proceedings if the parties, their advocates and the prosecutor agree to it (Art. 21, 1). For a person who participates in a matter, but is not fluent in the language of the judicial proceedings, a court shall ensure the right to become acquainted with the materials of the matter and to participate in the court process with the assistance of an interpreter as well as the right to appear before the court in the particular language in which such person is fluent (Art. 21, 2).

Field Code Changed

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#### 4. The European dimension

- 4.1 Latvia has not yet signed the [European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages](#) (ECRML). It signed the [Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities](#) (FCPNM) on 11 May 1995 but has not ratified it yet.
- 4.2 Several bilateral agreements exist between Latvia and the states the ethnic minorities residing in Latvia belong to. A database of bilateral agreements is provided by the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Latvia has signed agreements of cooperation with Poland, Israel, Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus on professional qualifications for teachers of national minority schools.