



# Republic of Latvia

## Country Report

### Table of contents:

**Executive Summary**..... 2  
 Latvia’s impressive transition to a Western-style political and economic model since regaining its independence in 1991 culminated in its 2004 accession to the EU and NATO. Overcoming an initial dependence on Russia and various crises in the 1990s, Latvia has shown impressive economic growth since 2000. *Read more.*

**History** ..... 2  
 Slightly larger than West Virginia, Latvia lies between its fellow Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania. Demographic issues dominate politics: out of Latvia’s slightly more than two million residents, only about 59% (approximately 1.2 million) are ethnic Latvians. *Read more.*

**Domestic Situation**..... 4  
 Latvia today is a stable parliamentary democracy, and is ranked as “free” by Freedom House. Basic civil liberties are guaranteed by its constitution and are recognized in practice by the government. The 1991 Latvian Constitution provides for a unicameral, 100-seat parliament (Saeima) which elects the President to a four-year term. *Read more.*

**Foreign Policy**..... 5  
 Latvia’s 2004 accessions to the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) achieved the country’s main goals in terms of institutional membership. Latvia is on good terms with its Baltic Sea neighbors, and participates actively in the Baltic Assembly, the Baltic Council of Ministers, the Nordic Council, and the Council of the Baltic Sea states. *Read more.*

**Relations with the U.S.**..... 7  
 The U.S. and Latvia established close and productive relations in the 1990s, including an ongoing dialogue and cooperation on counter-terrorism and non-proliferation issues. *Read more.*

**Jewish Community**..... 8  
 Jewish presence in Latvia was first recorded in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, referenced in German Livonian law prohibiting Jewish residency in the area. Adopted by the territory’s subsequent Swedish and Polish rulers, this policy allowed Jews only temporary residency rights, and only to promote manufacturing and trade. *Read more.*

## Executive Summary:

*Latvia's impressive transition to a Western-style political and economic model since regaining its independence in 1991 culminated in its 2004 accession to the EU and NATO. Overcoming an initial dependence on Russia and various crises in the 1990s, Latvia has shown impressive economic growth since 2000. While the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 severely affected Latvia's economy, resulting in a major economic and political crisis, Latvia's economy has steadily recovered.*

*Latvia enjoys strong ties with its Baltic and Nordic neighbors, and with the United States. Relations with Russia have improved in the post-Soviet period, but remain complicated. Tensions persist over Latvia's slow integration of its large Russian-speaking minority (an estimated one-third of whom still lack citizenship), sharply diverging views on Russia's wartime role in Latvia, and repeated commemorations of Latvian Waffen SS veterans (which also concerns Latvia's Jewish community).*

*Latvia's once-large Jewish population was devastated by Soviet and German invasions and occupations during World War II. While the government has made significant progress in recognizing Jewish issues and commemorating the Holocaust, problems remain with regard to property restitution, attacks by skinheads, and vandalism of Jewish sites. Roughly half of the country's current Jewish community has Latvian roots or citizenship, with most Latvian Jews living in the capital city of Riga. The Jewish community is active, well-organized, and works in conjunction with American and Israeli organizations. Latvia maintains full and warm diplomatic relations with Israel.*

## History:

Slightly larger than West Virginia, Latvia lies between its fellow Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania. Demographic issues dominate politics: out of Latvia's slightly more than two million residents, only about 59% (approximately 1.2 million) are ethnic Latvians. Russian-speaking Soviet-era settlers originally from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine form an estimated one-third of the population. Naturalization rates among Russian speakers accelerated in the run-up to Latvia's 2004 accession to the European Union. However, as of March 2011, 290,660 non-citizens lived in Latvia, and ethnic Latvians remain a minority in six of their country's seven largest cities. The relatively slow integration of this large linguistic minority has caused tensions between Russian speakers and ethnic Latvians, and has affected Latvia's relations with neighboring Russia.

## Statistics:

**Population:** 1,986,705 (July 2015 est.)

**Size:** 64,589 sq. km.

**Capital:** Riga

**Major cities:** Riga, Daugavpils, Liepāja, Jelgava

**Jewish population:** 10,000 (est.)

**2009 Aliyah** (emigration to Israel): 72

**Head of State:** President Raimonds Vējonis

**Head of Government:** Prime Minister Maris Kucinskis

**Foreign Minister:** Edgars Rinkēvičs

**Ambassador to United States:**

Andris Razans

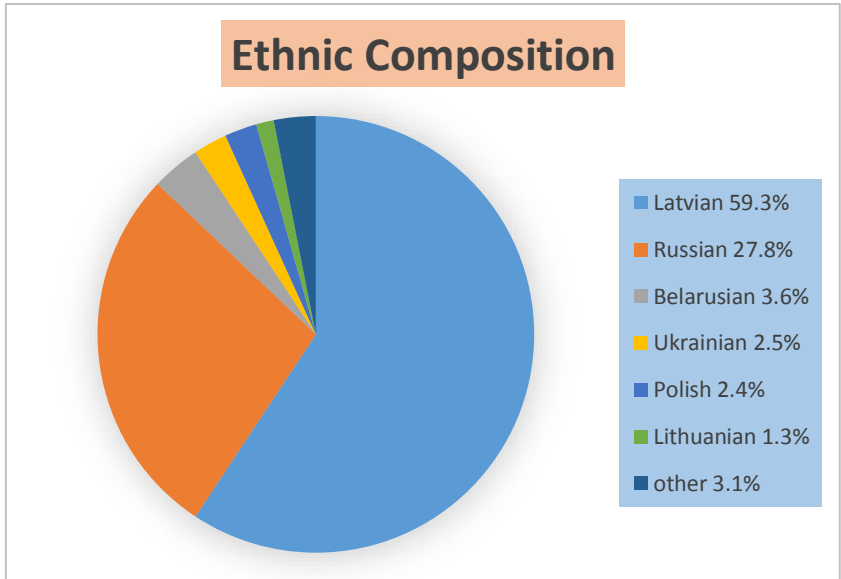
**U.S. Ambassador to Latvia:** Nancy Pettit

**Freedom House Rating:** Free

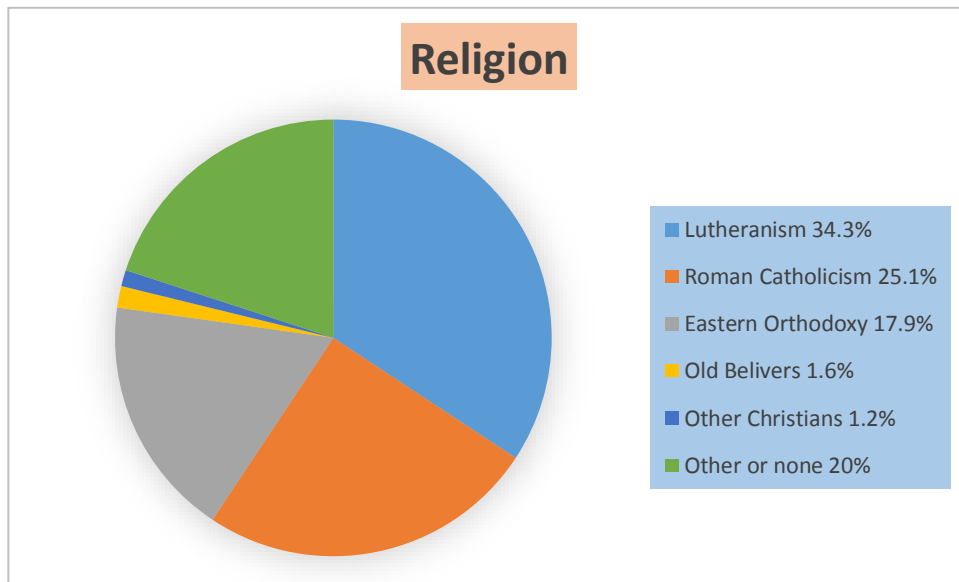
A Baltic people long ruled by Germans, Swedes, and Poles, Latvia came under Tsarist Russian rule in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. After a brief period of independence after World War I as a parliamentary republic, Latvia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. The United States never recognized the legitimacy of the Soviet annexation.

Soviet rule brought brutal ethnic and political purges in which many tens of thousands of Latvians were executed, deported, or imprisoned. While many Latvians collaborated with Soviet forces and joined the Red Army, others welcomed and collaborated with Nazi Germany, which was seen as the lesser evil compared to the Soviets.

German occupation led to the near-total destruction of the historic Latvian Jewish community and to large-scale recruitment of Latvian nationalists into German armed units, including the notorious Waffen SS. Soviet forces retook Latvia in 1944, leading to a new round of purges, deportations, and emigration. Postwar Soviet policy led to the deliberate resettlement



in Latvia of hundreds of thousands of Russian-speaking industrial workers and Soviet military and security personnel, whose numbers reduced ethnic Latvians to a bare majority. Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* allowed mass-based reformist and nationalist groups to reemerge in the late 1980s, leading to Latvia's declaration of independence in 1990. Latvia's independence was



recognized by Moscow and the world community in 1991. The last Russian troops left in 1994.

Following independence, Latvia struggled with reasserting its nationality and defining its citizenship policies in the face of many Russian speakers unenthusiastic about learning Latvian and accepting their new minority status. Latvia initially offered automatic citizenship to pre-war Latvians and their descendants, while other residents had to demonstrate language proficiency. Pressure from Russia and

Europe moved Latvia to amend its initial policies. Language proficiency as a precondition for citizenship remains a potent political issue, given the persistence of Russian among many Latvian residents.

### **Political Situation:**

Latvia today is a stable parliamentary democracy, and is ranked as “free” by Freedom House. Basic civil liberties are guaranteed by its constitution and are recognized in practice by the government. The 1991 Latvian Constitution provides for a unicameral, 100-seat parliament (Saeima) which elects the President to a four-year term. The President in turn appoints a Prime Minister and a Supreme Court. Parliamentary deputies also serve four-year terms.

Laimdota Straujuma has been Prime Minister of Latvia since 2014. Prior to her nomination, she served as Minister of Agriculture, from 2011 to 2014.

Parliamentary elections were held in Latvia in October 2014. While pro-Russian Harmony Center party came first, gaining 24 of the legislature’s 100 seats, Latvia’s governing center-right 3-party coalition received the majority of the votes.

In February, 2012 Latvia held a constitutional referendum to make Russian the second official language. A nearly three-fourths majority of Latvian citizens voted against the constitutional amendment.

Current law grants citizenship to all Latvian natives born after August 21, 1991. Controversy, however, persists over the legal status of an estimated 290,660 residents, mostly Russian speakers, who have not applied for citizenship because of the high cost of registration and the language proficiency requirement. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has criticized Latvia’s high rate of non-citizenship among its residents, but has backed Latvian legislation mandating that 60% of a minority school’s curriculum be taught in Latvian. The OSCE, UN, and other international organizations have rejected as unfounded earlier Russian allegations of systemic violations of the human rights of Latvia’s Russian-speaking residents.

### **Economic Situation:**

With few natural resources, Latvia historically has benefited from its strategic location on East-West and North-South trade and energy transit routes, which has allowed it to profit by handling growing trade between Europe and the former Soviet states. Heavily industrialized by Soviet planners, Latvia initially suffered from the loss of its former Soviet markets and suppliers after independence, losing up to half of its GDP in the early 1990s. Latvia’s economic downturn continued through the mid-1990s, and included a 1995 banking crisis, a large budget deficit, and spillover from Russia’s 1998 economic crisis that precipitated the closure of many Latvian enterprises and subsequent losses by Latvian banks.

**Currency:** 0,9 Euro = \$1  
**GDP:** \$27.82 billion (2015 est.)  
**GDP per capita:** \$24,62 (2015 est.)  
**GDP Growth:** 2.7% (2015 est.)

After the crisis Latvia's economy staged a strong recovery, boosted by consistent and vigorous economic reform policies at home, successful reorientation of exports towards Europe, and EU membership in 2004.

Latvia's economy grew by 50% between 2004 and 2007. However, the global financial crisis of 2008-9, as well as a growing inflation rate, high unemployment rate, account deficits and a low GDP (by EU standards), generated a major economic and political crisis in Latvia, and the country had one of the worst recessions in the EU. In 2009, deep public spending cuts earned Latvia an emergency bailout loan of 7.5 billion Euro from the IMF and the EU. The loan helped economic recovery and Latvia's economy returned to growth in 2011.

On January 1, 2014 Latvia joined Eurozone on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of the euro. Experts have linked Latvian Eurozone accession to changes in several economic factors, such as slowly rising prices on goods and services, increases in sales within the real estate market and an increasing number of mortgage loans.

Unemployment decreased to a single digit number by summer 2014. All banks in Latvia passed the stress tests by the European Central Bank later the same year. Both the World Bank and the European Central Bank predict ~4% economic growth until 2018.

### **Foreign Policy:**

Latvia's 2004 accession to the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) achieved the country's main goals in terms of institutional membership.

Latvia is on good terms with its Baltic Sea neighbors, and participates actively in the Baltic Assembly, the Baltic Council of Ministers, the Nordic Council, and the Council of the Baltic Sea states. In particular, it cooperates closely with Lithuania and Estonia on coordination of education systems, integration of the Baltic stock markets into the Alliance of Nordic Exchanges (NOREX), on security and trade, the Baltic energy market, and deployment of joint Baltic infantry and naval units based near Riga. The Nordic and Baltic states have cooperated under the NB8 agreement since 1992, discussing common economic, foreign policy, and regional issues.

Since joining NATO in 2004, Latvia has participated in peacekeeping operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, and hosted the NATO summit in Riga in November 2006.

Latvia and Israel established diplomatic relations in early 1992. Israel is the only Middle Eastern country with a Latvian embassy (open since 1995); in addition, there are two Latvian Honorary Consuls in Israel. Israel opened its embassy in Riga in late 1992. Relations have been strong and marked by frequent high-level consultations and official visits.

While Latvian-Israeli trade volume is not high, Israeli tourism to Latvia is growing, boosted by the 2003 opening of a direct Tel Aviv-Riga air route.

In July 2013, Israeli President Shimon Peres visited Latvia to discuss bilateral cooperation and celebrate the opening of Lipke memorial dedicated to rescuers of Latvian Jews during the Holocaust.

In December 2013, Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs participated in the OSCE meeting in Kyiv where he met with the Israeli Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel and discussed ways of improving bilateral economic relations.

History of Russia's domination of Latvia affects current bilateral relations. Initial Latvian-Russian relations were rocky in the 1990s, but tensions eased and cooperation increased after Latvia amended its citizenship law in 1998 to meet European standards and address Russian concerns. Latvian-Russian relations also were strained in the 1990s by Latvia's prosecutions of a number of retired KGB agents – ethnic Russian residents of Latvia – accused of involvement in the Soviet-era killing and deportation of Latvians. In 2002, the Saeima repealed legislation requiring that political candidates be proficient in Latvian, removing a significant irritant to Latvia's NATO and EU accession negotiations.

Longstanding border issues between Russia and Latvia, complicated by Russia's postwar annexation of a Latvian district and political friction over wartime history, delayed the final signing of a definitive border agreement, drafted and initialed in 1997, for ten years. Finally, after the Latvian parliament formally abandoned any land claims against Russia in February 2007, Latvia and Russia signed a bilateral Border Agreement in March 2007. Latvia is now the second Baltic state, after Lithuania, to sign a final border treaty with Russia.

Latvia leads the Baltic States in external trade with Russia. According to Bank of Latvia data, Russia holds fifth place in terms of direct foreign investment in the Latvian economy.

In May 2014, the Latvian Parliament made it a crime to deny the fact of the Soviet or Nazi occupation of Latvia, implicitly comparing the USSR period of its history with the Nazi occupation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia condemned this actions and voiced its concern over Latvia's attempts to rewrite history.

Tensions in bilateral relations between Latvia and Russia were reignited by the Ukrainian crisis, as Latvia grew more concerned about Russia's policies in the former Soviet Union region. Since the conflict in Ukraine, Latvia increased its defense budget on its eastern border with Russia and requested additional security reassurances from NATO.

### **Relations with the United States:**

The U.S. and Latvia established close and productive relations in the 1990s, including an ongoing dialogue and cooperation on counter-terrorism and non-proliferation issues. The United States, which never recognized the 1940 Soviet annexation of the Baltics, quickly reestablished full diplomatic relations with Latvia in September 1991, and in December 1991, granted the Baltic states permanent normal trade relation status.

The United States works closely with Latvia as part of the U.S.-Northern Europe Initiative, which has expanded cooperation among the countries of the Baltic Sea region. Bilateral economic ties have expanded steadily since the U.S.-Latvia Investment Treaty of 1995, and the signing of a Charter of Partnership in 1998.

The United States has engaged the Latvian government on the issue of land restitution and has been involved in public education programs on the Holocaust in Latvia. The United States strongly supported and welcomed Latvia's accession to the EU and NATO in 2004.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Latvian government undertook counter-terrorism measures that increased domestic security measures, and pledged assistance to U.S.-led global efforts. Latvia was one of ten NATO aspirants to back the U.S. position on Iraq in March 2003, and joined the other Baltic states in supporting the U.S.-led force in Iraq. Latvia supports U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and the Balkans.

Demonstrating close U.S.-Latvian ties, President Bush visited Latvia twice, in May 2006 and again in November 2006.

In 2008, Latvia joined the visa waiver program.

In April 2011, President of Latvia Valdis Zatlers met with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden at the White House. The Vice President praised Latvia's foreign policy priorities, particularly in terms of the European Union's Eastern Partnership program, as well as Latvia's involvement in the military mission in Afghanistan, in particular its participation in the Northern Distribution Network. At the conclusion of the meeting, President Zatlers presented Vice President Biden with the Latvian Order of Three Stars, in recognition of Mr. Biden's key support for Latvia's accession to NATO.

In June 2012, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Latvia. She praised U.S.-Latvia cooperation efforts, recognizing Latvia's important role in the Northern Distribution Network. During her visit, Clinton also urged Latvia to return Jewish property confiscated by the Soviet Union and the Nazis.

In August 2013, the Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian presidents met with President Obama and Vice President Biden to discuss regional cooperation and ways of improving American support in the region.

In March 2014, Vice President Biden met with the Latvian President to discuss measures to regional security. They talked about ways to improve Latvian energy security, military measures, energy, and cyber security issues.

In April 2014, a delegation of American senators headed by Sen. John McCain visited Latvia to discuss the situation in Ukraine, Baltic region security, and U.S.-Latvian cooperation within the NATO framework. Prior to this meeting, American military representatives had a meeting with the Minister of Defense Raymond Veyonis.

In April and May 2014, Latvian Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma visited the U.S. and discussed ways to improve U.S.-Latvian relations on security issues and economic cooperation and establish better connections with Latvian diaspora in the U.S. The Prime Minister also met with Vice President Biden to discuss security and energy issues. Latvia expressed interest in importing American gas to Europe. The issue of accelerating signing of the Transatlantic Trade Agreement was also discussed. Biden expressed his hope that Latvia, as a Country Chairman of the EU in 2015, will make a positive contribution towards hastening the signing of the Transatlantic Trade Agreement between the U.S. and the EU.

In May 2014, American Air Force representatives transferred their duties for protection of Latvian airspace to their Polish colleagues. Also, 160 American soldiers of the US 173<sup>rd</sup> Air Brigade are stationed on the territory of Latvia, and participate in joint military trainings.

In August 2015, a delegation of U.S. Senators headed by Sen. John McCain visited Latvia and participated in the inauguration ceremony for the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence. The delegation met with President Vējonis, Prime Minister Straujuma, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Rinkēvičs.

In February 2016, the Latvian Foreign Minister Rinkēvičs visited the United States and took part in the UNDP 50th Anniversary Ministerial Meeting in New York City. In Washington D.C., the Latvian Foreign Minister met with senior officials from the U.S. Department of State, the Congress, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of the Treasury.

The United States provides a limited amount of military assistance to Latvia. In Fiscal Year 2014, \$67 million worth of assistance was provided through various military programs.

### **Jewish Communal Life:**

Jewish presence in Latvia was first recorded in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, referenced in German Livonian law prohibiting Jewish residency in the area. Adopted by the territory's subsequent Swedish and Polish rulers, this policy allowed Jews only temporary residency rights, and only to promote manufacturing and trade. Jews were prohibited from owning land in Latvia through the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the exception of the region of Piltene. When the country's discriminatory laws were relaxed in the early 1700s, Jews built their first synagogue (in Aizpute) and cemetery (in Jelgava) on Latvian soil. In the 1740s Polish authorities expelled all Jews from the region, but following Russia's 1795 annexation of Latvia, Tsar Paul I reinstated Jewish residency rights.

Despite subsequent restrictions, persecutions and expulsions (particularly during World War I) by Russian Tsars and then by the increasingly nationalistic pre-war Latvian government, Latvia's Jewish community continued to grow, reaching close to 100,000 prior to World War II. During the war, German forces and their nationalist Latvian collaborators killed an estimated 95% of Latvia's Jews. About 2,000 Jews are believed to have died as partisans fighting German and pro-Nazi forces. Because of the devastating effects of German occupation, Latvia's Jewish community was reconstituted in part with Russian-speaking Jews. Only about half of the present-day Jewish community has roots in Latvia, mostly



wartime refugees who returned to Latvia after 1945. Most, but not all, Latvian Jews hold Latvian citizenship, and this number has continued to increase following Latvia's 2004 accession to the EU.

The vast majority of Latvia's Jews live in Riga. Rabbi Natan Barkhan, Chief Rabbi of Riga and Latvia, runs the Central Synagogue, Riga's only synagogue.

Latvia is a home to about 20 Jewish organizations, which offer a broad range of services. The Riga Jewish community is unified under the Council of Jewish Organizations. The Council of Latvian Jewish Communities and Congregations serves as a national representative for Latvian Jewish community. The Jewish community of Riga also has its own monthly newspaper, *Gesharim* (bridges), and a matzo bakery. Latvia also has the only Jewish hospital in the former Soviet Union.

The Riga Jewish Community Center (JCC/Alef) was established in 2000 with the support of the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC/ "Joint"). The JCC provides educational and cultural programs for children and families, including a cinema, musical clubs and a sports program. An ORT technology center for adults was opened in the Center in 2002, with funding from several foundations and JDC.

The JCC also runs a meals-on-wheels program for the elderly, funded by the JDC. The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS (FJC) runs a daily soup kitchen in Riga and prepares monthly food packages for the homebound.

Two Jewish day schools operate in Riga: the Dubnov School (a secular day school), and Chabad's Jewish Private School. The Dubnov School, founded in 1989 as the first Jewish school in the Soviet Union, operates in conjunction with the Israeli Ministry of Culture and houses a technology center. Two Jewish kindergartens are open for children of pre-school age: the Chabad's Lubavitch and the Emuna kindergarten.

Several Jewish youth programs operate in Latvia. In addition to Chabad's Jewish Private School, the FJC also operates summer camps. The Union of Jewish Youth of Latvia was founded in 1994 to promote Jewish education, address anti-Semitism, and develop community youth leadership. JDC's Club Ilan youth group currently has over 200 members. Latvia's Shalom Club, sponsored by the Israeli Foreign Ministry's Center for International Cooperation (MASHAV) and the Israeli Embassy, conducts community education programs and charity projects.

The Riga Jewish Community Youth Club, founded in 2006, teaches Judaism in an informal atmosphere, and organizes camps, seminars, and different tours.

The Latvian Jewish Charity and Social Aid Center "WIZO-Rahamim," founded in 1993, provides social aid to low-income members of the Latvian Jewish Community and the survivors of Holocaust.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has helped to fund partnerships between American Jewish organizations and several Latvian hospitals and hospices. International partnerships, including those with the United States and Europe, have also helped to revitalize Latvia's Bikur Holim

Jewish hospital, established in 1924, most of whose staff and patients were killed in the Holocaust. It reopened as a Jewish hospital again in 1991.

The Latvian government has a positive relationship with the Jewish community and provides it with financial support. The government has provided the buildings for the Jewish day school and JCC, as well as with funding for teacher salaries. In conjunction with the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, the Latvian and U.S. governments have created a framework for the protection and preservation of cultural sites. Since 1998, a Center for Judaic Studies has operated at the University of Latvia in Riga, funded by public and private grants from Latvian and foreign donors. The Center has enrolled several dozen students in its courses and lectures each year since its opening.

In May 2007, Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga presented David Harris, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee, with the Order of the Three Stars (Commander Class), Latvia's highest honor, for Harris' contribution to facilitating cooperation between Latvia and the U.S. The award was presented to Harris during the AJC's annual dinner in Washington, D.C.

In 2011, the Max Goldin Society of Jewish Culture Heritage was established to maintain and develop Latvian Jewish culture and traditions and to develop ethnic dialogue in the field of culture based on the values and ideals of the European Union.

### **Holocaust Legacy:**

Latvia has made progress in assessing its role in the Holocaust, and senior Latvian officials have expressed their solidarity with Latvia's Jewish victims and with the State of Israel. At the same time, Jews in Latvia and elsewhere have shown concern over the ultra-nationalist movement in Latvia.

Since Latvia's independence, July 4 has been designated as the official Holocaust Memorial. In 1994, a Holocaust memorial was erected near the ruins of the Riga Choral synagogue, where 300 Jews hiding in the basement were burned to death by Nazi forces in July 1941. Also in 1941, the Nazis and Latvian police marched thousands of Jews out of Riga into the forests and executed them. In 2001 an extensive monument in the Bikernieki forest was dedicated to mark the massacre site of 30,000 Jews, and another monument in the Rumbula forest was dedicated in 2002. The memorial at Rumbula, dedicated to the memory of 25,000 Jews, sparked controversy (later resolved) by acknowledging the local population's involvement in the massacre. Then-President Vike-Freiberga spoke at the unveiling.

Nevertheless, problems in addressing Latvia's Holocaust legacy remain. An estimated 50,000 Latvians died fighting the Soviets on the side of the Germans; overall, over 100,000 Latvians are believed to have fought on the Eastern Front during the war. Latvian police battalions, which worked with the Germans, were instrumental in carrying out the Holocaust on Latvian territory, and wartime Latvia is believed to have had one of the largest per capita recruitment rates in the Waffen SS in Europe. It has been alleged that some Latvian SS Legionnaires participated in roundups and mass executions. The Latvian government strongly denies such allegations. Outside critics have noted that while Latvia has prosecuted several former Soviet functionaries for Communist-era crimes, no Nazi collaborators have been brought to trial since Latvian independence in 1991.

After independence, serious debates over the history of the wartime Waffen SS Legion began in Latvia. Annual marches of Legion veterans through Riga at first included high-level politicians. In early 2000, the Saeima voted to drop March 16 in favor of November 11, the date of the World War I armistice that led to Latvia's first declaration of independence in 1918.

Many Latvian nationalists continue to recognize and honor Latvian veterans who collaborated with the Nazis against occupying Soviet forces. Many veterans schedule annual demonstrations and marches on March 16 to commemorate the Latvian Waffen SS veterans. These commemorations have drawn strong criticism from Israel, the United States, Russia, and Latvia's Russian community.

In 2012, in a controversial statement, Latvian President Andris Bērziņš defended the annual parade, saying that veterans of the World War II Latvian Legion deserved respect, not condemnation.

In 2015, 1,500 people gathered in Riga to commemorate Latvian Waffen SS veterans. However, members of the government did not participate in the nationalist rally. In 2014, then-Minister for Environmental Protection and Regional Development, Einars Cilinskis was forced to resign after participating in the march.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center has condemned the lack of war crimes prosecutions in Latvia. In 2002 it launched "Operation: Last Chance," calling on Baltic citizens to identify suspected Nazi collaborators for monetary rewards. The initiative provoked controversy, as many Latvians continue to regard World War II as a war against the Soviet Union in which the Germans were their liberators.

In 2012, the town of Bauska erected a monument in memory of the Latvian SS Legion, with a small written inscription reading "To the Bauska defenders who fought against the second Russian occupation." The public reacted negatively to the monument, accusing Latvian authorities of glorifying fascism and of Nazism rehabilitation.

According to the World Jewish Restitution Organization, Latvia has provided restitution for only a small number of Jewish communal properties. The 1992 Law on the Restitution of Property to Religious Organizations provided for the return to "religious" organizations of "religious" property – primarily houses of worship and related property – confiscated between 1940 and 1992. The government returned only around 20 properties (mostly synagogues) and paid compensation for several others. Over the years, Latvia's Jewish community sought to add other types of communal property to be restituted. Several attempts to pass such restitution legislation have failed. The parliament is currently debating a draft legislation proposing restitution of five formerly Jewish-owned properties to the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia.

In February 2015, Latvia's parliament passed a bill that facilitates the return of five buildings that were owned by Jewish communities before the Holocaust to the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia.

In July 2016, Latvia's President Vējonis spoke at the Holocaust Memorial at the ruins of the Great Choral Synagogue that the Holocaust was an enormous tragedy for the Jewish people and Latvia.

## **Anti-Semitism:**

Latvia's large Russian-speaking community hosts local branches of the notoriously anti-Semitic neo-fascist Russian National Unity (RNE) movement, which is reportedly active in several Latvian cities and towns. The Latvian nationalist community has at times condemned Latvian Jews, many of whom are Russian speakers, as "occupiers" akin to Soviet-era Russian settlers; nationalists have also condemned official recognition of the Holocaust as allegedly minimizing Latvian suffering at the hands of the Soviets.

In 2000, a memorial tablet was torn out at the Rumbula Holocaust memorial, and swastikas were painted on the synagogue in Riga a day before Latvia's commemoration of Jewish Holocaust victims. In 2002, the Riga City Council authorized the construction of a gas station on the foundation of a synagogue destroyed by the Nazis, leading to protests from the Jewish community. In 2003, the Bikernieki Forest cemetery in Riga was vandalized, and several teenagers were arrested.

In February 2005, five men pled guilty to damaging forty tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Riga in 2003. They received suspended sentences.

In June 2005, the Latvian prosecutor's office filed incitement charges against a nationalist newspaper that had published derogatory articles calling for the deportation of Russian speakers and Jews living in Latvia.

In late December 2005, vandals toppled a large Hanukkah menorah near the Israeli embassy in Riga, which was repaired and re-erected.

In May 2006 a Holocaust memorial, which was to be unveiled in June, was knocked down by vandals. The memorial honored the murder of 120 Jews in the town of Rēzekne.

In 2006 and early 2007, a rash of attacks by local skinheads and alleged neo-Nazis on dark-skinned foreigners from Africa and Asia were reported in Riga. At least some of the attackers were charged with hate crimes and received prison sentences in early 2007. This was an important precedent, in that similar prior attacks were often described as "hooliganism" and resulted in suspended sentences or convictions on lesser charges.

In December 2010, three skinheads desecrated eighty-nine tombstones in the New Jewish Cemetery, smearing Nazi swastikas in white paint on tombstones and upturning eight monuments. The young skinheads were detained in January 2011, and the act of vandalism was sharply condemned by Latvia's president, prime minister, foreign minister, and also by the Russian embassy in Latvia. In March 2012, the Riga district court passed a suspended sentence on the vandals.

In March 2011, Uldis Freimanis, a prominent leader of the extreme right in Latvia, made anti-Semitic remarks on Latvian television, saying that Jews have no place in Latvian society. This led to sharp criticism and condemnation from the international Jewish community and human rights organizations. The local Jewish community filed a criminal complaint and a half a year later the security police closed the criminal investigation, reporting that "the facts of the case did not constitute a criminal offense."

In March 2012, hosts of the Radio NABA show and a guest speaker, who served as a Waffen SS legionnaire during World War II, made anti-Semitic comments. Embassy of Israel representatives sent an official letter to the Council criticizing the statements. The show was subsequently canceled.

In October 2014, a Latvian theater premiered a musical celebrating the life of Nazi war criminal Herbert Cukurs, which drew strong condemnation by the international Jewish community. The Latvian government criticized but did not ban the musical.

In the last three years, Jewish cemeteries and memorials were desecrated with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans in Riga, Valdemarpils, Limbazi, but there were no reports of anti-Semitic attacks.