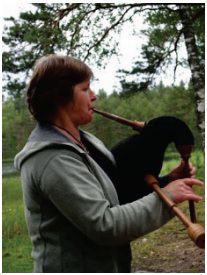
Expeditionary Culture Field Guide

LATVIA

U.S. AIR FORCE

About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success (Photo: A Latvian musician plays a popular folk instrument - the dūdas (bagpipe), photo courtesy of Culture Grams, ProQuest).



The guide consists of 2 parts:

Part 1 "Culture General" provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on the Baltic States.

Part 2 "Culture Specific" describes unique cultural features of Latvian society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training (Photo: A US jumpmaster inspects a Latvian paratrooper during International Jump Week hosted by Special Operations Command Europe).

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at http://culture.af.mil/ or contact the AFCLC Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil.

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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity (Photo: US and Latvian military personnel take a break during reconstruction of an orphanage in Latvia).

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing

constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as "cultural domains" – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, social and political systems, among others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture (Photo: Trakai Castle in Lithuania).

Social Behaviors across Cultures

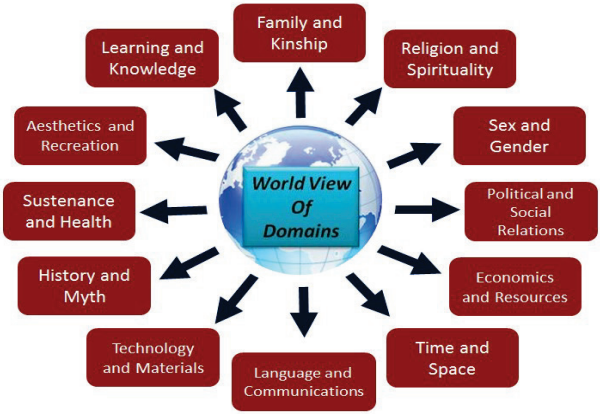
While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival,

although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.



This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

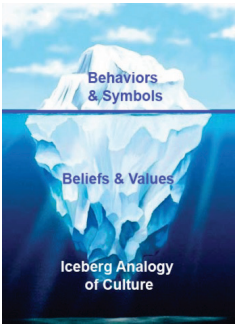
Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true, regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed (Photo: Winter in Estonia).

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change (Photo: US and Estonian soldiers).

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success (Photo: US and Lithuanian paratroopers prepare to parachute from a Black Hawk helicopter during a multinational exercise near Rukla, Lithuania).

As you travel through the Baltic States, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

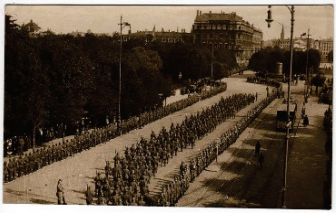
1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language (Photo: A relief depicting Lithuanians battling Teutonic Knights).

The Baltic States comprise 3 countries bordering the Baltic Sea on the northern edge of Europe: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. While archaeological finds suggest people inhabited the region as early as 9000 BC, scientists believe that Finno-Ugric tribes from the east settled in the region beginning around 3000 BC. In present-day Lithuania, these tribes were later joined by Indo-Europeans around 2000 BC. As their populations increased, all groups erected permanent, loosely-allied settlements sustained by agricultural production. By the 1st century AD, inhabitants began participating in trade networks that extended as far as the Roman Empire.

Beginning in the 9th century, Vikings from Scandinavia began raiding the Baltic coast, and by the 11th century, Russian armies made several fruitless invasions of the region. In the 12th century, German knights tasked by the Pope with Christianizing the inhabitants of the Baltic region began to conquer parts of Estonia and Latvia, consolidating their rule over both by end of the 13th century. While they did not always retain political control in subsequent centuries, the Germans dominated commerce in the region and significantly impacted Estonian and Latvian government, religion, and education as well as the social and justice systems.

By contrast, Lithuania successfully repelled the German invaders, forming a powerful independent state and later uniting with neighboring Poland to control large parts of the region through the 18th century. Unable to stave off persistent attacks from Russia, all 3 Baltic States fell to Russian rule by the late 18th century. Over the next nearly 120 years, Russia quelled nationalist movements and imposed a series of measures intended to promote Russification, including suppressing the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian languages and increasing Russian immigration to the region.



All 3 Baltic States experienced substantial conflict during World War I (WWI). Estonia and Latvia then engaged in wars of independence leading to several decades of peace. By contrast, as a diminished independent state Lithuania remained embroiled in territorial disputes through the onset of World War II (WWII). For that war's duration, all 3 States became a battleground. During its wartime occupation of the region, Nazi Germany murdered, deported, or confined most of the region's sizeable Jewish population and other "undesirables." The brunt of the regime's atrocities occurred in Latvia and Lithuania (Photo: German troops in Riga in 1916).

At war's end, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) absorbed all 3 nations, imposing its communist system, nationalizing private companies, and seizing private property. During their almost 50 years of occupation, the Soviets deported thousands of ethnic Baltic residents to prison camps in Russia. Furthermore, it murdered those deemed a threat to the new system, and repressed national languages, religions, and cultures while rapidly expanding industrial development.

Upon independence from the USSR in 1991, the 3 Baltic States transformed their governments into democracies. They adopted market capitalism and pivoted away from Russian influence to aggressively pursue political, military, and economic integration with the West.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

All 3 Baltic States are parliamentary republics led by an elected Prime Minister, President, and 1-chamber legislature. Executive power is vested in the Prime Minister, who leads the government together with the support of a Cabinet of Ministers. Presidential powers are largely ceremonial.

Within all 3 states, political parties typically form coalitions in order to attain and maintain power. The States have successfully created stable, well-run democracies, although they face several challenges to maintaining the democratic process. Weakened by overly broad and at times differing ideological profiles, some ruling political coalitions dissolve shortly after consolidation, in some cases resulting in frequent changes of government. In addition, corruption is particularly pervasive in Latvia and Lithuania, permeating all levels of government.

Following their independence from the USSR, the Baltic States formed strong regional and international alliances, such as joining the European Union (EU) and NATO. Today, the Baltic States are representative examples of democracy and post-Soviet economic growth, serving as advocates of a democratic and pro-Western agenda in the region (Photo: Former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates meets with the 3 Baltic State defense ministers in NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium).

The Baltic States rely heavily on NATO, the EU, the US, and other international allies to augment their military capabilities and to defend against external, state-level threats. Recently, rising tensions with neighboring Russia dominate the Baltic States' security environment.

In 2015, the US supported the Baltic States with $100 million in aid to build defense capacity and improve border security as part of a $3.4 billion "European Reassurance Initiative" fund intended to bolster NATO readiness in Europe. Meanwhile, NATO agreed to increase the number of troops permanently stationed in the region, despite fears that the increase in military presence might escalate tensions with Russia (Photo: City square in Riga, Latvia).

The 3 states exhibit differing levels of ethnic diversity. In Lithuania, 84% of the population are ethnic Lithuanians, while Poles are the largest minority group at just 7%. By contrast, the native populations of Estonia and Latvia are significantly lower, 69% and 61% respectively. In both countries, ethnic Russians comprise about 25% of the population.

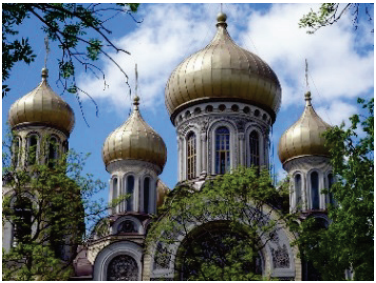
Relations between ethnic groups are somewhat strained in Estonia and Latvia where citizenship laws, language policies, and social divisions create some friction. Amid recently rising tensions with Russia, there is some concern that the Russian government may attempt to capitalize on the existing tension by provoking social unrest among those countries' sizeable Russian-speaking populations.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Residents of the Baltic region were among Europe's last to adopt Christianity. By the late 13th century, German knights had consolidated their rule over Estonia and Latvia and converted most residents to Christianity. By contrast, an independent Lithuanian state repelled the German crusaders, maintaining its pagan belief system as the state religion through the early 15th

century, when it finally adopted Christianity. Of note, many residents of all 3 Baltic States were slow to embrace the new religion, continuing their pagan practices or incorporating them into Christian worship for centuries (Photo: A church in Vilnius, Lithuania).



As the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe in the early 16th century, both Estonia and Latvia saw the Catholic Church supplanted by Lutheranism. By contrast, a Catholic counter movement in Lithuania prevented Protestantism from taking root. Throughout the centuries, Russian Orthodoxy and Judaism also enjoyed some growth in the region. The Lithuanian Jewish community grew significantly, eventually becoming a regional center of learning that lasted until the annihilation of the community during WWII.

During their years of occupation, the Soviets repressed all religious institutions and activities in the States. Further, the Soviets deported clergy while destroying or converting churches and synagogues for other uses. Over the years, membership in religious organizations decreased significantly.

Today, some 60% of Estonians and 44% of Latvians remain religiously unaffiliated. Among Estonians who do claim an affiliation, about 14% are Orthodox Christian and about 8% are Lutheran. Observant Latvians are about evenly split among Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Christians. By contrast, the majority of Lithuanians claim some religious affiliation, with about 77% identifying as Roman Catholics.

While Estonia and Latvia are home to small Muslim communities predominantly comprised of recent migrants, Lithuania's Muslim population traces back to the early 14th century. In all 3 Baltic States, small Jewish communities are experiencing some growth.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are fundamental elements of the Baltic States’ societies. Baltic residents maintain strong connections with both immediate and extended family members, supporting them emotionally and financially while providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. Most households comprise 2 parents and their children, with many families choosing to have just 1 or 2 children.

The urbanization of the Baltic States’ society has changed family life in recent years, as urban inhabitants marry later or cohabit (live in long-term, unmarried partnerships) and have fewer children. Consequently, while the traditional family structure remains common in rural areas, urban households are usually smaller and family structures more diverse (Photo: US Air National Guard member shows her camera to a Latvian boy).

While historically marriage was an arranged union, today both genders choose their own partners. Generally, couples spend several years dating, with some living together and having children before choosing to marry. Divorce carries little social stigma and is increasingly prevalent among younger generations. In fact, in all 3 Baltic States, divorce rates are among the highest in Europe and comparable to the US.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture’s categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Baltic States' historically patriarchal culture privileged men as leaders and providers. While some of the region's inhabitants continue to adhere to traditional values – men as breadwinners and heads of household and women as mothers and wives – gender roles and responsibilities began to transform during the Soviet era and are changing more rapidly in some families, particularly among younger generations in the post-Soviet period (Photo: US Army soldier talks with Estonian counterparts during a multinational military exercise).

Although women hold equal rights under the law, they continue to face barriers to their full participation in political, social, and economic spheres. For example, women often face discrimination in the hiring and promotion process, routinely receive lower wages than their male counterparts, and suffer from sexual harassment in the workplace.

Notably, Baltic women suffer from one of Europe's highest rates of gender based violence (GBV), both domestic abuse and rape. Considered private matters, many incidences of GBV go unreported. If cases are reported, the prosecution of perpetrators is rare. (Photo: US Marines perform for trainees at the Baltic Guard Youth Camp).

Despite these social and cultural barriers, the number of women serving in elected, diplomatic, and judicial positions across the region has increased over the past few decades. Baltic women

hold a significant proportion of national and sub-national government positions, maintaining similar participation rates in their national legislatures as women in the US. Additionally, in all 3 states women have held prominent leadership positions, including Prime Minister, President, and Speaker of Parliament.

Although homosexuality is legal in all 3 Baltic States, many residents consider homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender activity inappropriate.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

Following years of linguistic repression under Soviet rule, all 3 Baltic States named their native languages as official languages following their 1991 independence. Notably, while Estonian is derived from the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family, Latvian and Lithuanian belong to the Baltic branch of the Indo-European language family (Photo: Estonian street signs).

In Estonia and Latvia, about 1/3 of the population speak Russian as their first language. Russian is also prominent in Lithuania, where over 1/2 of residents speak it as a 2nd language. Russian was the predominant language in education, in media, and government proceedings during the Soviet era but no longer the region's main language. The Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian languages have supplanted Russian in each Baltic State, though many residents continue to use it in business and everyday life.

All 3 Baltic States are also home to native speakers of other languages including Polish, Ukrainian, Finnish, Belarusian, German, and other regional languages. English has become increasingly popular over the last several decades and is spoken widely in business and by young and urban Baltic communities.

Generally, Baltic residents demonstrate respect, privacy, and candor in their communication practices. They typically do not display strong emotions in public, tend to be reserved in all communications, feel comfortable in silence, and prefer direct speech. Residents usually share personal information only with family or close friends and rarely engage in small talk with strangers.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Prior to the 16th century, most formal education in the Baltic States occurred in religious institutions, where clergymen taught religion and basic literacy. By the 17th century, all 3 states saw the founding of universities and other centers of academic learning. By the late 1800s, Estonia and Latvia had developed extensive public school networks and reported some of the world's highest literacy rates.

The governments of all 3 states established free and compulsory public education systems in the early 20th century. The subsequent Soviet occupation brought significant changes to schools and curricula. During that period, the education system promoted Soviet ideology and communist tenets and emphasized Russian culture and language. It also prioritized vocational instruction, while simultaneously suppressing Baltic languages and culture (Photo: Lithuanian students).

Today, the Baltic States invest heavily in education, often at rates higher than in the US. School enrollment rates are high

and nearly 100% of Baltic residents are literate. Challenges to the education system include low teacher salaries, rural school closures, and disputes over the languages of instruction in Russian and other minority language schools.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Inhabitants of the Baltic States generally adhere to these habits, valuing punctuality, a sense of responsibility, and efficient and candid professional interactions. Within their personal lives, most Baltic residents invest significant time in establishing and maintaining relationships.

In Estonia and Latvia business tends to move at about the same pace as in the US, although more slowly in Lithuania. Like Americans, Estonians and Latvians prefer to build some trust before doing business but may engage in business activities without cultivating deep professional relationships. By contrast, Lithuanians typically invest time in building relations before conducting business. In all 3 Baltic States, residents rarely discuss their personal lives in business settings.

Concepts of personal space are similar to those in the US. For example, while conversing, Baltic residents stand at about the same distance as Americans, but may touch less often and display less affection when in public.

The Baltic States enjoy a number of public holidays. Besides the major Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter, residents typically celebrate their nation's Independence Day. Further, all 3 states mark mid-summer with a public holiday and various festivities (Photo: US Marines enjoy a cookout with members of the Baltic Guard Youth Camp in Latvia).

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of the Baltic States' forms of artistic expression, including their art, architecture, dance, music, and theater, reflect the region's rural peasant past, history of foreign occupations, and modern global trends.

Traditional music and dance in the Baltic States typically explore topics like nature, the seasons, rural life, and love. Folk songs usually include multiple melodic verses, while dances are slow and intricate. Under Russian and Soviet influence, classical ballet became a common form of dance across the region. The Baltic States' commitment to and enjoyment of song and dance are expressed every 4-5 years in national choir and dance festivals – a tradition that dates to the late 19th century. Rock, jazz, and classical music are popular contemporary genres (Photo: Latvian song and dance festival).

Rural landscapes and geometric designs are common themes in visual arts. Baltic residents also practice a variety of traditional handicrafts and folk art which reflect the region's rich peasant history, while incorporating Christian or ancient pagan motifs. Soccer and basketball are the most widely followed sports in the region. During the winter, residents also enjoy ice hockey, cross-country skiing, ice skating, bobsledding, and luge.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Baltic dishes tend to be simple, hearty, and mildly seasoned. Most meals are based on a staple – often potatoes, buckwheat, oats, or barley. Dark bread is particularly popular across the region and accompanies almost every meal. Although beer is

the most popular alcoholic beverage, Baltic residents also enjoy unique herbal liquors and vodka.

Health in the Baltic States has improved significantly in recent decades, as evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Most residents have access to free, state-funded healthcare.

The region's healthcare systems face several challenges such as rapidly growing healthcare expenditures associated with a shrinking yet aging population. Further, although residents generally have access to modern healthcare, the quality of care varies between urban and rural areas. Rural clinics are often burdened with heavy workloads, equipped with outdated medical equipment, and understaffed (Photo: Latvian rye bread).

Non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases account for the majority of all deaths in the region. In all 3 Baltic States, cardiovascular diseases are overwhelmingly the leading causes of death, followed by cancers and respiratory diseases. In addition, Baltic residents suffer from high rates of suicide and alcohol poisoning. Notably, Baltic men experience significantly higher mortality rates than Baltic women primarily because they are more likely to smoke, abuse alcohol, and follow unhealthy diets.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Prior to the 19th century, the states maintained largely agrarian economies, with many residents engaged in subsistence agriculture or laboring as serfs on German-owned holdings.

During the 1800s, Russian occupiers began to industrialize the region. These efforts intensified during the Soviet era, when the government implemented a centrally-controlled economic

system, established large collective farms, and developed various heavy industries.

Following their independence from the USSR in 1991, all 3 Baltic States immediately sought to de-centralize their economies and adopt liberal, free market systems. The transition initially caused their economies to contract, but by the mid-2000s, all 3 nations experienced significant growth. While the Baltic States' 2004 accession to the EU spurred further economic expansion, the 2008 global financial crisis slowed investment in the region and reduced demand for exports. As a result, the Baltic economies experienced severe contraction.

Reacting quickly, all 3 Baltic States enacted strict internal reforms, allowing their economies to recover within just a few years. Today, the Baltic States maintain stable, diversified economies, characterized by large, successful service industries and modernized industrial sectors. In fact, experts predict that each state will maintain current economic growth rates, which exceed the EU average, through 2020. Despite these positive trends, the Baltic States' economies face some challenges, including increasing income inequality, relatively low wages and productivity, corruption, outward migration of skilled workers, and ongoing unemployment (Photo: Skyline of Tallinn, Estonia).

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. While all 3 Baltic States have invested heavily into extensive road networks and efficient public transportation systems, Lithuania maintains the best roads. While only about 1/5 of roads are paved in Estonia and Latvia, over 4/5 of Lithuanian roads are paved. Railways connect major cities throughout the region, and a planned high-speed train will soon

connect the Baltic States with Europe. Because Latvia and Lithuania geographically separate Russia from Western Europe, both nations serve as important regional transit and trade hubs.

Modern information technology is widely available throughout the Baltic States. Cell phones are extremely popular while about 80% of residents regularly use the Internet. Estonia enjoys the region's highest rates of Internet connectivity and usage, especially among the younger generations.

Estonia is a net energy exporter, producing most of its energy from its large shale oil industry. By contrast, both Latvia and Lithuania heavily rely on oil and natural gas imports from Russia to meet domestic demand. Looking to decrease their dependence on Russia, both nations are actively diversifying their energy sources with the goal of reducing Russian imports in coming years.

Renewable energy is an important resource in Latvia and Lithuania, where it comprises about 39% and 20% of energy consumption respectively. Although Estonia is currently generating the least amount of renewable energy in the region, it plans to increase renewable consumption by 2020 (Photo: US Army and Lithuanian Land Forces personnel participate in airborne exercises near Rukla, Lithuania).

The EU is by far the region's largest trading partner. As EU members, the Baltic States enjoy a stable currency, a secure business environment, and free movement of goods and services. In addition, the Baltic States maintain important trade relationships with Russia. Regional trade among the Baltic States is also strong.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize the Baltic States' society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Latvia.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Dominated by foreign powers for centuries, Latvia has had an eventful and often tragic history, with its population suffering famine, plague, war, invasion, and occupation. Latvia gained independence twice in its history, first between the 2 World Wars and again in 1991. Since then, Latvia has transformed its government into a democracy, adopted market capitalism, and joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

Early History

Archaeological finds indicate people inhabited Latvia as early as 9000 BC. Scientists believe Finno-Ugric tribes, ancestors of Estonians and Latvia's Liv ethnic group, moved into the area from the east between 3000 and 2000 BC. Beginning around 2000 BC, members of Baltic tribes, including Latgals, Zemgals, and Cours, among others, began arriving from the south. Gradually, the Baltic peoples, ancestors of most modern-day Latvians, constructed a network of loosely-allied communities defended by wooden forts.

From early times, the Baltic tribes participated in extensive trade networks extending from Scandinavia through Latvia as far as modern-day Istanbul (Turkey). The region's main export was amber, a fossilized tree resin often made into jewelry (see p. 1 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). In the 1st century AD, Roman historian Tacitus described the Latvian Baltic tribes as farmers living by the "amber sea," a reference to the abundance of amber that washed up on Latvia's Baltic Sea shores (pictured).

This participation in trade networks also brought conflict. Beginning in the 11th century, Russian armies made several unsuccessful invasions of the region. While the Russians could not gain permanent control of any territory, their Orthodox Christian religion did penetrate parts of eastern Latvia (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

German Conquest

In the mid-12th century, merchants from the Holy Roman Empire entered the Baltic region. Intent on Christianizing Baltic inhabitants, a German Catholic monk convinced the Pope, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome, to name him bishop of Latvia in 1188. Although unsuccessful in converting the region's inhabitants to Catholicism, the Germans inspired the Pope's religious crusade against all northern European non-Christians starting in 1193 (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

In response, the German bishop in Latvia, Albert of Buxhoevden, established the Order of the Brothers of the Sword, an organization of German knights with the mission of Christianizing the inhabitants of the Baltic region, by sword if necessary. In 1201, Albert led a fleet of ships from the Baltic Sea up the Daugava River to the site of a small fishing village inhabited by members of the Liv ethnic group. There, Albert founded Riga, modern-day Latvia's capital, and named the region "Livland" or in Latin "Livonia" (present-day southern Estonia and Latvia) (Photo: Statue of Albert on the façade of the Riga Dome Cathedral).

While the mission of the Order was ostensibly religious, the knights' own motivation was primarily economic. From Riga, the knights advanced across the countryside, conquering local communities, confiscating residents' land, and dividing up the spoils among themselves. By 1207, the knights had conquered the Livs and by 1214 most of the Latgals.

The knights encountered stiff resistance as they moved south. Following a 1236 defeat against a combined Zemgalian-Lithuanian army, the knights merged with the German Teutonic Order and reorganized locally as the Livonian Order. The knights continued their subjugation efforts, defeating the Cours in the 1260s. After defeating the Zemgals – the sole remaining Latvian resistance – in 1290, the Livonian Order consolidated its rule over Latvia and neighboring Estonia. The resulting Livonian Confederation, centered at the Latvian town of Cēsis, was the dominant political force for the next 300 years (Illustration: An 1870 depiction of Livonian Order knights).

Many Germans proceeded to acquire vast agricultural estates, where they forced Latvians to labor. To prevent local resistance, some Germans built castles across the region. Other Germans settled in newly-established towns as merchants and craftsmen. Several Latvian towns, including Riga, Cēsis, and Ventspils, profited as members of the Hanseatic League, a powerful trading confederation of northern European towns and cities.

Although they did not always have political control, the Germans became entrenched in Latvia and would dominate commerce and have a hand in government, religion, education, and the justice system for the next 500 years. This domination would include the widespread use of the German language until 19th-century Russification efforts (see “The Latvian National Awakening” below).

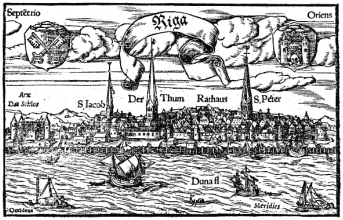
By the early 16th century, most of the Latvian ethnic groups had merged into a single group, the Letts or Latvians, while a few pockets of Latgals and Livs with their distinct languages (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*) remained in the

west. Further, most Latvians were serfs, semi-free peasants legally bound to the land they worked for German estate-holders.

Concurrently, the Livonian Confederation was beginning to weaken. As major landowners, the Livonian Order and the Catholic Church were competitors, while the city of Riga with its own privileges and power was hostile to both. When the Protestant (Lutheran) Reformation reached Latvia from its origins in Germany in the 1520s (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), Riga's inhabitants embraced the new faith, seeing it as a way to avoid the financial obligations demanded by the Catholic Church. In 1554, the leader of the Livonian Order declared Protestantism the state religion.

The Livonian War

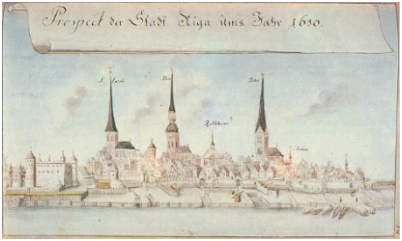
Split by religious dissent, the Livonian Confederation was unable to defend itself against its neighbors. Beginning with an invasion by Russian Tsar (ruler) Ivan IV ("the Terrible") in 1558, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Sweden, and Russia began a 25 year-long struggle for control that resulted in the desertion of farms, famine, and significant bloodshed in the region. In 1562, the Livonian Order was dissolved. To avoid Russian rule, the German residents in Latvia's West sought protection from Poland-Lithuania. The resulting Duchy of Courland remained an autonomous region of Poland-Lithuania for over 200 years. Poland-Lithuania also acquired Riga in 1581 (Illustration: A woodcut of Riga from 1547).



Then in 1592, Sweden intensified its territorial struggles with Poland-Lithuania, with most fighting occurring on Latvian soil. In 1621, Sweden invaded Livonia and captured Riga, then captured most of Livonia in 1625. Sweden's claims to Livonia were formalized with a 1629 treaty that allowed Poland-Lithuania to retain Latgale in southeastern Latvia as well as Courland in the west.

Partition between Sweden and Poland-Lithuania

The Swedes ruled Riga and northern Latvia for much of the 17th century, a period of relative progress and enlightenment. Although the Germans retained their holdings while the local Latvian peasants continued to toil as serfs, the Swedish rulers began to implement certain reforms to improve the serfs' lot. Besides making significant improvements in education (see p. 1 of *Learning and Knowledge*), the Swedes banned torture and even abolished serfdom in limited areas (Illustration: Riga in 1650).



Meanwhile, in western Latvia, the Duchy of Courland flourished as a part of Poland-Lithuania, developing a shipbuilding industry and its own navy. Further, the Duchy acquired its own colonies on the Caribbean island of Tobago and in Gambia, West Africa.

The Great Northern War

Rebuffed by Sweden and Poland-Lithuania in the 16th century, Russia renewed its efforts to acquire Baltic territory in the 18th century. Along with allies Poland-Lithuania and Denmark, Russia, under the leadership of Tsar Peter I ("the Great"), attacked the Swedes simultaneously from the east and west in 1700. Although the Swedes were able to repel these initial attacks and occupy Courland for a short while, a reformed Russian army re-invaded and proceeded to devastate large areas of Livonia.

In 1710, the Swedes surrendered Riga to the Russians, then formally ceded all of their Baltic provinces to Russia, including holdings in northern Latvia in 1721. Following a series of late 18th-century partitions of Poland-Lithuania, Russia acquired additional holdings in Latvia, including Latgale and Courland. By 1795, Russia controlled the entire Latvian territory.

Russian Rule

Like the Swedes before them, the Russians allowed the Germans to retain their estates, even engaging them to keep order among the Latvian peasantry and collect taxes. Further, some Germans acquired prominent positions in Russia's military and government administration. Consequently, power and capital remained firmly within German and Russian hands.

Beginning in the 1810s, the Russians began to introduce measures to restrict serfdom in Latvia and by 1819 had abolished the practice outright. Because these changes did not grant Latvians property-owning rights, there was ongoing unrest among the peasantry. Eventually, the peasants received the right to purchase land, and in 1861 serfs were emancipated across the entire Russian Empire.

The Latvian National Awakening

During this period, the absence of war and famine spurred population growth. Many Latvians became independent farmers as rights to property were extended to them. As Latvians acquired access to better education, many moved to towns, prospering due to industrialization. By the mid-19th century, a small Latvian middle class was developing in Riga and other towns.

Against this backdrop of national prosperity and new opportunities for Latvians, a sense of Latvian national consciousness arose. Led initially by Latvians who had moved to towns seeking work, the National Awakening Movement was formed in 1856 with the aim of promoting a Latvian national identity by supporting the study of Latvian history and culture and the use of the Latvian language (Photo: Krišjānis Valdemārs, considered the father of the Awakening Movement).

Some Latvians began organizing political movements that were hostile to both the Russian regime and German control of business and agriculture. For example, the leader of the "New Latvians" group founded the first Latvian newspaper in 1862.

Further, scholars began to collect and publish Latvian folk songs, stories, and poems to provide Latvians a sense of their own cultural history (see “Myth” below).

Meanwhile, the 1871 founding of the German Empire caused considerable worry among the Russians, especially given the strong German presence in Latvia. Consequently, the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries marked a period of rigid Russification in Latvia. For example, the Russians took control of the Latvian school system and attempted to replace German with Russian as the national language.

The 1905 Russian Revolution

The 1905 Russian Revolution with its mass political and social unrest spread quickly to Latvia. For the first time, activists openly discussed the idea of an independent Latvian state. Other Latvians took more extreme actions, participating in strikes, uprisings, and disturbances which killed scores of Russians and Germans.

With the support of German residents, the Russian army moved in to restore order, executing 1,000-2,000 Latvian rebels and deporting another 2,000 to Siberia. With this merciless crackdown, a whole generation of nationalist activists was silenced. To discourage further unrest, the Russian government resettled 20,000 Germans from other parts of the Russian Empire and increased Russian immigration to Latvia.

World War I (WWI) and the Russian Revolution of 1917

With the start of WWI in 1914, Latvia quickly became a battleground between Germany and Russia. Following the Germans’ invasion of western Latvia in spring 1915, the Russians gave the Latvians permission to form their own military units led by Latvian officers. These troops, called the Latvian Riflemen (pictured), engaged the Germans in fall 1915, forcing them to retreat for a few months.

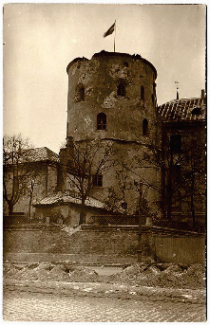
When the Germans attacked Riga in April 1916, combined Russian and Latvian forces compelled the Germans to retreat again. Encouraged, the Latvian and Russian troops tried to force the Germans out of western Latvia in the famous Christmas Battles, which began on December 23, 1916 and lasted 25 days. Suffering heavy losses, the Latvians and Russians were ultimately unable to resist the Germans, who captured Riga in September 1917 (Photo: German officers in Riga during WWI).

Meanwhile revolutionary forces had continued to simmer in Russia since 1905. In February 1917, Russian revolutionaries forced Russian Tsar Nicholas II to abdicate. When the provisional Russian government replaced Latvia's imperial governor with a Latvian commissioner, Latvian nationalists seized the opportunity to assemble their own provisional councils. Then, the provisional Russian government was toppled in the so-called October Revolution of 1917, which brought the socialist Bolsheviks to power under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, to power in Russia. The Bolsheviks quickly assumed control of parts of Latvia where some Latvians joined their cause, including some Riflemen.

Bolshevik control was short-lived. In March 1918, Russia which would become the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Germany signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which transferred sovereignty over Latvia from Russia to Germany. Like the Bolsheviks', German control lasted just a few months. On November 11, 1918, the Germans surrendered to the US and the Allies to end WWI. Just a week later, on November 18 (celebrated as Independence Day today), a coalition of Latvian political parties known as the Democratic Block under the leadership of Kārlis Ulmanis, head of the Latvian Farmers' Union, formally declared Latvia's independence. Unfortunately for Latvia, neither the Latvian Bolsheviks nor the Germans who remained in Latvia accepted the declaration.

The War of Independence

Over the next year, the Bolsheviks (both Soviet and Latvian), Germans, and Latvian nationalists struggled for control of Latvia. As most German troops retreated, the Soviets, with some assistance from Latvian Riflemen, set up a provisional Bolshevik government and captured Riga in January 1919 (Photo: Riga Castle in 1919 after heavy shelling).



Meanwhile, the Latvian government under Ulmanis fled Riga for Liepāja, a city in Latvia's far west. There, German forces initially welcomed the Latvians, then turned on Ulmanis and his followers in April, forcing the Latvian leadership to flee to a nearby British warship. Due to pressure from Great Britain and other Western powers, the Germans withdrew from Liepāja and headed back north toward Riga. Upon their arrival in May, the Germans forced the Bolsheviks to withdraw. A combined force of Latvians and Estonians, supported by British and French warships, then compelled the Germans to abandon Riga. In July, the British facilitated Ulmanis's return to Riga.

Sensing a last chance to seize Latvian territory, the Germans mounted a surprise attack on Riga in October. This time Latvian and Estonian forces, again supported by a British/French naval squadron, soundly defeated the Germans, forcing them to withdraw completely from Latvia. In late 1919, the Latvians turned their attention to Latgale in southeastern Latvia, the only territory still under foreign domination. With support from Polish forces, the Latvians drove the Bolsheviks from Latgale over the winter 1919-1920.

Independence

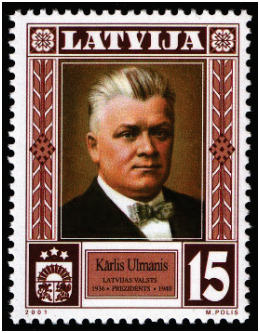
For the first time in its history, all of Latvia was united under Latvian leadership. Despite this reality, recognition was slow to come. In August 1920, the USSR signed the Riga Treaty, renouncing its right of sovereignty over Latvia. In January 1921 the other European powers officially recognized independent

Latvia. In February 1922 Latvia adopted a constitution that provided for a republic led by a President and single-chamber Parliament of 100 members.

Latvia entered independence with several burdens. WWI and the War of Independence had reduced the population by 1/4. The problem of a diminished workforce was compounded by the fact that many Latvian children had received no schooling during the war years. Further, Latvia's infrastructure was in ruins and industrial output had fallen by 83%.

Despite these challenges, Latvia's 22 years of independence were generally a time of peace and prosperity. With trade re-directed toward the West, the country flourished economically. Land reform broke up the large German estates and re-distributed holdings among Latvian farmers, leading to enhanced agriculture output. The government introduced compulsory education (see p. 2 of *Learning and Knowledge*), while the Latvian language enjoyed a resurgence. By the 1930s, visitors noted that living conditions there were better than in many parts of Western Europe.

In contrast to Latvia's economic and social successes, its political situation was unstable. Between 1922 and 1934, Latvia's government consisted of a succession of short-lived coalition governments, although the continued presence of Farmers' Union leader Ulmanis (pictured) provided some continuity. The worldwide Great Depression of the early 1930s led to widespread disillusionment with Latvia's political process. Further, several anti-democratic political groups emerged that fell under the influence of fascist tendencies sweeping the continent at the time.



As Prime Minister (PM) in 1934, Ulmanis declared a state of emergency, dissolved the Parliament and all political parties, and established authoritarian rule. In 1936, Ulmanis appointed himself

President and proceeded to dismantle Latvia's democratic institutions, aiming to create a state along the model of Mussolini's fascist Italy. Before long, the events of World War II interrupted his plans and ended Latvia's independence.

World War II (WWII)

In August 1939, Nazi Germany and the USSR signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a secret nonaggression pact which essentially divided Eastern Europe into Soviet and German spheres of influence, with Latvia falling into the Soviet sphere.

World War II began a month later, with Hitler's invasion of Poland. In October, the Soviet government imposed a treaty of mutual assistance on Latvia that allowed the Soviets to occupy Latvian military bases. Latvia's remaining Germans were recalled to Germany, although most had not lived there for generations.

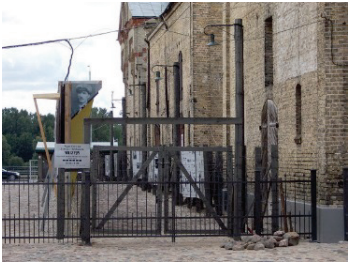
The Soviet Occupation: By mid-1940, Soviet forces occupied the entire country. While Ulmanis initially urged his countrymen to remain calm, the Soviets moved quickly to remove political office-holders, deporting Ulmanis and other leaders to Soviet prison camps, mainly in Siberia. A puppet government installed by the Soviets approved a resolution in July to join the USSR. Some 2 weeks later, the USSR formally incorporated Latvia as one of its constituent republics.

The Soviets moved quickly to impose their communist social and economic system, nationalizing private companies and seizing private property. The Soviets replaced the Latvian currency with their own, forbade religious education at school, and made Christmas a normal working day. Further, over the next year, the Soviets executed or deported around 35,000 Latvians, primarily intellectuals and leaders (Photo: Demonstration in support of the Soviets in December 1940).

The Nazi Occupation: In June 1941, Germany turned on its former ally and attacked the USSR. By July, German forces occupied Latvia. While many Latvians greeted the Germans as their liberators from Soviet rule, the realities of occupation soon dashed their hopes for a return to independence.

For the next 3 years, Germany occupied Latvia, making it part of its *Ostland* province along with Estonia, Lithuania, and Belarus. The Germans conscripted many Latvians into the Latvian Legion, a unit of the infamous Waffen-SS troops. Some Latvians volunteered to serve in the Legion or in other German units primarily because they feared a return to Soviet rule should the Germans lose. Meanwhile, the pro-independence Latvian Central Council pursued military and diplomatic activities to resist the Nazis and avoid a return of the Soviets, although their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful.

With its sizeable Jewish population (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*), Latvia became a target of and location for some of the Nazi regime's most horrific activities. Shortly following the German invasion, special units arrived, confining Jews to a barbed wire-surrounded ghettos. Some Jews were sent to nearby concentration camps, including the Salaspils and Kaiserwald camps near Riga (Photo: The Riga Ghetto Museum depicts life within the Jewish ghetto during WWII).



Other Latvian Jews were murdered outright: in late 1941, around 25,000 Jews from Riga's ghetto – primarily women, children and the elderly – were shot in the Rumbula Forest near Riga. Between 1941 and 1944, the Nazis murdered around 45,000 Jews and other "undesirables" in the Biķernieki Forest in southern Latvia, burying them in mass graves. In total, experts estimate that around 200,000 Latvians, both Jews and non-Jews, were killed in action, deported to Soviet labor camps, or exterminated by the Nazis during WWII.

In 1944, the Soviet army began another invasion of Latvia. With the Latvian Legion leading the defense, the Germans were able to hold out in western Latvia but unable to stop the Soviets' advance through the rest of the country. When the Soviets took Riga and eastern Latvia in October, they immediately conscripted thousands of Latvians and sent them to fight against the Latvian Legion in the northwest. As the war neared its end in 1945, more than 150,000 Latvians fled to Germany or Sweden, many continuing on to Great Britain, Canada, and Australia (Photo: Latvian residents welcome the Soviet army as liberators from the Nazi occupation in 1944).

The Soviet Era

Following Germany's surrender in May 1945, the USSR immediately reincorporated Latvia, a move never recognized by Western nations. To eradicate Latvian national consciousness and restructure Latvia in the Soviet Socialist model, the state implemented repressive Russification measures. Between 1946 and 1949, the Soviets deported around 150,000 Latvians in several waves to prison camps in northern Russia and Siberia. A particularly large wave of deportation occurred in 1949, consisting primarily of farmers unwilling to join the Soviets' new agriculture collectives.

The Forest Brothers: In the years following the end of WWII, as many as 20,000 Latvians joined an anti-Soviet partisan movement known as the Forest Brothers. Until disbanded by the Soviet security forces in 1957, the Forest Brothers conducted various acts of armed opposition.

Besides agricultural collectivization programs, the Soviets chose Latvia as an investment center for industry, including steel manufacturing and shipbuilding. To provide the workforce required by these and other projects, the Soviets encouraged ethnic Russians and residents of other parts of the USSR, such as Ukraine and Belarus, to move to Latvia. Further, over the course of the Soviet occupation some 200,000 Soviet military

personnel also lived in Latvia, many choosing to remain there upon retirement. Because of these policies, the proportion of Latvians in the population decreased significantly over the years: by 1990 almost half the population was Russian-speaking. Today, some Latvian communities are still majority Russian-speaking while Russian/Latvian identity and language disputes continue to simmer (see p. 13-14 of *Political and Social Relations* and p. 2 of *Language and Communication*).

Over the next 3 decades, due largely to Latvia's successful industrialization, Latvians generally enjoyed a higher standard of living than most other Soviet republics. Denied political expression, many Latvians turned to cultural outlets, including folklore groups and choral societies (see p. 2-5 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Other Latvians maintained a spirit of resistance through theater or literature (see p. 6-7 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*) or through their religious activities (Pictured: A 1973 Soviet stamp depicts participants in Latvia's song festival).

An Opening

Beginning in 1985, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced a series of reforms that would eventually result in the dissolution of the USSR. These reforms – most notably ***perestroika*** (restructuring) and ***glasnost*** (openness) – introduced market forces into the struggling Soviet economy and increased individuals' freedom of expression. Although the attempted reforms were largely unsuccessful, deteriorating economic conditions sparked a wave of democratic movements in the Soviet republics, including Latvia.

While some early demonstrations focused on ecological issues, the first anti-communist demonstration occurred in June 1987, when a large crowd gathered at Riga's Freedom Monument to protest the 1941 deportations to Siberia. A year later, anti-Soviet feelings were further fueled when the Latvian Writers'

Union revealed the details of the once-secret 1939 USSR-Germany nonaggression pact, demonstrating that the Soviet Union's claim that Latvia had "voluntarily" joined the USSR was untrue. By late 1988 the Latvian flag, outlawed by the USSR, became a common sight at rallies and in November was raised over Riga Castle (pictured).

During this period new political organizations emerged, including the Popular Front of Latvia (PFL), which in 1989 called for full independence. In August 1989, some 2 million Latvians, Estonians, and Lithuanians joined hands to form a human chain stretching from Tallinn (Estonia) through Latvia to Vilnius (Lithuania) to mark the 50th anniversary of the USSR-Germany pact.

With demands for independence intensifying, Latvia held elections in March 1990 that produced a pro-independence majority. Soon, the Latvian Supreme Council declared its intent to pursue full independence and announced the restoration of the 1922 constitution. In response, a pro-Moscow faction launched its own political organization and attempted to gain the support of ethnic Russians who feared the implications of Latvian independence. For the next 9 months, Latvia was neither independent nor fully under Soviet rule.

In January 1991, Gorbachev sent a signal to all potential break-away Soviet republics by ordering troops to seize key installations in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius. Fearing a similar move in Riga, some 700,000 Latvians mounted a pro-independence demonstration on January 13. To protect key sites, the demonstrators erected and manned barriers. On January 20, Soviet troops attacked the Latvian Interior Ministry, killing several Latvians and injuring many others. Following severe international criticism, Gorbachev abandoned plans for a further crackdown.

Latvia again entered an uneasy state of limbo until August 1991 when Soviet troops again threatened the Latvian

Parliament during a coup attempt against Gorbachev in Moscow. When it became apparent that the coup attempt had failed, the Soviet troops retreated. Immediately, the Latvian government declared independence again, which the international community recognized within a few days and which the USSR recognized within a few weeks.

Independence Restored

In 1993, independent Latvia introduced its own currency and held its first post-Soviet elections, bringing Guntis Ulmanis (grand-nephew of Kārlis Ulmanis) to power as President. The new government sought to transform Latvia into a free market economy, though at a slower pace than neighboring Estonia.

An immediate issue before the new republic was the rights of non-ethnic Latvian residents who had immigrated to Latvia after the 1940 Soviet annexation. For the 1993 election, the government granted only pre-1940 citizens and their descendants the right to vote. It then announced that citizenship would be granted only to those post-1940 immigrants who demonstrated a basic proficiency in Latvian. This decision attracted international criticism and strained relations between Latvia and Russia (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*). Another pressing issue was the more than 50,000 Soviet troops stationed in Latvia – it was 1998 before the last of these troops left (Photo: Daugava River in Riga).

Transition from a Soviet state to independence had its challenges. The uncertainties of the market economy, including inflation, high unemployment, and business bankruptcies caused substantial economic suffering. Further, some Latvians regretted the loss of the social safety net the Soviet system had provided. For the majority, though, the transition was welcome.

Since independence, no political party has been able to secure consistent support. Instead, a succession of right-of-center coalitions have formed alliances to control Parliament and the office of Prime Minister (PM) (see p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*). Despite this political instability, Latvia has successfully reoriented itself toward the West, joining the Council of Europe in 1995 and becoming a full member of both NATO and the EU in 2004 (Photo: Old Riga).

Modern Latvia

While Latvia experienced an economic boom following its accession to the EU, the 2008-09 European financial crisis profoundly affected the country, requiring strict austerity measures. These included tax increases, deep cuts in public spending, and stringent financial controls. These actions were met with fierce opposition that caused the collapse of the ruling coalition in 2009. A shaky coalition headed by PM Valdis Dombrovskis took control, then retained power following a 2011 election that saw the pro-Russia Harmony Party gain significant support (see p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*). In 2011-12, the Harmony Party and the right-wing National Alliance clashed over language: when the Alliance introduced a petition to establish Latvian as the sole language for education, the Harmony Party countered with a petition to make Russian an official language. Neither effort succeeded.

Following the 2013 collapse of a supermarket roof killing more than 50 people, PM Dombrovskis resigned, though he remained in office to oversee Latvia's adoption of the EU's euro as its currency in January 2014. As the next PM, Laimdota Straujuma focused on strengthening national defense in the wake of Russia's regional belligerence (see p. 11 of *Political and Social Relations*). Following disputes within her political coalition, Straujuma resigned in late 2015. The Parliament approved Maris Kucinskis as her successor in early 2016.

Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity.

For Latvians, myths and folklore played an important role in maintaining their identity through years of conflict and occupation by foreign forces. During Latvia's 19th century "National Awakening," scholars collected myths and stories to help promote Latvian culture. For example, Andrejs Pumpurs collected folk stories about a half-human, half-bear creature called Lāpčlēšis, compiling and publishing them as Latvia's national epic poem in 1888.

As in many Latvian folktales, ***Lāpčlēšis*** contains references to supernatural forces such as demons and witches and describes a struggle between good and evil. The son of a female bear, Lāpčlēšis is the epic's central character. With the extraordinary powers he inherited from his mother, many of which emanate from his bear ears, Lāpčlēšis performs heroic deeds. These include ridding the shores of the Daugava River of monsters and defeating an Estonian giant.

At the epic's end, Lāpčlēšis unites the Latvian people in order to repel foreign invaders. Betrayed by a former ally, Lāpčlēšis loses his powers when the Black Knight, a German giant, cuts off his ears. Lāpčlēšis and his opponent fall into the Daugava where they continue to fight. The epic ends with the prediction that Lāpčlēšis will one day defeat his rival, bringing freedom to the Latvian people. Of note, Latvia honors its war heroes every year on November 11, Lāpčlēšis Day (Photo: A 1932 stamp depicts Lāpčlēšis as Riga's protector).

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name
Republic of Latvia
Latvijas Republika

Political Borders
Estonia: 207 mi
Russia: 206 mi
Belarus: 100 mi
Lithuania: 338 mi
Coastline: 309 mi

Capital
Riga

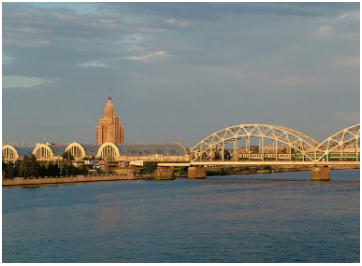
Demographics
Latvia's population is about 2 million, making it the 2nd most populous Baltic State after Lithuania, yet one of least populated nations in all of Europe. Significantly, Latvia's population is shrinking at an annual rate of -1.1%, in part due to Latvia's low birthrate (see p. 4 of *Sex and Gender*) and high emigration stemming from Latvians' search for employment abroad. Latvia is primarily urban: 68% of the population lives in metropolitan areas, predominantly in the capital city of Riga.

Flag
The Latvian flag consists of 3 horizontal, alternating bands of maroon and white. According to a Latvian myth, the white band – at half the width of the maroon bands – symbolizes a white sheet used to cover a wounded warrior, while the top and bottom maroon stripes represent his spilled blood. While records indicate the flag was used by Latvian tribes as early as 1280, it was officially adopted by independent Latvia in 1918, suppressed during Soviet rule (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), and finally re-adopted in 1990.

Geography

Situated in the Baltic region on the northern edge of Europe, Latvia shares a border with Estonia to the north, Russia to the east, Belarus to the southeast, and Lithuania to the south. Latvia's long coastline faces the Gulf of Riga and the Baltic Sea. Latvia's total land area is about 39,000 sq mi, making it slightly larger than West Virginia and about twice the size of Belgium.

Latvia's West is characterized by a relatively flat landscape with low-lying, fertile plains. By contrast, Latvia's East features rolling hills interspersed with river valleys, bogs, and marshes. With an elevation of about 1,024 ft, Gaiziņkalns Hill is Latvia's highest point. Coniferous and deciduous forests cover almost 45% of the country's territory. Latvia is home to about 5,000 mostly small and shallow lakes, the largest of which is the 50 sq mi Lake Lubāns. The Daugava (pictured in Riga) is Latvia's longest river which divides the country in half. It originates in Russia and stretches approximately 624 mi to empty into the Gulf of Riga.



Climate

Latvia experiences a temperate, maritime climate with high levels of precipitation and 4 distinct seasons, including mild summers and harsh winters. Temperatures in the winter month of January average around 24°F, but may drop as low as -4°F. By contrast, in the summer month of July, temperatures average 65°F and rarely climb above 80°F. Generally, coastal areas enjoy a milder climate, moderated somewhat by the warm Gulf Stream, while inland areas experience colder temperatures. Of note, the number of daylight hours varies dramatically through the year. For example, in June days last about 18 hours, while daylight in December lasts no more than 6 hours. Rainfall is heaviest June-September, while snowfall generally occurs between January-March.

Natural Hazards

Latvia suffers from relatively few natural hazards. During the winter, Latvians may be vulnerable to heavy snowfall, although roadways typically remain cleared and safe to drive. Latvia's most significant hazard is occasional springtime flooding resulting from melting snow and the breakup of river ice.

Environmental Issues

Similar to other former Soviet states, Latvia's environmental issues stem from decades of rapid industrialization and the Soviets' concurrent environmental mismanagement during their occupation (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*). Detrimental activities, which caused rampant water and air pollution, included dumping untreated sewage into drinking water reservoirs and improperly disposing of hazardous industrial waste (Photo: A port in Riga).

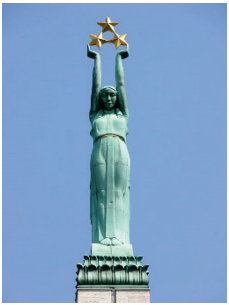
Following independence, Latvia's government immediately began to address the environmental degradation. For example, it implemented large-scale wastewater treatment programs and enacted strict legislation to regulate agricultural runoff, industrial waste, and the release of air pollutants from power plants. Despite these efforts, some coastal and inland waters remain heavily polluted, while industrial centers like Riga, Daugavpils, and Liepāja suffer from air pollution caused by toxic manufacturing and automobile emissions.

Government

Latvia is a constitutional democracy with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 26 districts (***rajons***), which further subdivide into 110 counties (***pagasts***) administered by local governments. Initially adopted in 1922 and formally reinstated in 1991 (see p. 16 of *History and Myth*), Latvia's constitution outlines the structure of government and the rights of Latvian citizens, including of ethnic minorities.

Executive Branch

Latvia's President, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief of Latvia's National Armed Forces, is elected by the Parliament and may serve up to 2 consecutive 4-year terms. Although presidential powers are largely ceremonial, the President has the authority to initiate legislation and also serves as Latvia's spokesperson abroad. Latvia's current President, Raimonds Vējonis, took office in 2015 and is currently serving his 1st term.



By contrast, executive power is vested in the Prime Minister (PM, known as the Minister President in Latvian), who is head-of-government. The PM is nominated by the President and approved by the Parliament. Once confirmed, the PM forms and leads a Cabinet of Ministers. Together, they implement foreign and domestic policies and submit draft legislation to the Parliament. Latvia's current PM, Maris Kucinskis, took office in early 2016 following the resignation of Laimdota Straujuma in December 2015 (see p. 17 of *History and Myth*) (Photo: Riga's Freedom Monument honors Latvian independence).

Legislative Branch

Latvia's legislature is a single chamber Parliament (***Saeima***), composed of 100 members elected to serve 4-year terms by proportional representation. While the President, PM, and Cabinet of Ministers may draft and propose legislation, the Parliament ultimately controls all legislative powers. These include amending the constitution, passing laws and international treaties, approving declarations of war, and passing the national budget (Photo: US Secretary of State Kerry with Latvian Foreign Minister Rinkēvičs).

Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Court, Constitutional Court, district courts, and a system of regional courts which oversee minor cases. As the highest court, the Supreme Court is the final court of appeal for both civil and criminal cases. The chief justice nominates Supreme Court judges, who must be approved by the Parliament and serve until age 70, though they may extend their term by 2 years. Judges for all other courts serve 10-year terms.

Political Climate

Latvia's political landscape includes a multi-party system in which political parties or coalitions of parties compete for power. Since independence, numerous parties have vied for Parliamentary seats, often forming broad coalitions of varied stability. While some ruling coalitions have lasted several years, others have dissolved just months after consolidation, resulting in frequent changes of government (Photo: Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Latvian Foreign Minister Kristovskis).

In fact, of the 18 governments that have governed Latvia since independence, just 1 has served a full parliamentary term. Experts suggest that the parties' historic instability derives from unclear ideological profiles that often represent the narrow interests of their financial backers rather than the Latvian public (Photo: Riga's Town Hall).

Holding 24 seats in the Parliament, the Harmony Party is presently Latvia's largest political party. Having a left-wing platform that supports the rights of Latvia's Russian-speakers, the Harmony Party has a historically strong representation in the Parliament. The Harmony Party's strength

combined with its association with Russia and Russian-speakers has often compelled Latvia's smaller political parties to form hasty and unstable coalitions with each other in an attempt to prevent the Harmony Party from claiming power.

Latvia's coalition government is currently led by Maris Kucinskis of the centrist Union of Greens and Farmers Party (ZZS), which presently holds 21 seats in the Parliament and is the 3rd largest party. Joining the ZZS as a coalition member, the center-right Unity Party is presently the 2nd largest party with 23 seats in the Parliament. The far-right National Alliance (NA), the 4th largest party with 17 seats in the Parliament, is the final coalition member. Other currently active parties include the Alliance of Regions (LRA) with 8 seats in the Parliament and the For Latvia from the Heart (NSL) party with 7 seats.

Corruption permeates all levels of government despite efforts to curb its existence. Consequently, some Latvians continue to distrust certain political parties, public officials, and members of the judiciary. Nevertheless, Latvia has achieved some of its political and economic goals since independence, including successfully integrating into international organizations (see "Defense" and "Foreign Relations" below) and establishing a free market economy (see p. 1-2 of *Economics and Resources*).

Defense

The Latvian National Armed Forces (NAF – pictured) are a unified military force consisting of primarily ground forces, with smaller maritime and air branches. The NAF are charged with defending against foreign and domestic threats, supporting disaster relief, and participating in international peacekeeping efforts. Military service is not compulsory; men and women may voluntarily join the NAF at age 18.

With a joint strength of just 5,310 active duty troops and 7,850 reserve personnel, Latvia has the smallest force of the Baltic States and relies heavily on military support from its international allies to defend against external, state-level threats. Latvia receives the majority of its defense support from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a political and military alliance among 28 nations (including the US) that promotes the safety of its members through collective defense (Photo: US troops cross the border between Estonia and Latvia in 2015).

Joint: Comprised of 2,600 active-duty personnel, the joint forces divide into 1 Special Forces unit and 1 combat support battalion.

Army: The Latvian Army is a well-trained force of 1,250 active-duty troops, including 600 National Guard members. The Army consists of 12 light maneuver brigade and battalions, 4 combat support battalions, and 3 combat service support battalions (Photo: Latvian troops demonstrate military equipment to children).

Navy: Consisting of 550 active-duty personnel, the Latvian Navy is a small force that includes the Coast Guard and is equipped with 5 patrol and coastal combatants, 6 mine warfare and countermeasure vessels, and 2 logistics and support vessels.

Air Force: The smallest of the military branches, the Latvian Air Force consists of 310 active-duty personnel tasked with airspace control and defense, maritime and land search and rescue, and air transportation. The Air Force consists of 1 transport squadron, 1 air defense battalion, and 1 air defense squadron.

Latvia Air Force Rank Insignia

PRIVATE

PRIVATE 1ST CLASS

CORPORAL

SERGEANT

1ST SERGEANT

SERGEANT 1ST CLASS

MASTER SERGEANT

SERGEANT MAJOR

2ND LIEUTENANT

1ST LIEUTENANT

CAPTAIN

MAJOR

LT COLONEL

COLONEL

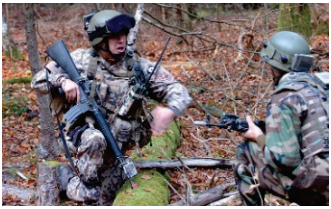
BRIG GENERAL

MAJ GENERAL

LT GENERAL

Foreign Relations

Immediately after gaining independence from Soviet control, Latvia sought to diverge from Russian influence, pursuing economic, political, and military integration with its Western European, Baltic, and Nordic neighbors. Latvia's efforts culminated in its accession into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and UN in 1991 and into NATO and the EU in 2004. Today, Latvia contributes to multiple NATO and EU missions and regularly participates in multilateral military exercises with NATO partners. Latvia also advocates a democratic and pro-Western agenda among Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and other former Soviet states and has campaigned for the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO (Photo: Latvian and Afghan soldiers talk during an exercise).



Regional Cooperation: Latvia joined with Estonia and Lithuania in 1991 to form the trilateral Baltic Assembly to address common economic, political, and cultural issues. Latvia is also a member of the Nordic-Baltic Cooperation (NB8) along with Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Estonia, and Lithuania. Formed in 1992, the NB8 stimulates political dialogue and promotes coordination among Nordic and Baltic nations on economic policy, foreign and national security, energy and transportation infrastructure, and civil protection. With leadership of the NB8 rotating annually among the 8 member nations, Latvia acts as the NB8's 2016 coordinator and host.

Relations with the EU: The EU is a political and economic partnership among 28 nations located in Europe. Latvia relies on the EU as a political, military, and economic buffer against neighboring Russia. Of note, Latvia's adoption of the EU's euro as its own currency in 2014 was a divisive political issue and initially received little public support, primarily because many Latvians viewed their own currency as a symbol of sovereignty and national identity.

Relations with the US: Latvia and the US enjoy strong political, military, and economic relations that were first established in 1922 during Latvia's first period of independence. Never having formally recognized the Soviet annexation of Latvia in 1940 (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*), the US fully supported the restoration of Latvian independence in 1991. Today, the US views the current Latvian government as the legal continuation of the independent republic that existed between the 2 World Wars (Photo: Latvian troops train during a US-sponsored exercise).

In the years following independence, the US advocated for Latvia's membership in NATO and the EU despite some resistance from other member nations who feared Latvia's involvement might create tension with Russia. Today, the US provides Latvia with financial military assistance, including $67 million in aid in 2014. In addition to financial assistance, the US provides military training and equipment to bolster Latvian military operations. In return, Latvia has participated in US-led military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Latvia and the US also enjoy close economic cooperation, having signed multiple bilateral investment and trade agreements in areas such as transportation, logistics, renewable energy, and telecommunications. Latvia is also one of 38 nations participating in the US "Visa Waiver" program, which grants Latvians the ability to travel to the US for up to 90 days without obtaining a visa (Photo: A member of the Latvian Armed Forces signals a C-130 with smoke during a multinational military exercise).

Security Issues

Latvia's security environment is dominated by its historically volatile relationship with neighboring Russia (see p. 6-14 of *History and Myth*). Latvia relies on its memberships in NATO, the UN, and the EU to help insulate it against external state-level threats, including cyberattacks and terrorism.

Latvia and Russia: Although relations with Russia have improved since the end of the Soviet occupation, political and social tensions persist. Following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the resulting unrest in eastern Ukraine, Latvia requested enhanced support from NATO. With the goal of deterring further aggression in the region, NATO agreed in early 2016 to increase the number of troops permanently stationed in Latvia. NATO also established a rapid response command center capable of reacting quickly to external threats.

Tensions further increased as a result of these actions because Russia claims the troops' presence violates a formal 1997 agreement between NATO and Russia that restricts the stationing of large numbers of troops along their borders. NATO claims that its actions do not explicitly violate the agreement (Photo: Members of the Latvian Armed Forces work with US troops during a NATO training exercise).

Other friction stems from Russia's claims that Latvia violates the rights of its substantial ethnic Russian minority, who remain somewhat segregated in Latvian society. In the wake of the recent civil unrest in eastern Ukraine, there are also concerns that the Russian government will attempt to inflame social tensions among Latvia's significant Russian population (see "Social Relations" below).

Ethnic Groups

Historically a relatively diverse country, Latvia's ethnic and linguistic diversity increased under Soviet occupation as a result of the USSR encouraging workers from Russia and other Soviet republics to resettle in Latvia (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*). By 1989, about 1.2 million workers, mostly from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine had immigrated to Latvia, settling primarily in industrial centers like Riga, Daugavpils, Ventspils, and Liepāja. Consequently, the Latvian proportion of the population declined dramatically, from 77% in 1935 to 54% in 1989. By 2013, the ethnic Latvian population had increased to about 61% (Photo: Latvian children visit the US Embassy in Riga).

Today, ethnic Russians make up the largest minority group, about 26% of the population. Other non-ethnic Latvian residents include Belarusians (3%), Ukrainians (2%), Poles (2%), and Lithuanians (1%). Most of these minorities primarily reside in urban areas.

While historically Latvians subdivided into several different ethnic groups, they eventually merged into a single group (see p. 1-3 of *History and Myth*). Today, a few distinctive groupings remain (see p. 1-2 of *Language and Communication*). For example, a few Latvians identify as members of Latvia's only remaining non-Baltic ethnic group, the Livs, though their unique Livonian language is all but extinct. Some 165,000 Latvians speak Latgalian, a minority language spoken in eastern Latvia (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*).

About 8,000 residents identify as Roma or "Gypsy" who mainly live in small urban communities and large towns like Riga, Jelgava, and Ventspils. Although the Roma are better integrated into Latvian society than similar populations across Europe, the Roma continue to face negative social stereotypes and discrimination in employment.

Social Relations

Newly-independent Latvia's decision to restrict citizenship to ethnic Latvians and pre-1940 residents regardless of ethnicity rendered about 30% of Latvia's population, namely post-World War II residents and their descendants, immediately stateless. To become eligible for citizenship, these residents were required to pass extensive exams in Latvian history and language.

After Russia and the EU criticized this requirement, Latvia temporarily eased the naturalization process then reinforced the language requirements in 2006, causing tension between ethnic Latvians and Russian-speaking minorities. Today, many ethnic Russians have fulfilled the requirements to receive Latvian citizenship, while others reside in Latvia as Russian citizens. Comprising about 12% of Latvia's population, non-citizens retain the right to live in Latvia and may travel freely within the EU. Nevertheless, they may not vote, hold positions in government, or work in civil service jobs.

While Russian-speakers make up about 34% of Latvia's total population, their numbers are not equally distributed across the country. In fact, Russian-speakers comprise the majority in some areas, including the southeastern Latgale region bordering Russia and Belarus. There, 51% of the population of the city of Daugavpils is Russian-speaking. Of note, Riga's population is also diverse, with about 50/50 Latvian and Russian speakers (Photo: Daugavpils tram).

Generally, Latvians and ethnic Russians tend to coexist harmoniously though they may not always mix. Proud of their heritage, Russians tend to socialize with other Russians and remain somewhat segregated in Latvian society, though younger generations are more likely to interact. In the capital of Riga, attitudes between the 2 groups tend to be more positive than in other parts of the country.

Several ethnic Russians with Latvian citizenship currently serve in elected positions, such as mayor of Riga (pictured), and as members of Parliament representing the Harmony Party (see "Political Climate" above).

In recent years, most discord between Latvians and ethnic Russians has centered on language (see p. 17 of *History and Myth* and p. 2 of *Language and Communication*). Despite some tension, most of Latvia's minorities express satisfaction with their lifestyles. Few support Russian nationalist ideas or secession from Latvia. Instead, they appreciate Latvia's higher standard of living and the travel, work, and study opportunities that accompany Latvia's membership in the EU.

As noted earlier, the Latvian government worries that Russia will try to inflame societal tensions or foment anti-Latvian feelings. For the last 2 decades, Russia has claimed Russian-speakers in Latvia have faced discrimination, encouraging them to accept automatic Russian citizenship instead of applying for Latvian citizenship. In January 2015, activists in Russia used the Internet to declare independence on behalf of the Latgale region's Russian-speakers, a move that was immediately labeled a criminal act by Latvia's government.

Many of Latvia's Russian-speakers get most of their news and information from Russian government-owned television channels. Critics charge that Russia uses the media as well as other state-funded organizations to promote Russian culture but also to stoke discontent with the aim of destabilizing Latvia. An example was Russian organizations' open support for the failed 2011-12 referendum to name Russian the country's 2nd official language (see p. 17 of *History and Myth*). To counteract Russia's influence, the Latvian government is considering several different ways of better integrating the country's Russian speakers, including launching its own Russian-language media outlets.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

With almost 44% of Latvia's residents claiming no religious affiliation, scholars ranked Latvia as the world's 8th least religious country in a 2015 study. The Latvians who do identify with a religious tradition, almost 56% of the population, are overwhelmingly Christian: on average, 20% are Lutheran, 19% Roman Catholic, and 17% Orthodox. Other Christians (Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, and Pentecostals) plus adherents of other traditions (Judaism, Islam, Hare Krishna, and Buddhism) together comprise less than 1% of the population (Photo: The oldest parts of Riga's St. Peter's Church date to 1209).

Latvia's constitution protects the freedom of religion, specifies the separation of church and state, and recognizes no state religion. By law, 8 religious groups – Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Old Believer Christians, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Jews – retain some rights and privileges not granted other religious groups. These include the right to teach religion in public schools and the right to officiate at marriages.

Latvia's Early Spiritual Landscape

Scholars' understanding of Latvians' beliefs and practices before the arrival of Christianity is largely based on surviving traditions and folk songs. Although there was likely significant regional variation, early residents practiced animism, the belief that the spirit of life or consciousness resides in natural objects such as trees, rocks, hills, fields, and animals. Trees, in particular, held great significance, as did certain places, such as forests, fields, and springs.

Having no organized priesthood, spiritual leaders communicated with gods and spirits who were believed to guide or obstruct human behavior. The most important deities included *Dievs* (the Supreme Being and God of the Sky), *Māra* (the Earth Mother), and *Laima* (the Goddess of Fate).

The Arrival of Christianity

Compared to most other parts of Europe, Christianity arrived relatively late in Latvia, though some residents of eastern Latvia adopted the Orthodox Christian religion of 11th-century invading Russian armies. In the mid-12th century, a Catholic monk built the region's first Christian church on the Daugava River in central Latvia. Despite these inroads, the religion initially failed to take root.

At the end of the 12th century, the Pope, as head of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome, attempted to change the situation by announcing a religious crusade against all northern European "heathens" or non-Christians (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*). After founding Riga in 1201, German knights advanced across the region in ensuing decades, consolidating their rule over Latvia and neighboring Estonia by 1290.

Although forced to convert to Catholicism, few Latvians completely embraced the new religion, primarily because they were suspicious of services conducted in Latin, a language they could not understand. Instead, many continued for several centuries to practice their old nature-based rituals alongside Catholicism (Photo: The dome of Riga's Dome Cathedral towers over Riga's old town).

Over the next decades, Germans established a permanent presence, acquiring vast agricultural estates and settling into towns (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*). Riga's Catholic bishop oversaw the construction of cathedrals, while Catholic religious orders founded monasteries offering religious education to Germans (see p. 1 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

The Protestant Reformation and Rise of Lutheranism

The Protestant Reformation began in the early 16th century to answer a call for change in the Roman Catholic Church from all across Europe. A key event in the movement occurred when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a church door in Germany in 1517. Critical of several Catholic Church teachings and the authority of the pope, Luther's ideas spread quickly among German-speaking populations, especially through the use of the newly-invented printing press.

At this time, most Latvians were serfs, semi-free peasants who worked the land for German estate holders (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*). Although some German landowners initially resisted the change, they eventually welcomed Lutheran teachings as a way to resist the influence of the Pope, requiring their Latvian serfs to adopt the new faith as well. In 1554, the ruling Livonian Confederation declared Protestantism the state religion. In 1563 the Catholic bishopric in Riga ceased to exist.

A Lutheran-Catholic Divide

Upon taking control of northern Latvia in the 17th century (see p. 5 of *History and Myth*), the Swedes made the Lutheran Church the state church. Swedish and German Lutheran clergy strived to make church teachings more accessible to Latvians, establishing schools (see p. 1 of *Learning and Knowledge*), translating the Bible into Latvian in 1689, and delivering sermons in Latvian.

Gradually, Lutheran churches supplanted Catholic churches in most of Latvia. An exception was the southeastern region of Latgale. As a part of Catholic Poland-Lithuania, Latgale remained predominantly Catholic. There, Catholic clergy successfully constructed bonds between the Church and its flock that would endure through centuries of Russification and repression (Photo: Basilica in Aglona, the region's most important site of Catholic pilgrimage, dates to 1699).

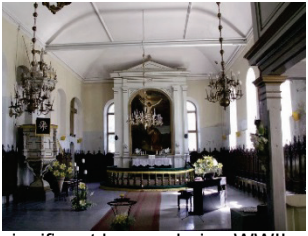
Russian Rule

Over the course of the 18th century, Russia acquired control of Latvia (see p. 6-7 of *History and Myth*). During the next 200 years of Russian domination, the Russian Orthodox Church enjoyed moderate growth through state support, repression of the Lutheran and Catholic churches, and an influx of Russians. Further, some Latvians converted to Orthodoxy in the 1840s under the mistaken belief they would be awarded land.

Threatened by the 1871 founding of the German Empire, Russia's distrust of the Lutheran Church and its German roots deepened. Further, the regime sought to counteract the rise of a Latvian consciousness that accompanied the "National Awakening" (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*). Consequently, the late 19th century marked a period of rigid Russification that included the state's overt promotion of Russian Orthodoxy and the construction of Orthodox cathedrals across the country.

First Period of Independence

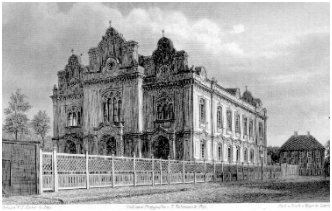
Following years of bloody conflict (see p. 7-9 of *History and Myth*), Latvia entered its first period of independence with a 1922 constitution that proclaimed the separation of church and state and upheld freedom of religion. The Lutheran Church in particular made efforts to "Latvianize" itself during this period, composing new hymns in Latvian and translating the New Testament into modern Latvian. In 1935, about 55% of the population were Lutheran, 25% were Catholic, 9% Orthodox, and 5% Jewish. The remaining population were largely members of other Protestant denominations (Photo: Interior of a Lutheran church in Sabile).



World War II (WWII)

The Lutheran and Catholic churches experienced significant losses during WWII, as many clergy fled as refugees or were deported to Soviet labor camps (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*). While significant, these losses paled in comparison to the trauma experienced by Latvia's Jewish community under the Nazi regime (see p. 12 of *History and Myth*).

Jews had begun to settle in Latvia in the 15th century. Following the lifting of laws restricting Jewish residency in 1840, they began moving to Riga in large numbers. By the 1930s, Latvia's Jewish community was estimated at 95,000. Immediately following the Nazis' arrival in Latvia, special units began to forcibly confine Latvia's Jewish community in ghettos in Riga, Liepāja, and Daugavpils. Some Jews were deported to labor and concentration camps, while others were murdered outright (see p. 12 of *History and Myth*). By war's end in 1945, only about 1,000 Latvian Jews had survived (Photo: Riga's Great Choral Synagogue in the early 20th century, where the Nazis burned alive some 300 Latvian Jews in 1941).



Religion during the Soviet Period

The Soviet Union's 1940 invasion and annexation of Latvia (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*) brought permanent changes to Latvia's religious landscape. Besides attempting to eradicate Latvian national consciousness and restructure Latvia to fit their socialist order (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*), the Soviets imposed their atheist worldview, rejecting all religions and belief in deities.

The Soviets' brutal repression of the Latvian population in general (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*) also included the execution, deportation, or banning of the clergy. The Soviets also revoked the independence of the Latvian Orthodox Church, subordinating it to the Moscow Patriarchate.

All religious organizations saw their activities drastically cut. Lutheran ministers could preach only censored sermons in a reduced number of churches, while Orthodox priests could only celebrate the liturgy. Congregations could undertake no other activities or charitable work. The state also excluded religion from educational policy and curriculum. While Orthodox priestly candidates could attend a seminary in Russia, training for Lutheran and Jewish clergy was virtually nonexistent.

While also subject to these constraints, the Catholic Church was able to remain somewhat influential, even helping to maintain Catholicism across the USSR by sending Latvian priests to other Soviet republics. In addition, the Latvian Catholic Church also eventually received its own seminary.

During the Soviet era, the state destroyed many churches and synagogues and confiscated others, converting them for alternative uses (Photo: The Russian Orthodox Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ in Riga was used as a planetarium and restaurant during the Soviet occupation).

To further supplant religion's place in society, the Soviet state substituted new secular rituals for important life events such as baptism, confirmation, weddings, and funerals. Over the years, membership in religious organizations shrank drastically: for example, while the Lutheran Church estimated active membership at 600,000 in 1956, that number had decreased to 25,000 by 1987.

With Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's social and economic reforms in the 1980s (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*) came the lifting of religious repression. Both the Lutheran and Catholic churches enjoyed a surge of interest and allied themselves with the growing independence movement.

Religion After the Second Independence

Following Latvia's 1991 declaration of another independence, there was a significant but short-lived revival of religious activity. While many Latvians remained religiously unaffiliated, religious organizations made significant gains. For example, the Latvian Orthodox Church regained its independence from Moscow, Lutheran religious education and training became available at the University of Latvia, and the Catholic Church acquired a new seminary. Further, the new government's support for religious freedom allowed many other religious groups access to the country for the first time in 50 years.

Religion Today

Today, ethnic Latvians tend to affiliate with the Lutheran and Catholic churches, while ethnic Russians mostly align with Orthodox churches. While still concentrated in the southeastern region of Latgale, Latvia's Catholics today live in all parts of the country.

Judaism: Following WWII, some Jews from other Soviet republics moved to Latvia. In 1959, Latvia was home to about 37,000 Jews. Beginning in the 1970s, the population began to decline significantly as many Jewish citizens emigrated to Israel. While the Latvian government estimates 5,400 Jews live in the country today, a Latvian Jewish organization estimates the population between 6,200 – 11,000.

Islam: Latvia is home to about 10,000 Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds, primarily from other former Soviet republics. Latvia's only mosque opened in Riga in 2005.

Dievturība*:** Some Latvians follow *Dievturība*, a religion first established in 1926 during Latvia's first period of independence. Practitioners, called ***Dievturi, seek to restablish Latvia's pre-Christian spirituality, relying primarily on descriptions of *Dievs* (the pre-Christian Supreme Being) in Latvian folklore and ***dainas*** (folk songs – see p. 4 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*) as the basis of their theology. Rooted in the cycles of nature, *Dievturība* focuses on achieving virtue by living in harmony with nature and other members of society. Of note, many Latvians disapprove of the movement because of its association with fascist ideology in the 1930s.

The Old Believers

Latvia's southeastern Latgale region is home to the Old Believers, members of an offshoot of the Russian Orthodox Church. Today's Old Believers are descendants of Russians who objected to mid-17th century reforms in the Russian Orthodox Church. To avoid persecution in their home communities, they fled to Latvia where they formed communities dedicated to maintaining their unique social and religious traditions.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

Latvians strongly identify with their birthplace, rarely moving away from the region where they were born. Even if younger Latvians seek employment and education in urban areas, they typically return home for holidays, during vacations, and on weekends. Latvians maintain close relationships with both immediate and extended family members.

Residence

Urban residences tend to be small, having only a few rooms. By contrast, rural homes are typically larger and may comprise multiple structures. About 33% of Latvia's population lives in rural regions.

Rural: Traditionally, Latvians lived on small, family-owned farms comprised of multiple structures, including a building for sleeping and eating, a barn for storing grain and housing animals, a small smoke house for smoking and curing meats, and a sauna (pictured). During their rule, the Soviets replaced many of these farmsteads with large collective farms, forcing rural residents to live in centrally-located collective housing units. While many families have returned to living on single-family farms, some rural residents continue to reside in Soviet-era apartment blocks.

Latvians historically built homes of thick wooden logs to repel the cold. Today, home builders increasingly use modern materials such as bricks and cement. Of note, some homes lack indoor plumbing and electricity, requiring residents to rely on wood burning stoves for heat. Latvians have a particular fondness for gardens and enjoy growing flowers, fruits, and vegetables.

Latvian Saunas

Offering relief from Latvia's cold winters, a sauna (***sauna*** or ***pirts***) is a fundamental aspect of Latvian life and a popular Latvian pastime. Usually constructed outside the home, a basic *pirts* consists of a single insulated room heated by an electric or wood burning stove surrounded by hot stones or bricks. Bathers toss water on the bricks to produce clouds of steam while brushing their skin with birch twigs to stimulate circulation and open pores.

Urban: City living conditions are usually cramped. During the Soviet occupation (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), the government erected practical, poorly-constructed high-rise apartment buildings on the edges of cities. These complexes were designed to accommodate the influx of workers from Russia and other Soviet republics seeking work in Soviet industries (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*). Today's independent Latvian government has renovated many of these tenement blocks and is constructing new, modern units. Nevertheless, many families continue to live in outdated and small apartments.

Apartments typically contain 2-3 rooms, a small kitchen, and bathroom. During the Soviet era, many urban dwellers maintained small gardens, growing staples like potatoes, onions, and cabbage (see p. 1-2 of *Sustenance and Health*) to supplement food supplies provided by the state. Today, many urban residents continue to maintain small flower gardens on balconies and along window sills. Of note, many urban residents own modest summer cottages (***dachas***) in the countryside where they retreat for rest and recreation during the summer.

Family Structure

Most Latvian households comprise nuclear families (2 parents and their children) living together with grandparents and even great-grandparents. Extended family members are important in

daily life, supporting one another financially and gathering frequently for meals, birthdays, and other special occasions. While some mothers work outside the home, Latvians typically view the father as the primary breadwinner and head of the household. Even if she holds outside employment, the mother typically retains responsibility for household chores and child-rearing (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender*).

Latvians revere their elderly family members for their wisdom and experience, often providing physical and financial care for aging parents. In fact, nursing homes generally house only elderly who have critical health conditions or lack close kin.

Children

Most Latvian families choose to have just 1-2 children who typically remain at home with their parents until they marry. Grandparents often care for children while both parents work. Children's chores tend to vary by gender: girls may help their mothers cook, clean, and tend to the garden, while boys typically help their fathers with home repairs and, in rural areas, farming (Photo: A Latvian family).

Birth: Latvians strongly value motherhood. Traditionally, to protect their unborn children from an "evil eye" (a harmful glance from a stranger), pregnant women refrained from discussing their pregnancies in public and did not venture outside the home during the last months of pregnancy. Although these practices are relatively uncommon today, Latvians continue to be highly protective of their young children. For example, mothers generally do not take their babies out in public or receive guests before their children are at least a month old.

Soon after birth, family members may burn oak leaves (if the child is a boy) or lime leaves (if the child is a girl), a practice intended to give the baby strength. Many parents also appoint godparents, who promise to care for the child if the parents are unable to. Approximately 1 week after birth, some Latvians

hold the ***Krustaba***, a name-giving ceremony during which the godparents formally accept their roles. Christian Latvians may baptize their children within a month of birth.

Dating and Marriage

Traditionally, a ***vedējpāris*** (matchmaker) arranged the meeting of potential mates. Today, Latvians choose their own spouses based on mutual attraction. Boys and girls often begin dating around age 15, though they typically interact from a younger age. Popular socializing activities include attending sports events, dining at restaurants and cafes, and convening at clubs and parties.

Latvians tend to marry in their early or mid-20s. Many newlyweds choose to reside with 1 set of parents for a period in order to save money. In contrast to Estonians, who rarely marry outside their ethnicity, about 1 in 5 Latvian marriages are between partners of different ethnic backgrounds (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*). Of note, parenthood outside of marriage is also common. About 40% of Latvian children are born to unmarried or cohabitating couples – very close to the US rate of 41%.

Weddings: While Latvians no longer enter into arranged marriages, the *vedējpāris* continues to hold an honorary and important role in the marriage ceremony. Today, the *vedējpāris* is usually a close friend who helps plan the wedding, serves as a witness to the union, and symbolically aids the couple transition from single to married life (Photo: A newlywed Latvian couple).

Although some Latvians choose to wed in church ceremonies, most couples marry in civil ceremonies held at a local government marriage bureau. During a civil ceremony, which is typically attended by only a few close friends and relatives, the bride and groom recite vows, exchange rings, and sign a marriage contract. In some rural regions, wedding parties may be larger. During the

service, the bride may wear a white gown and hold a bouquet of flowers, while the groom wears a formal suit. To bring the couple good fortune, family and friends cover the road leading to the ceremony site in oak leaves. The newlyweds may depart the ceremony in a car decorated with flowers.

Immediately following the ceremony, friends and family gather for a reception, during which attendees dance, sing, and enjoy an elaborate feast. Festivities may last 2-3 days, comprising a series of parties held at a family home, restaurant, or hotel.

Divorce: Divorce carries little social stigma and is increasingly common. At 3.6 per 1,000 people, Latvia's divorce rate is equal to that of the US, but is among Europe's and the Baltic States' highest rates. Of note, studies reveal that ethnic Latvians are less likely to get divorced than ethnic Russians and members of other ethnic groups.

Death

After a death, mourners gather for a casket viewing. Family members may place items traditionally viewed as useful for the next life into the casket with the deceased. Such items commonly include combs and mirrors, which Latvians traditionally considered to be required for entry to the kingdom of the dead. Family and friends then gather at a church or cemetery for a funeral service. The casket is then buried in a cemetery where meticulously-maintained plots often incorporate small flower gardens. Due to shortages in cemetery space, urban Latvians are increasingly choosing cremation over a casketed burial. Following the funeral service, family members and close friends gather for a quiet meal in remembrance of the deceased (Photo: Riga's Brethren Cemetery honors soldiers killed in World War I and the Latvian War of Independence).

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Traditionally, Latvian society was patriarchal, meaning men held most power and authority. While women and men have equal rights before the law, traditional attitudes continue to present hurdles to women's full participation in educational, economic, and political spheres.

Gender Roles and Work

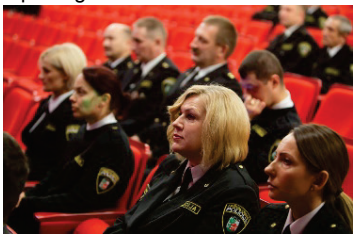
Domestic Work: Latvian women traditionally held primary responsibility for all household chores, child care and education, and the care of elderly parents. During the Soviet era (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), the majority of women entered the workforce because the state expected all Latvian citizens to contribute to the economy. Some women continue to work outside the home today but also perform most domestic tasks (Photo: A mother takes photos of her daughter in Liepāja).

Labor Force: In 2014, 55% of Latvian women worked outside the home, compared to 57% in the US. About 1/3rd of women work in what are considered traditional "female" professions, such as healthcare, education, social work, and retail, though increasingly more women hold high-level positions in business and government. Generally, women experience some discrimination in hiring and promotion, receiving lower wages than men with comparable education levels and work experience. Although Latvian women generally demonstrate greater academic achievement than men and attain higher levels of education, they earn an average of 14% less than their male counterparts. Of note, this salary gap between the genders is smaller than the EU average and is substantially smaller than neighboring Estonia's.

Gender and the Law

Latvia's 1991 constitution guarantees equal rights to women in education, healthcare, and social welfare while affording special protections to single mothers and pregnant women. Enacted in 2002, the Labor Law further protects women from differential treatment in the workplace based on gender and criminalizes sexual harassment by employers.

Women and men enjoy equal rights in marriage, divorce, and their authority over their children. In addition, the constitution recognizes a female head of household and provides equal inheritance rights to wives and daughters. It also guarantees equal rights to own and access land and property, as well as grants equal access to credit and bank loans (Photo: Members of the Liepāja police force).



Despite this legal framework, laws are not always enforced. For example, women face discrimination by both public and private employers and suffer from sexual harassment in the workplace. While a growing number of civil and non-profit organizations promote women's rights, few political parties devote attention to gender equality and women's issues.

Gender and Politics

Since Latvia's 1991 independence, women's participation in the political process has increased. While no women held seats in Latvia's first 2 governments following independence, women began to occupy several important political positions after 1994. Notably, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was elected Latvia's first female President in 1999 and re-elected for a 2nd term in 2003, making Latvia the first post-communist nation to elect a woman as head of state. In 2014 Laimdota Straujuma became Latvia's first female Prime Minister (see p. 17 of *History and Myth*).

Today, 18 women hold seats in the 100-member Parliament, including the role of speaker. This rate is comparable to the US, where women comprise 20% of all Congress members. In

addition, 26 of 53 Supreme Court judges are women, as well as 2 of 6 Constitutional Court justices. Within Latvia's local governments, women hold about 31% of positions.

In contrast to neighboring Estonia, which mandates representation of both genders in government, there is no such law in Latvia. In fact, echoing popular public opinion, former President Vīķe-Freiberga noted that establishing gender quotas imply women cannot succeed on merit alone and therefore are demeaning and unnecessary.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Some 32% of Latvian women reported domestic abuse in 2014 – one of the EU's highest rates of domestic violence. Although the constitution does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, a 2014 amendment outlines some safeguards. Protective measures include giving the police more freedom to intervene in domestic violence cases and easing requirements to initiate restraining orders, among others (Photo: Latvians attend a fair in Liepāja).

Some Latvian women and children become victims of sex trafficking and are subjected to brokered marriages, domestic servitude, or forced prostitution within Latvia, Europe, and the US.

While Latvia implemented a program in 2008 to help prevent GBV and provide victims support, most government rehabilitation services, such as battered women's shelters, are inadequate. To fill the gap, several non-profits and international organizations offer additional assistance. Despite this support, many women are unaware of their rights to protection or reluctant to report infractions and seek help. Further, even if GBV cases are reported, indictment and prosecution of perpetrators is rare. For example, in 2010 police received 79 reports of rape but just 19 individuals were convicted.

Sex and Procreation

During the Soviet era (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), public displays of affection and sexuality were generally uncommon. Although attitudes have liberalized in recent years, Latvians typically do not discuss sex openly. Of note, some younger couples, particularly in urban areas, may hold hands and express affection in public (Photo: A US soldier talks to a young Latvian girl).

At 1.4 births per woman, Latvia's birthrate is well below the rate required to maintain the population and is among the world's lowest rates. Alarmed at Latvia's negative population growth, in 2011 the government created a "State Family Policy," a federal action plan meant to facilitate family formation and to promote fertility. As in all the Baltic States, abortion is legal in Latvia, though less common than in some other EU countries. In 2013, abortion outpaced Latvian birth rates, with 14 abortions to 10 births per 1,000 women (Photo: A Latvian family).

Homosexuality

While Latvia decriminalized homosexual activity in 1992, it does not recognize same-sex marriages. A 2006 amendment to the Latvian Constitution defines marriage as the union of a man and woman. International organizations report that Latvian legislation falls short of protecting LGBT community members from gender-based hate crimes. Homosexuals are often reluctant to report harassment and experience stigmatization in Latvian society.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

The official language of Latvia is Standard Latvian, which about 56% of the population speaks as a primary language. Due to the large numbers of ethnic Russians who settled in Latvia during the Soviet occupation (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), nearly 34% of Latvia's population speaks Russian as a first language. The remaining 10% have another primary language.

Latvian

Latvian, sometimes called Lettish, belongs to the Baltic branch of the Indo-European language family and is most similar to Lithuanian. Due to the presence of German- and Russian-speakers during the country's long history of occupation (see *History and Myth*), Latvian has incorporated many German and Russian loanwords. Largely in reaction to these foreign occupations, the Latvian language has become a significant marker of national Latvian identity (Photo: Latvian Air Force emblem "All for Latvia").

Modern Standard Latvian uses a 33-letter Latin-origin alphabet that utilizes diacritics (marks placed over vowels to indicate length and over or under consonants to indicate a changed pronunciation). For example, the Latvian "s" sound is identical to the English "s," while "š" is pronounced "sh." Similarly, "ņ" is pronounced as "ni" or "ñ," and "ū" sounds like "oo."

Spoken Latvian is melodic and sounds more similar to Scandinavian than other continental European languages. Due to Finnish influence, stress always falls on the first syllable of words, with the single exception of ***paldies*** (thank you). Some Latvian grammatical constructions do not exist in English.

Latvian divides into 3 main dialect groups: West (Tamian), East (High), and Central. The Central dialect served as the basis for the development of Standard Latvian. About 165,000 Latvians speak Latgalian, which many linguists consider a variant of the East dialect while others believe it to be a separate language.

In 1999, Latvia passed the State Language Law in an effort to maintain, protect, and develop Latvian. According to the law, only Latvian, Latgalian, and the nearly-extinct Livonian (the last native speaker died in 2013) are considered indigenous to Latvia. Every public or private institution that acts in the general public interest is required to use Latvian or provide Latvian translations for all materials.

While the language law attempts to integrate ethnic minorities by granting them the right to use their native languages, many minority residents and some international organizations claim that the law is unjust and discriminatory. Despite these tensions and resistance to the policy, about 80% of the population can communicate in Latvian today, up from around 65% at independence in 1991.

Russian

Latvia is home to the EU's largest Russian-speaking population. Mostly concentrated in the East, Russian-speakers match or outnumber Latvian-speakers in Riga and Daugavpils, Latvia's 2 largest cities (Pictured: 1912 postcard of Riga labeled in Russian and Latvian).

While Soviet occupiers required Latvians to learn and use Russian for all public communication, Latvian schooling was primarily conducted in Latvian (see p. 3 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Latvians' private communications also were accomplished in their native Latvian. By contrast, few Russians learned Latvian since their schooling was predominantly in Russian (see p. 3 of *Learning and Knowledge)*. Due to this historical trend, language issues occasionally cause tensions between Latvian and Russian speakers today.

While many people still use Russian in business and everyday life, it is no longer Latvia's dominant language. In 2012, Latvian voters disapproved a proposal to make Russian an official second language (see p. 17 of *History and Myth*). Some policies to promote the use of Latvian have caused Russian use to decline. For example, public signs no longer include Russian.

Other Languages

Some Latvians speak other languages as their primary language. These include Lithuanian, Polish, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Romani (the language of the Roma or "Gypsies" – see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*), among others (Photo: US paratroopers speaking with Latvian students).

English: Some 30% of Latvians can communicate in English. Generally, younger residents of Riga are more likely to speak English than older Latvians in rural regions. Because primary schools typically offer multilingual instruction, many Latvian youth are proficient in Latvian, Russian, and English (see p. 5-6 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Communication Overview

Communicating effectively in Latvia requires not only knowledge of the various languages but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Latvian communication patterns reflect the Latvian values of privacy, candor, and loyalty. Compared to Americans, Latvians may seem reserved, feel comfortable in silence, and rarely display strong emotions. Most Latvians prefer direct speech

and an even tone of voice. They especially value the privacy of their home and typically share personal information only with relatives or close friends.

While Latvians are usually polite, they rarely engage in small talk or extend many compliments. Latvian humor tends to be dry and includes cultural references that may be difficult for foreign nationals to understand. Likewise, Latvians may not understand or appreciate American sarcasm or irony.

Hierarchy is important in Latvian communications. As age and position/title oblige respect, Latvians generally introduce elders and people with senior positions first, often giving them decision-making powers at home or in the workplace. Latvians tend to avoid public conflicts, preferring to deal with issues in private.

Greetings

Latvian greetings are usually simple and direct, often consisting of a firm handshake, constant eye contact, and a verbal ***Sveiki*** (hello), ***Čau*** (Hi), or ***Kā tev iet?*** (How are you doing?). It is customary for women and elders to extend their hands first. Sometimes Latvians exchange light kisses on the cheek as a sign of respect or friendship. When approached, Latvians often stand up to acknowledge the newcomer's presence. Some Latvians may avoid exchanging greetings in entranceways (Photo: US Navy Captain greets Latvian Navy Commander).

Forms of Address

Latvians use different forms of address to demonstrate respect and the nature of the relationship. They typically address new acquaintances with their last name followed by a title, such as ***Kungs*** (Mr.), ***Kundze*** (Mrs.), appropriate job title, or military rank. For example, Mr. Vējonis would be Vējonis Kungs in Latvian. Of note, some Latvians may use ***Jaunkundze*** (Miss) only for female children, not for unmarried women. While close colleagues, friends, and family typically call each other by their

first names, foreign nationals should use the last name and appropriate title unless directed otherwise.

Of note, last names have distinctive feminine and masculine forms. While male names typically end in –š, female names end in –a, or –e. When they marry, some women may take their husband's surname, adapted to the feminine form. To express affection when speaking with children, Latvians may add a gender-specific diminutive ending to a name (*–īts* or *–iņš* for males; *–ina* or *–īte* for females). For example, Valdis might be called Valdiņš, and Maija might be Maijina.

Conversational Topics

Popular conversation topics include work, family, and the weather. Latvians also enjoy discussions about history, culture, and sports. While Latvians themselves may criticize various aspects of their country, foreign nationals should avoid doing so. Other potentially offensive topics may include personal finances, Latvia's foreign occupations, and tensions between Latvia's ethnic and linguistic groups. Foreign nationals should avoid profanity and any expressions that could be considered vulgar or ill-mannered. Unlike Americans, Latvians typically respond to "how are you" questions with a thorough and sincere response (Photo: US Airmen work alongside Latvians on an orphanage project).

Gestures

Latvians sometimes use gestures to emphasize their verbal expressions but may find frequent gesturing inappropriate or annoying. Like Americans, Latvians use the "thumbs up" gesture to indicate a positive occurrence. Latvians consider pointing with the index finger impolite. Instead, they indicate direction with the entire hand.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at http://culture.af.mil for language training resources. Click on Menu tab in upper right then Resources.

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Latvian
Hello / Hi	Sveiki / Čau
Good morning	Labrīt
Good afternoon	Labdien
Good evening	Labvakar
How are you?	Kā jums klājas?
Well, thank you. And you?	Paldies, labi. Un jums?
My name is _____	Mani sauc _____
Please	Lūdzu
Thank you	Paldies
You're welcome	Vienmēr laipni
Yes/No	Jā/Nē
Goodbye	Uz redzēšanos
Goodnight	Ar labunakti
Have a nice day!	Lai jums laba diena!
Excuse me / Sorry	Piedodiet or Atvainojiet
Do you speak English?	Vai jūs runājat angliski?
I don't speak Latvian	Es nerunāju latviski
Please speak more slowly	Lūdzu, runājiet lēnāk
I don't understand	Es nesaprotu
I don't know	Es nezinu
What?	Kas?
When?	Kad?
Where?	Kur?
Who?	Kas? Kurš? (m) Kura? (f)
Why?	Kāpēc?
Cheers! / Cheers! (as a toast)	Uz veselību! / Priekā!
Help!	Palīgā!
I need your help	Man vajag jūsu palīdzību
I am lost	Esmu apmaldījies (m) apmaldījusies (f)

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 99.9%
- Male: 99.9%
- Female: 99.9% (2015 estimate)

Early History of Education

Before the introduction of formal education that accompanied the 13th-century arrival of Christianity (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*), inhabitants of the region informally transmitted values, skills, and historical knowledge to younger generations. In 1211, German missionaries founded the Riga Dome School to train German clergymen in Latin and religious texts. By the 15th and 16th centuries, the German nobility had established secular town schools to provide their sons basic levels of literacy (see p. 2-4 of *History and Myth* for description of German Conquest in Latvia).

Latvians acquired access to formal education for the first time following the 16th-century Protestant Reformation (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), when Swedish clergy set up schools to make Lutheran teachings available to the general population. By the late 17th century, Sweden required every parish to have at least 1 primary school (see p. 4-5 of *History and Myth* for Swedish influence in Latvia). In 1683, the first Latvian language schools opened and in 1685 the Swedish crown subsidized the translation of the Bible into Latvian (Photo: US Marines and Latvian soldiers speak to a class in Lejasciems).

Years of war and disease in the early 18th century (see p. 5-6 of *History and Myth*) caused educational offerings to reduce in number and quality. During 19th-century Russian rule, educational opportunities improved under the influence of European Enlightenment philosophy (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*).

The National Awakening and Early 20th Century Education

A central part of the Latvian National Awakening (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*) was criticism of German and Russian cultural and linguistic domination of Latvian society. By the mid-19th century, Latvian-language journalism and literature were supporting the rise of a Latvian national consciousness. Scholars collected traditional folk songs and stories (see p. 4 of *Aesthetics and Recreation* and p. 18 of *History and Myth*) and publishers printed new Latvian-language newspapers. By the late 1890s, Latvians' literacy rate reached 79% in certain regions, compared to only 21% in Russia.

After achieving its first independence in 1920 (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*), Latvia established free compulsory education for children aged 8-14. While some Latvians continued to attend German- and Russian-language schools, many others studied in Latvian schools for the first time. Over the next decade, educational opportunities expanded to include schools in other minority languages. By 1933, 80% of Latvia's ethnic minorities attended school in their native languages. This trend was abruptly reversed in 1934, when Latvia's authoritarian government (see p. 9-10 of *History and Myth*) enacted a law requiring all Latvian and most minority children to attend Latvian-language schools (Photo: Zasa Secondary School, built in 1939).

Education under the Soviet Occupation

The Soviet occupation (see p. 11 and 13-14 of *History and Myth*) resulted in significant changes to the Latvian education system. While they made some improvements, including increasing compulsory education to 8 years by the 1950s, the Soviets used the education system to implement their socialist agenda (see p. 11 of *History and Myth* and p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Consequently, the curriculum emphasized Soviet patriotism and communist tenets such as collectivism, Marxist-Leninist philosophy, and socialist humanism. Due to this

imposition of Soviet doctrine and repression of divergent views, many Latvian intellectuals fled the country or were executed, further facilitating the dominance of Soviet ideas in education.

Further, the Soviet regime supported a divided education system. Ethnic Russians and all other minorities attended Russian-language academic and vocational schools that followed the Soviet curriculum and offered limited instruction in Latvian. Meanwhile, most ethnic Latvians attended separate Latvian-language schools that also followed the Soviet curriculum, including mandatory Russian language and history courses. Students in these schools were forced to attend an extra year of classes in order to improve their Russian, a requirement not imposed on students in the Russian-language schools. Consequently, tensions emerged between Latvian and Russian speakers that continue to exist today (see “Modern Education System” below).

By the 1970s, the Soviets had implemented universal secondary education. Students attended Latvian-language schools for 11 years and Russian-language schools for 10. The Soviets prioritized vocational schools to give residents the requisite skills to work within the Soviet military-industrial complex. By the mid-1980s, nearly 99% of Latvians were literate.

In the late 1980s, Latvians began to protest education’s focus on Russian language and culture, publicly calling Russian schools “symbols of occupation.” Along with calls for independence, Latvians openly debated options to alter Soviet educational policies. Following its 2nd independence in 1991 (see p. 16 of *History and Myth*), Latvia introduced legislation that laid the foundation for the current curriculum. This course of study emphasizes Latvian national identity, minority education, information technology skills, and lifelong learning traditions (Photo: Saldus Art School).

Modern Education System

After 2 decades of reforms, Latvian students score comparably to US students on international math, reading, and science exams. In 2011, the government spent 8.9% of its budget on education, significantly lower than that spent in the US. Nevertheless, education expenditure grew by 7% from 2013-2014, a higher increase than in any other EU country except Hungary (Photo: US paratrooper with Latvian students).

In 2014, about 28% of all public school students attended schools that follow the national curriculum but teach some lessons in a minority language, primarily Russian. A controversial 2004 regulation requires all secondary schools, including minority language schools, to offer at least 60% of their courses in Latvian. The regulation further requires secondary students to pass a Latvian proficiency exam to graduate.

Many Russian speakers protest these requirements, citing a lack of Latvian-speaking teachers in the Russian schools. In addition, some ethnic Russians believe that such requirements erode Russian language and culture in Latvia. Further, critics of the system point to a widening gap in university admissions and post-secondary attainment between Latvians and minorities, including ethnic Russians. Nevertheless, while the education level of Russian speakers was 10% higher than Latvian speakers in 1989, achievement was nearly identical by 2012.

Other educational challenges include school closures due to population decline in rural areas; low quality of vocational, health, and adult education; and extremely low teacher salaries that are just 1/8 the US average. Latvia has addressed these and other issues in a comprehensive plan that includes structural changes in vocational education, curriculum modernization, and increased teacher salaries.

Pre-Primary: Public kindergartens provide non-compulsory subsidized education for children aged 1-4. In 2015, 89% of 4-year-olds were enrolled such programs. Children aged 5-6 attend compulsory pre-primary schools, where they learn basic language, math, and social skills. While materials in these schools are typically in Latvian, parents may request instruction in minority languages.

Basic: Consisting of 9 grades starting at age 7, basic schooling is compulsory and consists of primary school (grades 1-4) and lower secondary school (grades 5-9). In 2013, 96% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in basic schools having a curriculum consisting of Latvian and/or Russian, math and technology, social sciences, history, natural sciences, foreign language (including English), art, music, handicrafts, and physical education.

To graduate, students must pass exams in math, Latvian (or a minority language and Latvian as a 2nd language), history of Latvia and the world, and a foreign language. Basic vocational programs are available for students who have not finished their basic academic education by age 16 (Photo: Rubene Basic School).

Secondary: While secondary school (grades 10-12) is not compulsory, a majority of Latvian students enroll. Secondary schools offer 4 standard educational tracks: general comprehensive; humanities and social sciences; mathematics, natural science, and technical science; and vocational. Compulsory subjects for all 4 tracks include Latvian language/literature, math, foreign language, history, applied information technology, and physical education.

The objectives of academic secondary education are to prepare students for university, ensure adequate social development, and encourage a critical socially-active attitude

with an understanding of Latvian citizenship obligations. To qualify for university, students must complete the secondary academic or vocational curriculum and pass exams in Latvian, math, a foreign language, and 1 subject of the student's choice.

Vocational schools remain an important part of the Latvian education system. Almost 40% of secondary students enroll in vocational schools to learn skills in business, information technology, arts, sports, music, and other subjects. Students may enroll in vocational programs lasting 2-3 years or so-called secondary vocational programs lasting 4 years. While both tracks require students to develop skills and knowledge for the labor market, the latter enables students to proceed to university or other institutions of higher education.

Post-Secondary: Many Latvians pursue post-secondary academic and vocational education at 1 of 60 institutions of higher learning, mainly in Riga. Latvia restructured its higher education system in the 1990s so that institutions now offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral academic degrees, as well as vocational certificates. In 2013, 40% of Latvian 30-34-year-olds held post-secondary qualifications, achieving the EU's 2020 education target ahead of schedule.

Each year, the Higher Education Council allocates a certain number of grants to students who attain high scores on their secondary school exams. All other students are entitled to government loans to finance their post-secondary education. The University of Latvia is the country's oldest and most prestigious university, originally founded by the Russians in 1862 as Riga Polytechnic. Today, it is the largest university in the Baltics, enrolling about 20,000 students in more than 150 programs (Photo: The University of Latvia around the turn of the 20th century).

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Latvians value candid, efficient, and professional interactions in the workplace, are typically punctual, and consider significant tardiness rude. Further, they tend to maintain boundaries between their personal and professional lives.

Time and Work

Latvia's work week runs from Monday-Friday with most business hours from 9:00am-6:00pm. While there is some variation by store size and location, most shops are open from 10:00am-7:00pm Monday-Friday and 10:00am-4:00pm on Saturday. Although many stores close on Sundays, major shopping centers are typically open every day, often for longer hours than small shops (Photo: Riga's Town Hall Square).

Most banks are open Monday-Friday from 9:00am-6:00pm and on Saturday from 10:00am-3:00pm. Post offices typically open Monday-Friday from 8:00am-8:00pm and from 8:00am-4:00pm on Saturday. Some banks, post offices, and shops stay open later in Riga and other urban locations than in rural areas. While most businesses close on public holidays, large supermarkets and food stores in Riga typically remain open.

Working Hours: Latvian labor law stipulates a standard 40-hour work week, with up to 8 hours of paid overtime. Many Latvians, particularly those who work in the private sector, often work longer hours. Although Latvia has labor regulations to protect workers, lax enforcement allows employers to have a great deal of control over hiring, wages, and working conditions. Even so, all Latvian workers are entitled to a weekly rest period of at least 42 consecutive hours. They also receive 28 days of annual paid leave in addition to paid public holidays.

National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- March/April: Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Easter Monday (dates vary each year)
- May 1: Labor Day and Constitution Day
- May 4: Independence Restoration Day
- June 23: Midsummer's Eve
- June 24: St. John's Day / Midsummer's Day
- November 18: Independence Day
- December 24: Christmas Eve
- December 25: Christmas Day
- December 26: Boxing Day
- December 31: New Year's Eve

Of note, if either Independence Restoration Day or Independence Day falls on a weekend, the holiday is observed on the following Monday.

Time Zone: Latvia adheres to Eastern European Time (EET), which is 2 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 7 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Latvia observes daylight savings from the end of March-October, which makes Latvia 3 hours ahead of GMT during that period.

Date Notation: Like the US, Latvia uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans, Latvians write either the day first, followed by the month and year, or the year first, followed by the month and day.

Time and Business

Business in Latvia tends to move at a similar pace as in the US. While Latvians typically value punctuality and adherence to deadlines, a small degree of tardiness is acceptable if prior notification has been given. Custom requires all potential business partners to shake hands and exchange business cards when meeting for the first time.

Latvians prefer to get to know potential business partners before discussing business. Generally, Latvians value efficient meetings, seldom allowing them to run long. Meetings tend to be formal, with candid and direct communication (see p. 3-4 of *Language and Communication*), and closely following a predetermined agenda. Latvians consider interruptions to be rude and inappropriate. After a meeting, Latvians often follow up via phone or email with discussion points, deadlines, or decisions. Reaching a deal or agreement may take a few days, pending leadership approval (Photo: President Vējonis and US personnel observe a tank delivery at the Riga docks).

The Latvian workplace is typically hierarchical, with the upper management or senior officials running meetings and making most decisions. Some Latvians may be reluctant to complain or openly question their superiors, though most are relatively open with their critique. Managers almost always deliver feedback and criticism to employees in private. Although not the norm, some businesses follow an informal, consultative, and democratic approach to decision-making. While most business discussions occur during scheduled meetings in an office, informal meetings in different locations or during a meal are not unusual (Photo: US Airmen and Latvian soldiers work at an orphanage).

Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Latvia depends on the nature of the relationship. With strangers, Latvians tend to maintain about an arm's length of distance when conversing, although the space between family and friends tends to be closer.

Touch

Conversational touching in Latvia tends to be less common than in the US, and strangers rarely touch after the initial handshake (see p. 4 of *Language and Communication*). Close friends and relatives may touch to convey affection, respect, or sincerity. Though not the norm, it is increasingly common for young friends to touch in social settings or for young couples to hold hands in public.

Eye Contact

Direct eye contact is important during any greeting (see p. 4 of *Language and Communication*) or business meeting to convey interest and transparency. Many Latvians consider reluctance to make periodic eye contact during conversation a sign of dishonesty or an attempt to conceal information.

Photographs

Banks, churches, museums, secured areas, and similar places may prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should always acquire a Latvian's permission before taking his photo.

Driving

Some Latvians have aggressive driving habits, passing vehicles on blind corners or at high speeds. Further, some drivers ignore laws that require drivers to yield to pedestrians in marked intersections and give the right of way to trams. Traffic law enforcement continues to suffer from corruption; drivers often pay police officers to avoid official fines. While Latvia has the EU's highest rate of traffic-related deaths, at 10.5 deaths per 100,000 people per year, this level is declining and is comparable to the US rate of 10.3. Drunk driving is a serious offense, with a minimum punishment of 10 days of immediate imprisonment. Like Americans, Latvians drive on the right side of the road (Photo: US soldiers travel in Strykers and support vehicles through Saulkrasti).

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Latvian traditional dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's rural peasant past, history of foreign occupations, 20th-century nationalist movements, and modern global trends.

Dress and Appearance

Traditional: Traditional dress has become a visible expression of Latvian national culture. Latvians typically wear traditional attire during special events, festivals, and holidays, although some rural Latvians wear it more regularly. While each region has its own variations of colors, patterns, and styles, traditional garments are often wool or linen in white, gray, black or naturally-dyed red, brown, and green (Illustration: A 1521 watercolor of Livonian women).

Women's wear typically includes a long multi-colored skirt secured by a ***josta*** (patterned sash) topped by a blouse embroidered with traditional geometric patterns and fastened with a silver ***sakta*** (brooch). A woolen ***villaine*** (shawl) accents the costume and provides warmth. Beads, brooches, and other jewelry made from silver and ***dzintars*** (amber, pictured) are also traditional. Married women typically wear cloth headscarves, while single girls wear ***vainags***, a crown made of flowers.

Men's traditional attire usually includes dark gray breeches and knee-length stockings. Over a long-sleeved shirt men often wear a sheepskin coat or long dark jacket with a woven or

leather and metal belt. Men often complete their traditional look with a broad-rimmed felt or straw hat. Both men and women wear ***pastalas,*** shoes made from a single piece of leather and tied with laces. Layered pairs of stockings, woolen mittens, socks, and jackets or capes are typical cold-weather accessories.

Modern: For everyday dress, most Latvians wear clothing that reflects the latest European fashion trends, although particular styles may depend on age and geographic location. Generally, older Latvians dress more conservatively than younger generations, and most urban Latvians dress more formally than rural dwellers. In the workplace, Latvians often prefer formal attire, while "Latvian casual" (similar to business casual) is typical for informal occasions. In a current trend, some modern styles incorporate traditional Latvian geometric designs.

Recreation and Leisure

Latvians generally prefer to spend their leisure time with close friends and family (see p. 1-2 of *Family and Kinship*). Popular activities demonstrate Latvians' connection to the land and traditional life, including relaxing in a ***pirts*** (sauna—see p. 1-2 of *Family and Kinship*), folk dancing and singing, playing chess, hiking, hunting, and fishing. During the cold, dark winter months, Latvians enjoy visits to the theater, cinema, and opera, as well as winter sports and craft-making. Some Latvians also vacation in warmer destinations during the winter (Photo: Latvian forest).

During the long, temperate summer days, Latvians spend extended periods of time in the countryside or by the sea. Popular activities in these destinations include berry- and mushroom-picking, gardening, bird-watching, and cycling. Many Latvians like to search for amber that washes up on the Baltic shore (see p. 1 of *History and Myth*).

Festivals: The Latvian Song and Dance Festival is one of country's most important cultural and historical events. Held

every 5 years since 1873, the festival helped advance Latvia's independence movements (see p. 6-7 and 14-15 of *History and Myth*). It is now the world's largest choral festival, often attracting over 100,000 spectators. In addition to the main choral performances, thousands of artists exhibit traditional arts and crafts, folk dances, and theater acts. Typically held in July, the 26th Song and Dance Festival will occur in 2018 (Photo: 1994 postage stamp of performers at the Song and Dance Festival).

Most other popular festivals mark the changing seasons and traditional pre-Christian or Christian celebrations. Perhaps the most significant annual festival, ***Jāņi*** (Midsummer's Day) celebrates the summer equinox. As part of the festivities, Latvians decorate their homes and make traditional food and beer. Other activities include making music, singing songs dedicated to the sun called ***Līgo dziesmas***, dancing, and jumping over bonfires. Other popular festivals include ***Mārtiņi,*** which celebrates the start of winter, the International Baltic Ballet Festival in Riga, the ***Rīgas Ritmi*** music and jazz festival, the Riga Opera Festival, the Livonian Festival in Cēsis, and the ***Positivus*** pop and rock festival in Mazsalaca.

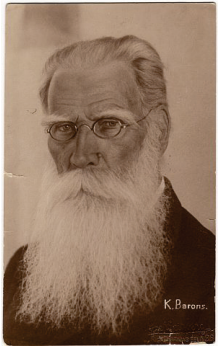
Sports and Games

Sports: Latvians enjoy many winter sports, including bobsledding, luge, and cross-country skiing. Ice hockey and football (soccer) are the most popular team sports, and Latvian teams have gained international acclaim in both (Photo: Former Latvian NHL star Brimanis coaches a team in Leipāja).

Many Latvians also enjoy basketball, especially watching Kristaps Porziņģis, a 2015 draft for the NBA's New York Knicks. Latvians have also been successful at the Olympics, winning medals in cycling, gymnastics, luge, and bobsledding, among other sports.

Traditional Games: Latvians play many traditional games, especially on holidays. During Easter, some rural residents take turns on swings attached to tall trees. Other popular games include chess and ***Zole***, a card game that uses 26 cards. Of note, riddles are particularly popular in Latvia, where scholars have collected over 450,000 examples of these word puzzles.

Music



Traditional: Because of the efforts of Krišjānis Barons (pictured) and other scholars during Latvia's 19th century National Awakening, Latvia today is home to a large folk poem and folk music collection. A common form is the ***daina***, a melodic prose sung by individuals or groups. Usually just 4 short verses, the *daina's* first 2 lines typically ask a question, while the subsequent 2 provide the answer. While they may evoke any emotion or theme, *dainas* typically explore the seasons, stages of life, love, work, and the land, while others feature pre-Christian themes and stories (see p. 1-2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Most *dainas* follow a strict rhythmic pattern without end rhyme.

Traditional instruments include flutes, wooden trumpets, simple horns, reed instruments, zithers, bells, drums, and tambourines. The ancient harp-like ***kokle*** is the most notable folk instrument. Traditionally 5-stringed, modern versions of the *kokle* may have up to 20 strings. It has no standard shape, and musicians play it on a table or their knees. The *kokle*, and the ***dūdas*** (bagpipe) often accompanied *daina* performances.

During their 17th-century rule (see p. 5 of *History and Myth*), the Swedes introduced accordions, fiddles, violins, mandolins,

and guitars to Latvian music. The organ is another popular instrument, with at least 1 present in almost every church. German and Swedish choral music became popular in the 19th century. Today, choirs are integral to Latvian musical traditions as evidenced by the country's song and dance festivals.

Modern: Although it was forbidden by the Soviet occupiers (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), rock music gained popularity in the 1950s due to the activities of music smugglers and the availability of western radio. Today, Liepāja is Latvia's rock capital. Popular local bands include Prāta Vētra, Pērkons, Linga, and Līvi. Jazz, classical, opera, and international pop music are also widely enjoyed.

Dance

Traditional: Latvian folk dances exhibit a mixture of traditional Latvian and regional characteristics. Women typically lead a group slowly and methodically in a circle or line formation, sometimes without music or singing accompaniment. Surprisingly complex for their slow speed, the dances often depict day-to-day rural life, nature themes, and special life events, such as birth, death, and marriage (Photo: A Latvian dance ensemble).

After the 18th-century introduction of the German waltz, polka, and square dance, folk dances began to include male leads and formalized choreography. Today, some folk dances are performed with partners or in formations of 4 or more couples. Others double as games. ***Rotaļa*** is a common children's dance that includes simple steps performed in a circle formation to polka music.

Modern: Latvian modern and artistic dance developed in the early 20th century. Under Soviet direction (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), Latvia became a center of Russian classical ballet, and the Riga Ballet was widely considered the best outside of Russia. Latvia is now home to many world-class ballet dancers who compete and perform around the world.

Theater and Cinema

In the early 13th century, Germans (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*) staged the first theatrical performances in Latvia. While the plays had Christian themes for centuries, the first permanent German theater in Latvia produced secular plays beginning in the late 1700s. A century later, the first Latvian theater troupe began performing Latvian-language plays that helped to inspire the 19th-century National Awakening (see p. 6-7 of *History and Myth*).

Theater and cinema remained popular in 20th-century Latvia, even during Soviet censorship. Some productions emphasized Soviet themes on the surface level while also containing hidden patriotic messages. In the 1960s, Gunārs Priede, Latvia's most prolific playwright, replaced common Soviet themes with more realistic depictions of rural life and social conditions. Today, Latvians enjoy a wide array of theatrical productions.

Literature

For most of the country's history, Latvia's folklore was an oral tradition. Written Latvian literature enjoyed a surge during the 19th century National Awakening, when scholars began to collect and document folklore and folk poems. Other authors and poets composed original Latvian-language works which often depicted rural life, peasant work, and Latvia's history of foreign occupations (Photo: 1993 postage stamp of *Lāčplēsis*, the hero of Latvia's national epic – see p. 18 of *History and Myth*).

The late 19th century ***Jaunā strāva*** (New Movement) supported nationalist ideals and sought to open Latvia to Western European socialism. National icons Jānis and Elza Pliekšāns, known as Rainis and Aspāzija, produced works that helped to foster the first period of Latvian independence (see p. 9-10 of *History and Myth*). Throughout this era, Latvian writers explored common themes, including the rural peasantry, patriotism, and life under foreign rule.

During the Soviet era (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), many Latvian authors went into exile (see p. 2-3 of *Learning and Knowledge*) while those remaining were subject to censorship. During this period, some Latvian authors tried to disguise their critical treatment of contemporary themes within historical settings. Today, popular works include both fiction and non-fiction treatments of rural Latvia and life during the Soviet period.

Visual Arts and Handicrafts

Latvian visual arts often reflect common aesthetic themes, including rural landscapes and geometric designs. During the 19th century National Awakening, Latvian artists Vilhelms Purvītis and Jānis Rozentāls used new European styles, such as Impressionism, to depict Latvian subject matter. Of note, famous American painter Mark Rothko was born in Daugavpils, Latvia. Today, a museum there showcases his work and life (Photo: A 2013 postage stamp of Rothko).

Handicrafts and folk art reflect Latvia's rural peasant history when Latvians made most of their required everyday objects by hand. Traditional handicrafts include leatherwork, metalwork, wooden objects, ceramics, and textiles. Of note, Latvian women traditionally made knitted or woven mittens and other warm clothing for men to signal their romantic interest, a tradition that some women continue today. The Latvian government has invested in the preservation and promotion of traditional handicrafts through extracurricular programs and handicraft courses that are part of the national public school curriculum (Photo: A 2002 postage stamp depicting traditional mittens and costumes from Vidzeme).

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Typical Latvian fare consists of mildly seasoned, hearty dishes prepared from fresh, local ingredients. Rural residents and older urban Latvians prefer to entertain guests at small, home gatherings. By contrast, younger generations tend to mingle in bars, clubs, and restaurants (Photo: A restaurant in Jelgava).

Dining Customs

Latvians typically augment 3 daily meals with snacks throughout the day. While the mid-day meal is traditionally the largest, dinner can also be substantial. When invited to a Latvian home, guests should arrive on time and may bring flowers, cake, or an alcoholic beverage as gifts for the host.

Upon entering the home, guests remove their shoes, replacing them with their own slippers or with a pair provided by their hosts. At the table, hosts typically serve their guests first. After guests finish their portions, they usually must decline several offers of additional servings if they do not want more food. Of note, Latvians consider it impolite to leave food on their plates. Special occasion meals may last several hours and include several courses.

Diet

Bread accompanies most Latvian meals. ***Rupjmaize*** (a traditional dark rye bread, baked in a wood-fired oven) and ***saldskābā maize*** (a sweet and sour rye bread) are 2 of the most common varieties. Besides bread, grains such as buckwheat, oats, and barley are important staples. Many Latvian dishes also incorporate dairy products, including milk, cottage cheese, sour cream, cheese, and yogurt. Common vegetables include potatoes, beets, cabbage, carrots, radishes, cucumbers, mushrooms, peas, and tomatoes.

Fish is a popular protein and may be served filleted, smoked, salted, stuffed with vegetables or grains, or incorporated into soups and salads. Common varieties include salmon, eel, pike, and herring. Latvians also enjoy assorted meats including beef, veal, pork, lamb, chicken, duck, and goose. Sausage and bacon are particularly popular. Meats and fish are typically served alongside potatoes or grains and seasonal vegetables.

Latvians enjoy a variety of native fruits and berries, including quince (a sweet, yellow fruit similar in shape and taste to a pear), black and red currants, cranberries, raspberries, gooseberries (pictured), and ***brūklenes*** (bilberries). In addition to consuming fruit raw, Latvians enjoy making fruit jams, juices, and compote (a stewed mixture of fruits, sugar, and spices).

Popular Dishes and Meals

Breakfast typically includes a variety of savory foods, such as bread, cheese, eggs, porridge, cold meat, smoked fish, bacon, and sausages. Pancakes served with butter, jams, or other fillings are also popular. Breakfast typically includes tea, coffee, juice, yogurt, milk or ***rūgušpiens*** (curdled milk).

Generally served between 1-3 pm, lunch often consists of a 3-course meal, beginning with a soup, followed by a main meat or fish course served with potatoes, and a dessert. Although traditionally a light meal, dinner is increasingly supplanting lunch as the day's largest and main meal. Similar to lunch, dinner may consist of multiple courses, including an appetizer or soup and a main course comprised of a protein, starch, and vegetable.

Popular dishes include ***pīrāgi*** (small pies or pastries filled with meat and vegetables); ***pelēkie zirņi ar speķi*** (a stew of boiled peas with bacon and onions); ***svaigo kāpostu zupa*** (cabbage soup); ***skâbâ putra*** (a hearty soup of sour cream, cracked barley, and buttermilk, served cold with slices of marinated herring); and ***cūkas galerts*** (diced pork set in gelatin made from meat stock, served with vinegar, mustard, or horseradish).

Many Latvian salads are dressed in sour cream or mayonnaise and may incorporate hearty ingredients like smoked fish, meat, or potatoes mixed with a variety of vegetables. For dessert, Latvians enjoy ***ķīselis***, a thickened fruit soup, or ***tortes***, various cakes. On special occasions, ***kliņģeris*** (a rich, yeast coffee bread made with dried fruits and twisted into the form of a pretzel) is especially popular.

Eating Out

Latvians, especially in urban areas, eat out regularly. Restaurants range from upscale establishments to small casual eateries (***kafejnīca***) and bars serving inexpensive, hearty meals or light snacks. Restaurants serving international cuisines, including Italian, Greek, Indian, and Japanese are increasingly popular in larger cities. Of note, while tipping is relatively uncommon in rural areas, many urban establishments expect a 10% gratuity for good service. Street stalls are not particularly popular, though some vendors gather in central squares, markets, or busy transportation junctures to sell light snacks, fresh fruits, and homemade jams and preserves (Photo: A vendor sells fried potatoes in Riga).

Beverages

Latvians enjoy tea, sweetened with honey, and coffee, usually served without milk, throughout the day. During the summer, Latvians may enjoy ***kvass*** (a non-alcoholic fermented drink made from rye bread or fruit, yeast, sugar or honey, and water). Another traditional drink is ***bērzų sula***, birch juice combined with rye bread crusts, black currant bush twigs, and raisins. Popular alcoholic beverages include vodka, ***Melnais Balzāms*** ("Black Balsam" – a thick, bitter liquor known for its healing properties and brewed in Riga since the early 18th century), ***allažu ķimelis*** (a caraway-flavored liquor), and beer, including local brews such as Aldaris, Cesu Gaišais, Bauskas, Rigas, and Piebalgas. Some Latvians also enjoy imported whiskey, brandy, and wine. Latvians tend to consume beverages, including soda and beer, at room temperature.

Health Overview

Latvians' overall health has improved dramatically in recent decades. Between 1991 and 2015, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1), decreased from 18 to 7 deaths per 1,000 live births. Meanwhile, maternal mortality dropped from 47 to 18 deaths per 100,000 live births. Further, life expectancy at birth steadily increased from approximately 69 to 74 years. Despite this gain, Latvians' life expectancy remains the lowest in the EU, which averages 80 years. While Latvians generally have access to modern healthcare, the quality of care varies greatly among private, public, urban, and rural facilities (Photo: Latvian and Lithuanian soldiers compete in a basketball tournament).

Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Latvian medicine centers on the use of herbal remedies, not surgical methods, to identify and treat the basic causes of illness.

Many Latvians supplement conventional therapies with traditional remedies. Merchants in both urban and rural markets commonly sell medicinal plants and herbal remedies. Besides herbal remedies, common treatments include acupuncture and homeopathy.

Acupuncture is an ancient Asian practice in which a practitioner inserts very thin needles into various parts of a patient's skin. Developed in 18th-century Germany, homeopathy is a practice in in which a patient ingests diluted animal, mineral, plant, and synthetic substances with the aim of triggering the body's natural system of healing. In addition, some Latvians drink Black Balsam (see "Beverages" above) as a cure for a variety of ailments.

Modern Healthcare System

The federally-funded National Health Service (NHS) administers Latvia's national healthcare policies and provides free, basic medical coverage to all Latvian residents (including non-citizen residents – see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*). In 2013, Latvia had 65 public and private hospitals, delivering a full range of surgical, intensive, and emergency care. In addition, about 5,000 small, family-owned general medical practices provide basic primary care and act as their patients' gatekeepers to secondary ambulatory and hospital services. Also popular is home medical care provided to chronically ill patients or patients recovering from surgery (Photo: A US Airman trades hats with a Latvian child).

Healthcare System Challenges: Recent health reforms have improved services for children and pregnant women, strengthened primary care, and enhanced emergency assistance. Despite this progress, Latvia's healthcare system suffers from insufficient funding and lags behind most EU states in performance and patient satisfaction. Further, high out-of-pocket expenses for special procedures and some medication force many Latvians to forgo medical treatment altogether. In fact, Latvia has the highest proportion of citizens with unmet healthcare needs in the EU, with about 14% of Latvians reporting such needs in 2011, well above the 1% reported in Estonia, Lithuania, and other EU states.

While Latvia's cities typically have a variety of medical facilities, many public hospitals and clinics remain understaffed and poorly maintained. Although private facilities are staffed with highly-qualified doctors and offer first-rate care, they are too expensive for many Latvians. The quality of care further diminishes in rural areas, where residents have access only to small, ill-equipped clinics. Moreover, practitioners in some rural regions are burdened with heavy workloads, forcing patients to wait for long periods before they can receive care.

Similar to its Baltic neighbors of Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia's aging population is expected to burden its healthcare system in the coming decades. With 39% of Latvia's population aged 50 or older in 2015, experts estimate that proportion will rise to 45% by 2030. Meanwhile, high emigration (see p. 1 of *Political and Social Relations*) combined with low fertility (see p. 4 of *Sex and Gender*) result in fewer young people. Consequently, the proportion of Latvians of working age is dwindling relative to the number of retirees – a situation which will continue to add significant strain to the healthcare system.

Health Challenges

As in many countries with aging populations, chronic and non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, account for over 4/5 of all deaths in Latvia. The top causes of death include cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes, digestive diseases and colon, lung, and breast cancer. About 10% of all deaths result from car accidents, smoking, suicide, and other preventable "external causes." Of note, with 22 deaths per 100,000 people, Latvia has the 3rd highest suicide rate in the EU, behind Hungary (with 24 deaths) and Lithuania (with 30 deaths). About 26% of Latvian adults are obese, about the same rate as neighboring Lithuania but lower than the US rate of 33% (Photo: US military members visit a children's hospital in Riga).

The average life expectancy for Latvian men is 70 years, which is considerably lower the average of 79 years for Latvian women. In fact, Latvian male life expectancy is the 2nd shortest in the EU, behind neighboring Lithuania (69). Experts suggest this high rate of male mortality results from Latvian men's harmful lifestyle choices, including alcohol abuse, frequent tobacco use, and an unhealthy diet.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

For centuries, Latvians subsisted as peasants in an agrarian and trade-based economy dominated by German landowners (see *History and Myth*). In the late 1800s, Russian occupiers began to transform Latvia into what would become the most industrialized Baltic state during the Soviet era (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*). In addition to large collective farms, the Soviet state developed and supported timber, machinery, chemical, and other heavy industries until the USSR's collapse and Latvian independence in 1991 (Photo: Riga's Town Hall Square).

Using the West as an economic model, Latvia's transition from a centrally-planned Soviet economy to a liberal free-market system was arduous. To initiate liberal economic reform, Latvia adopted its own currency, reduced public spending, privatized state-owned companies, curbed subsidies, and instituted a flat tax system. The economic shock from these and other reforms caused the economy to shrink by nearly half. Additionally, inflation peaked at over 950% and unemployment hit record highs between 1990-93.

Once reforms took hold by the late 1990s, the economy began to recover: inflation fell to 3%, unemployment began to decline, and most enterprises were privatized. Despite persistent corruption and some other structural issues, Latvia began negotiations to apply for membership in the European Union (EU) in 1999.

By the early 2000s, the Latvian economy was growing faster than those of most other European countries, recording average annual growth of 8.5% from 2000-07. With its modernized industrial sector, expanding services sector, and newly-privatized farms, Latvia gained accession to the EU in

2004, further facilitating economic expansion. Its EU membership along with relatively low public debt, low flat taxes, and high-quality low-cost production made Latvia an attractive place for foreign direct investment (FDI). To further entice investors, Latvia created tax- and tariff-free trade zones in Riga, Liepāja, Rēzekne, and Ventspils.

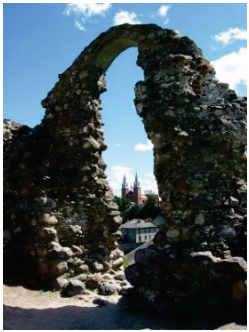
The 2008-09 global financial crisis hit Latvia's banking and credit services hard. By early 2010, the economy had contracted by almost 1/4 and unemployment spiked to over 20%. Government austerity programs, an internal currency devaluation, and EU financial support helped growth to rebound by mid-2010. Latvia then grew by almost 4% per year from 2011-14, one of the EU's highest rates. Partially due to its prudent reaction to the financial crisis, the EU approved Latvia's application to join the Eurozone and to adopt the EU's euro as its currency in 2014. Despite low initial public support, Latvians generally consider the euro to be economically beneficial (Photo: Euro coin depicting a Latvian maiden).

Latvia's economic growth has recently outpaced that of its Baltic neighbors and most other EU countries. After healthy growth in 2015, experts expect the economy's growth rate to average over 3.5% through 2020, lower than its pre-crisis rate but higher than most other EU members. As of early 2016, Latvia has low inflation, an unemployment rate just below 10%, and increasing wages. As a part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, Latvia will seek to further reduce unemployment, invest more in research and development, encourage FDI, and expand its renewable energy infrastructure (see p. 2 of *Technology and Material*).

Although Latvia has successfully transitioned to a modern free-market economy, it has a lower per-capita income than most EU countries and both its Baltic neighbors. Other challenges include low productivity and wages, rampant corruption, a large informal sector, increasing income inequality, high structural unemployment, and net emigration.

Services

Accounting for about 74% of GDP and 67% of employment, the services sector is the largest and fastest-growing segment of Latvia's economy. Key services industries include transportation and storage, retail and wholesale trade, telecommunications, banking, real estate, and tourism.



Tourism: While Latvia's tourism market grew steadily until the 2008-09 financial crisis, its recovery since then has been slow. Major tourist attractions include Riga's historic center, ancient castles, and national parks. Nearly 6 million tourists visited Latvia in 2014, primarily from Russia, Germany, Estonia, and Lithuania (Photo: Livonian Order castle ruins in Rēzekne).

Industry

As the 2nd largest component of the economy, the industrial sector accounts for 23% of GDP and 24% of the labor force. The most significant sub-sectors include manufacturing, construction, and energy.

Manufacturing: Food and beverage processing accounts for about 25% of the manufacturing sub-sector. Other significant activities include metalworking, mechanical engineering, as well as textile, pharmaceutical, and chemical manufacturing.

Construction: Construction accounts for nearly 7% of GDP and 6% of the workforce. This $2 billion industry has been a key factor in Latvia's transition to an open-market economy, experiencing high growth since 2010. Latvian construction companies compete for projects throughout the region, with the largest markets located in Lithuania, Sweden, and Estonia.

Green Energy: Latvia has maintained significant hydroelectric and biomass power industries, initially developed in the Soviet era, to decrease its dependence on oil and gas imports (see p. 2 of *Technology and Material*). Latvia plans to increase

employment and investment in green energy as part of the Europe 2020 Strategy (Photo: The Pļaviņas hydroelectric plant).

Agriculture

Consisting of farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry, agriculture is the smallest component of the Latvian economy. It accounts for just over 3% of GDP and 9% of the labor force.

Farming and Livestock: About 30% of Latvia's land area is dedicated to cultivation. Grains such as rye, wheat, oats, flax, and barley encompass almost 1/3 of agricultural output. Other crops include potatoes, onions, carrots, and sugar beets. Cows, pigs, and poultry are the most common livestock, while dairy production is also a significant component of the sub-sector. Of note, approximately 10% of all agricultural land is certified for organic production. Honey, one of Latvia's principal organic products, is also a high value-added export.

Fishing: The relatively large Latvian fishing industry consists of about 700 vessels that harvested over 115,000 tons of sprat, herring, cod, and other fish in 2014. As one of the largest food production sectors, the fish processing industry employs nearly 6,000 people. While Latvians consume much of the catch, fresh and processed seafood exports reach over 50 countries, primarily Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland.

Forestry: With over 54% of its territory covered in woodlands, Latvia has a highly-developed forestry industry. As early as the 1930s, Latvian timber comprised 10% of the global market. Today, raw timber, paper, furniture, and other products are notable components of Latvian export inventory. Commercial harvests primarily include fir, pine, birch, and aspen trees.

Currency

The ***euro*** (€), the EU's common currency, is issued in 7 banknote values (5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500) and 2 coin values (1, 2). A euro subdivides into ***centi*** (cents), issued in 6 coin values (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50). With the variance in exchange

rates, $1 has been worth between 67 and 95 *centi* in recent years. Most businesses accept credit cards, although some smaller vendors may only accept cash in small denominations.

Foreign Trade

Totaling $13.4 billion in 2014, Latvia's exports include foodstuffs, timber and wood products, machinery and equipment, metals, and textiles. Major export partners in 2014 were Lithuania (18%), Russia (15%), Estonia (11%), Germany (7%), Poland (6%), Sweden (5%), and the UK (5%). In the same year, Latvia imported $16.7 billion in machinery and equipment, consumer goods, chemicals, fuel, and vehicles from Lithuania (17%), Germany (12%), Poland (11%), Russia (8%), Estonia (8%), Finland (6%), and Italy (4%) (Photo: A freight ship docked in Riga port).

European Union

Participation in the 28-member EU (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations)* provides Latvia with the economic benefits of a large common market for exports, a stable currency, a secure business environment, and easier access to FDI. During 2014-15, about 76% of Latvian trade was with EU countries. Two disadvantages to membership include market regulations restricting the flow of some goods and services and easier emigration of Latvians to other EU countries, thereby reducing Latvia's labor force.

Foreign Aid

The EU is Latvia's largest aid supplier, providing about €5.5 billion for structural assistance and regional development from 2014-2020. Although Latvia is a net recipient of aid, in 2013 its government gave about €17 million in official development assistance via international agencies and technical projects.

In recent years, the US has given Latvia economic and military aid averaging about $7 million per year. In early 2016, the US pledged $3.4 billion in military support for Europe as a whole in response to recent Russian military aggression (see p. 11 of *Political and Social Relations*).

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Latvia's modern physical infrastructure includes well-maintained roads and efficient public transportation systems. Latvians enjoy a free press, unrestricted Internet access, and a well-connected telecommunications network.

Transportation

While the number of Latvian families using a privately-owned vehicle (POV) is increasing, many people travel by train, bus, taxi, bicycle, or foot. Riga's mass transit system includes efficient and affordable bus, tram, trolley, and commuter trains that run from 5:30am-midnight. Residents of Riga and its suburbs most commonly commute by train, while outside the capital, buses and POVs are more efficient forms of transport. Bike paths traverse the country, connecting Latvia to Estonia and Lithuania. Biking is particularly convenient in Riga and Jūrmala (Photo: Riga's Stone Bridge).

Since the country is strategically located between Western Europe and Russia, Latvia's ports, roads, railways, and pipelines play significant roles in regional trade and transport. Current development plans seek to improve all modes of Latvia's transportation system in order to secure Latvia's position as a European transit hub.

Roadways: In 2013, Latvia had over 45,000 mi of roads, 20% of which were paved. While most main roads are well-maintained, many minor roads are in poor condition, particularly in the winter or after extreme weather. Due to minimal traffic, most roads are single lane in each direction. Latvian highways A1, A4, and A7 comprise the *Via Baltica* (EU route E67), which runs from Estonia to Poland.

Railways: Latvia has just over 1,400 mi of railways connecting its cities with Estonia, Lithuania, and Russia. The state-owned ***Latvijas dzelzceļš*** (Latvian Railways) provides most train services. Although both the number of passengers served and amount of freight transported have declined in recent years, commuter rail services in and around Riga remain efficient, extensive, and well-used. A planned electric high-speed ***Rail Baltica*** train is set to connect Latvia to the EU Railroad Network by 2025 (Photo: Riga Station).

Ports and Waterways: Latvia has nearly 200 mi of waterways, navigable year-round. The major ports of Liepāja, Ventspils, and Riga are also special economic zones (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*). Regular ferry services connect these ports to cities in Germany and Sweden.

Airways: Latvia has 42 airports, with 18 having paved runways. In 2014, Riga International Airport served nearly 5 million passengers, accounting for 45% of all air traffic in the Baltics. AirBaltic, the state-owned national carrier, offers service to over 50 local and international cities. Several global carriers also connect to international destinations.

Energy

Renewable energy resources, mainly hydropower and biomass, account for 39% of Latvia's energy consumption, a rate of renewable energy use that is Europe's 2nd highest and triple the EU average. While Latvia uses hydroelectric energy to generate electricity, it burns woodchips and other organic material primarily for heat. To fulfill its remaining energy needs, Latvia imports natural gas and oil from Russia, which respectively account for about 30% and 27% of total energy consumption. To reduce its dependence on Russian imports, Latvia has increased pipeline connections with Baltic, Nordic, and Central Asian countries and plans to liberalize its gas market by 2017 to reduce Russia's stake in its natural gas utility.

Media

The Latvian constitution protects freedom of speech and press, while the Freedom of Information Law regulates public information access. Although there have been some reports of governmental interference, state censorship tends to be rare.

Radio and TV: Of the 37 broadcast stations in Latvia, only 2 are state-owned. While the public ***Latvijas Radio*** dominates the radio market, other stations broadcast popular content in many languages. Most households subscribe to cable, satellite, or Internet services that provide international television content (Photo: Riga's Radio and TV Tower dominates the cityscape).

Print Media: The Latvian press includes more than 100 periodicals published in Latvian, Russian, English, and other languages. *Diena* and *Latvijas Avīze* are the most popular Latvian-language newspapers, while *Vesti segodnya*, *Telegraf*, and *Cas* cater to Latvia's Russian-speakers, who constitute the largest Russian-speaking media market in the Baltics. Based in Riga, the English-language *Baltic Times* provides coverage of all 3 Baltic States.

Telecommunications

Latvia has an extensive telecommunications network with fiber optic connections to Estonia, Finland, and Sweden. In 2014, Latvia had about 20 landline and 130 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people. The major mobile phone service providers are Tele2, Bite, as well as LMT, which is working to make Latvia one of the first countries to provide a 5G network.

Internet: In 2015, about 82% of residents used the Internet, connecting to the web with speeds that are faster than those in the US and Latvia's Baltic neighbors. Nevertheless, compared to most EU countries, Latvian businesses are less integrated with digital technology, and e-government services are of lower quality, despite the high rates of speed and connectivity.

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October 2016