



Latvia — Va-PoReg Country Report

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09/10/1721 Start Part of Other Country [of Russia]: As a result of the Great Northern War, which took place from 1700 to 1721, Estonia and Livonia surrendered to Russia in 1710, and the Treaty of Nystad in 1721, signed on 09/10/1721¹, solidified Russian control, making Vidzeme part of the Riga Governorate. Meanwhile, the Latgale region remained under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as Inflanty Voivodeship until 1772 when it was absorbed into Russia. The Duchy of Courland and Semigallia, a vassal state of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was annexed by Russia in 1795 through the Third Partition of Poland, thus bringing the entire territory that is now Latvia under Russian rule. Despite this, all three Baltic provinces maintained their local laws, German as the official language, and their own parliament known as the Landtag.² The territory that would later become Latvia, along with other western parts of the Russian Empire, was severely impacted by the devastation of World War I. Initially, demands for self-determination were limited to seeking autonomy. However, the situation changed with the Russian Revolution in 1917, which created a power vacuum. This was followed by the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between Russia and Germany in March 1918, and ultimately, the armistice between the Allies and Germany on 11/11/1918.³ LIED and V-Dem do not provide data for Latvia between 1900 and 1918.

11/07/1917 Continuation as Part of Other Country [of Russia, Communist Ideocracy]: On this date the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was proclaimed.

11/18/1918 End Part of Other Country [of Russia, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Democratizing Regime: Latvia gained its independence de jure on 11/18/1918 and de facto on 08/11/1920 (Dreifelds 1996: 96-97, Casey et al. 2020: 11). Kārlis Ulmanis was appointed as the prime minister and entrusted with forming a government.⁴ Universal suffrage was introduced in Law of elections to the Constituent assembly in 1919.⁵ Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. For the given timeframe, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, whereas V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating political liberties were present.

04/17[&18]/1920 End Democratizing Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: Latvia conducted elections for the Constitutional Assembly. The Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party emerged as the leading party, securing 57 out of the 150 seats in the Assembly (Plakans 1995).⁶ However, there was no party that was able to establish a dominant status permanently and because of the proportional election system up to twenty-seven parties were represented in the parliament. Thus, there were frequent changes in government compositions.⁷ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Moreover, these elections were competitive, clean, free and fair (LIED, V-Dem's CEI and EF&FI). LIED classifies political liberties as absent, whereas V-Dem's PCLI considers them as fully present for the entire time. V-Dem's LDI is on a level that indicates that Latvia was not a liberal democracy until 1922 and came into the range of somewhat a liberal democracy only since 1923. The constitution of 1922 envisioned an independent judiciary accountable solely to the dictates of the law.⁸ Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate in

1920-1921 and robust until 1933, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive.

05/15/1934 End Electoral Democracy/Start Personalist Autocracy: Following the emergence of a right-wing coup threat, Kārlis Ulmanis, who was already serving as Prime Minister within a parliamentary democratic system, seized power with the support of General Jānis Balodis. The coup is classified in the scholarly literature, and by us, as a self-coup (autogolpe). Ulmanis used his executive position and the loyalty of the military to dissolve parliament, ban all political parties, curtail the press, and imprison opposition figures. This was not a military coup in the strict sense, since the armed forces did not act as an independent political actor against a civilian government. Rather, they backed an incumbent head of government who unilaterally dismantled democratic institutions and consolidated personalist rule (Dreifelds 1996: 96-97, Casey et al. 2020: 11). Up until March 1936, the incumbent State President Alberts Kviesis stayed in office and although he had not been a supporter of the coup, he collaborated with Ulmanis. On 04/11/1936 Ulmanis succeeded Kviesis as president, subsequently holding both the office of Prime Minister and President and thus uniting both the executive and legislative in one person.⁹ Ulmanis „did not create a ruling party, [or a] rubber-stamp parliament”.¹⁰ The regime was characterized by a personal and paternalistic dictatorship, with Ulmanis, who referred to himself as „the leader of the people,” asserting that his decisions were in the best interest of Latvians (Butulis 2001, Feldmanis 2001). He held a strong belief in Latvian nationalism and championed the slogan „Latvia for Latvians,” advocating for Latvia to be a nation-state specifically for Latvian people, rather than a multinational state dominated by traditional Baltic German elites and the Jewish entrepreneurial class.¹¹ Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. The regime can therefore clearly be classified as a personalist autocracy, as there were no longer any institutional restrictions on Ulmanis power. LIED still codes political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI decreased into a range which we interpret as not really present. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

06/17/1940 End Personalist Autocracy/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by USSR, Communist Ideocracy]: After the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Germany and the Soviet-Union in August 1939, Latvia was occupied on this date. The Soviet forces compelled the Latvian government to resign (Dreifelds 1996: 97-98, Casey et al. 2020: 11). Moscow installed a puppet government under Augusts Kirhenšteins, which immediately requested incorporation into the USSR. Rigged elections were held on 07/14-15/1940, with only pro-Soviet candidates permitted. During this brief occupation period, the puppet government operated under direct Soviet control. All independent political organizations were banned, and Soviet security structures (including the NKVD) began operations. According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties were not really present.

08/05/1940 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by USSR, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]: Following the occupation, the Communist Party of Latvia became the sole legal party, forming the „Latvian Working People's Bloc“ for elections. All other political groups were banned, including the Democratic Bloc, which was prevented from participating. The election results were manipulated, with Soviet army personnel allowed to vote and the announcement released prematurely. Despite the unconstitutional process, the newly elected People's Parliament declared the establishment of the Latvian SSR on 07/21/1940 and requested admission to the Soviet Union, which was eventually accepted by the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, formally incorporating Latvia into the USSR on 08/05/1940.¹² Latvia within the Soviet Union represents a contested borderline case, as it functioned de facto as a constituent Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR federal structure and was governed through Soviet institutions. However, many Western states never recognized Soviet annexation as legitimate, maintaining diplomatic recognition of

Baltic governments-in-exile and treating the territories as occupied rather than legitimately integrated. Va-PoReg's de facto classification principle prioritizes actual governance structures, leading to Part of Other Country classification based on factual integration into Soviet administration, with the contested nature and subsequent independence restoration (1990-1991) warranting this borderline designation. Between 1940 and 1990 LIED and V-Dem do not provide data for Latvia.

07/01/1941 End Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Germany, Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy]: On this date, German troops reached Riga, after having launched their attack against the Soviet forces occupying Latvia on 06/22/1941. Latvian citizens who had been conscripted into the Red Army deserted their units, and began liberating towns from Soviet occupation of their own accord. By 07/10/1941, German troops occupied the entire Latvian territory. Latvia was incorporated into the Reichskommissariat Ostland as the Generealbezirk Lettland. The Generalplan Ost, drafted in 1939, determined that the Latvian population should be reduced by half, with Jews, Romani people, communists, army officers, politicians, and intellectuals demarked for execution or deportation. The civilian population would be further reduced through orchestrated food shortages, resulting in mass starvation.

10/13/1944 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Germany, Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy]/Start Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]: On this date, Soviet troops recaptured Riga from the German forces, but failed to recapture all Latvian territory, as the Courland Peninsula remained in German control until 05/09/1945. On 03/17/1944, Latvian political leaders and public figures declared the need to restore sovereignty to the Republic of Latvia, effectively calling for resistance to the reoccupation by the Soviet Union.¹³ Despite this, the Soviets reinstated the Soviet system to the same standards as it had been in 1941. The Soviet forces were met with resistance by Latvian national partisans, also called the Forest brothers. On 03/25/1949 the Soviets deported 43.000 rural residents to Siberia and northern Kazakhstan. Collectivization of Latvian farms had begun in 1948 and intensified in 03/1949. The deportations and collectivization of farms harshly affected the resistance movement, with the last members surrendering in 1956, after being promised amnesty. The local Communist Party was under Moscow's control and local party officials were often Russian-raised ethnic Latvians, who did not speak Latvian. Beginning in 09/1959, the Soviets purged over 2.000 leading Latvian communists from government positions. The Latvian census of 1959 showed that Latvians were significantly outnumbered by Russian nationals, as a result of an extensive Russification program and planned immigration. Between 06/14/1987 and 09/06/1991, the Singing Revolution preceded the subsequent independence of Latvia from the USSR.

03/18/1990 End Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, Latvia held parliamentary elections in the Latvian SSR. This marked the first genuinely free parliamentary election in Latvia since 1931. A total of 201 deputies were elected to the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR, with 170 of them being elected in the initial round. Subsequent run-off elections took place on 03/25, 04/01, and 04/29 to determine the remaining deputies.¹⁴ In May 1990, Latvia's Soviet declared its independence from the Soviet Union. Following a tense and violent standoff with pro-Soviet forces, the Soviet Union acknowledged Latvia's independence in September 1991 (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 37). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED categorizes elections during this time as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores elections as free and fair. Their CEI scores them as somewhat clean. Additionally, LIED considers the political liberties as absent. However, V-Dem's PCLI already indicates a full presence of political liberties. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. As per FH's classification starting from 1991, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. For the remaining period the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. According to our observations Latvia is a borderline case between a liberal and an electoral democracy in this period.

06/05[&06]/1993 End Electoral Democracy/Start Liberal Democracy: On these dates the first post-soviet elections took place. These elections were a significant milestone as they were conducted under a new electoral law, with the participation of a wide range of political parties representing diverse ideologies. The elections were deemed free and fair by international observers, marking a clear departure from the semi-democratic practices of the earlier transition period. The result of the elections was a coalition minority government between the two parties Latvian Way and Latvian Farmers Union.¹⁵ Elections in 1995 entailed a major change in the composition of the parliament as it turned out deeply fragmented into nine parties of which six formed a coalition. This coalition under Andris Skele as prime minister soon began disintegrating, resulting in Skele's resignation in 1997. The following coalitions were not as numerous but governmental stability remained precarious.¹⁶ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. The elections in Latvia are deemed free and fair.¹⁷ Every citizen over the age of 18 may vote (OSCE 2023). V-Dem's LDI reached a high level in 1993 it. V-Dem's CEI reflects a high level of electoral cleanliness ever since 06/05/1993. The pivotal change towards democracy occurred with the first fully free and fair parliamentary elections held on 06/05/1993. Since then, LIED categorizes all elections as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores elections as free and fair except for 2006 to 2009, when it scores them only somewhat free and fair. Their CEI has continuously scores elections as clean. On 10/06/2018 Credible and competitive parliamentary elections took place, leading to the formation of a coalition government from a divided seven-party parliament (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020). The parliamentary elections on 10/01/2022 were viewed as competitive and credible. New Unity, a center-right party, established a ruling coalition with the United List, a centrist alliance and the National Alliance, a right-wing party. Latvia is a parliamentary democracy with a unicameral system and is classified by FH as a consolidated democracy.¹⁸ In general, civil liberties are respected both in law and in practice. Freedom of religion and freedom of assembly are protected. Per FH's scoring for 1994, the country is classified as free with a score of 5, which falls into our interpretation of the rather free category. From 1995 onward the country is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. Therefore, both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI score full political liberties since 1993. Political parties in Latvia are free to organize themselves and compete freely with each other. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust until 2011 and between 2021-2022, comprehensive until 2020 and in 2023. Although there are numerous provisions designed to ensure transparent government work, the European Commission Rule of Law Report 2022 expressed concerns about the risk of corruption in public procurement. Judicial independence is guaranteed in principle, but corruption and politicization remain a persistent problem. Protection of human rights and equality before the law are ensured by the constitution.¹⁹

Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional Sources (Bilmanis 1947, Bilmanis 1951, Elklit 1994, Hiden/Salmon 1991, Iwaskiw 1995a, Iwaskiw 1995b, Pabriks/Valtenbergs 2010, Rogainis 1971)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Nystad

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvia#Reformation_period_and_Polish_and_Swedish_rule

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvia#Declaration_of_independence_and_interwar_period

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvia#Declaration_of_independence_and_interwar_period

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920_Latvian_Constitutional_Assembly_election

- ⁷ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html> , see narratives for version 5.0, Latvia_R: 1-2, Latvia_V: 1-2.
- ⁸ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Latvia_2016
- ⁹ <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/ulmanis-karlis/>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C4%81rlis_Ulmanis
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C4%81rlis_Ulmanis
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C4%81rlis_Ulmanis
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvian_Soviet_Socialist_Republic
- ¹³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_re-occupation_of_the_Baltic_states_\(1944\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_re-occupation_of_the_Baltic_states_(1944))
- ¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1990_Latvian_Supreme_Soviet_election
- ¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1993_Latvian_parliamentary_election#:~:text=Parliamentary%20elections%20were%20held%20in,of%20votes%20and%20won%20seats
- ¹⁶ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html> , see narratives for version 5.0, Latvia_R: 2-3, Latvia_V: 2-3
- ¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Latvian_parliamentary_election
- ¹⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/latvia/nations-transit/2023>
- ¹⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/latvia/freedom-world/2023>

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