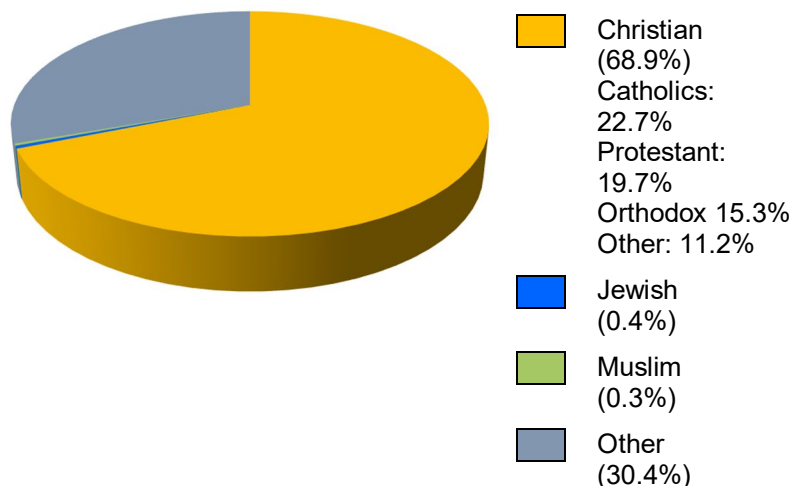


LATVIA



Area:	Population:	Political system:	Major Language(s):
64,600 km ²	2.2 million	Democracy	Latvian

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Religious Demographics: (July 2014 estimate) There are over 30 religious groups present in the country and the Ministry of Justice reports the largest are Roman Catholics (22.7 percent), Lutherans (19.6 percent) and Orthodox Christians (15.3 percent). Smaller Christian groups include Baptists, Pentecostals and other evangelical Protestant groups. The Central Statistical Bureau estimates that approximately 5,400 persons self-identify as Jews, while the Council of Jewish Communities estimates the Jewish population at between 6,200 and 11,000. In its annual report to the Ministry of Justice, the Islamic Cultural Centre, an umbrella organization for Muslim religious communities, states there are an estimated 10,000 Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds living throughout the country. Other religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Hare Krishna's and Buddhists.

Freedom of religion and separation of state and church are guaranteed by the Latvian Constitution. Eight religious groups – Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jews – enjoy special privileges. These include the right to teach religion courses in public schools. These eight groups are also the only religious groups represented on the government's Ecclesiastical Council, an advisory body chaired by the Prime Minister, which meets periodically to comment on and provide recommendations on religious issues. These recommendations do not carry the force of law.

Although the government does not require a religious group to be registered, the law accords registered religious groups a number of rights and privileges, including legal entity status for owning property and conducting financial transactions, and providing tax benefits for donors. Registered religious groups are allowed to perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons and military units. With the agreement of the local government, they are also allowed to hold services in public places such as parks or public squares. If an unregistered group carries out any of these activities, it is subjected to a fine. In order to register as a congregation, a religious group must have at least 20 members over the age of 18 recorded in the population register. The ultimate

decision lies with the Ministry of Justice. The ministry may deny an application if the registration of a religious group would represent a threat to human rights, democracy or public safety.

Religious groups registered for fewer than 10 years are required to re-register annually. Representatives from these religious groups stated that such requirements were onerous and ignored the fact that some groups had been present in the country in an unregistered status for many years. The Ecclesiastical Council met several times to discuss the reporting standards for religious organizations.

Incidents

In October 2014 a musical celebrating the life of Herberts Cukurs was staged in theatres across the country. Cukurs was a Latvian aviation pioneer who later in life became a member of the Arajs Kommando, a Latvian auxiliary police unit under German SS command during the occupation. According to eyewitness accounts, Cukurs was responsible for the murder of Latvian Jews during the Holocaust. The musical was condemned by several high-ranking government officials, including the foreign minister. Several non-violent protests of up to 50 people took place before performances in Liepāja and Riga.¹

By the end of 2016 Latvia is expected to have taken in more than 700 refugees. Volunteer groups such as “I Want to Help Refugees” maintain that societal attitudes need to change in order to tackle possible prejudices. According to the UN Refugee Agency, things are moving in the right direction.² Statements by radicalised converts that Latvia is to become a part of an Islamic caliphate are fueling anti-Muslim resentment.³ According to Islamic leaders, Muslims of ethnic Latvian origin, or those who migrated to Latvia from Central Asia during the Soviet period, generally feel well integrated into society. The Islamic Cultural Centre reported that police monitored the activities of their community. According to an imam, people from other countries complained that officials used warnings of visa revocation as a way to obtain information about the community.⁴

In December 2014 a 70-year-old religious Sister was murdered in Riga. Her massacred body was found after several days. The perpetrators and their motive are unknown.⁵

A Latvian artist offended the Orthodox Christian community by creating a series of paintings presenting monkeys styled as Orthodox saints in traditional icons. The painter, an atheist, claims he is not opposed to religion and points to his right to freedom of expression.⁶

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

According to a Freedom House report of 2015, freedom of religion is generally respected in Latvia. The report mentions that religious communities registered for more than 10 years are privileged over younger religious groups.⁷ Increased levels of radicalisation among some newly arrived Muslims coupled with existing prejudices may result in future tensions within Latvian society.

Increased levels of radicalisation among some newly arrived Muslims coupled with existing prejudices may result in future tensions within Latvian society.

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- 1 <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238398#wrapper>
 - 2 <http://www.unhcr.org/569799b86.html><http://www.unhcr.org/569799b86.html>
 - 3 <http://www.frontpagemag.com/point/260497/riga-mosque-spokesman-complains-islamophobia-warns-daniel-greenfield>
 - 4 <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238398#wrapper>
 - 5 <http://www.pch24.pl/lotwa--siostra-zakonna-zamordowana-w-rydze,32755,i.html>
 - 6 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/01/latvia-russia-sergey-dyomin-art-monkeys-orthodox-church>
 - 7 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/latvia>