

# Latvia

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*Capital:* Riga  
*Population:* 2.03 million  
*GNI/capita, PPP:* US\$23,150

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
National Democratic Governance	2.00	2.00	2.50	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.00	2.00	2.00
Electoral Process	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75
Civil Society	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75
Independent Media	1.50	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	2.00	2.00	2.00
Local Democratic Governance	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25
Judicial Framework and Independence	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75
Corruption	3.00	3.00	3.25	3.25	3.50	3.25	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
Democracy Score	<b>2.07</b>	<b>2.07</b>	<b>2.18</b>	<b>2.18</b>	<b>2.14</b>	<b>2.11</b>	<b>2.07</b>	<b>2.07</b>	<b>2.07</b>	<b>2.07</b>

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2015 was characterized by contradicting trends in Latvia. While democracy further consolidated in the country, illiberal strands appeared in the domestic political discourse, and an ideological struggle over so-called traditional values became more visible. Pro-Russian politicians were especially engaged, and numerous discussions took place on conservative “family values” in schools and ethical behavior in the public domain.

Two major foreign policy developments had an outside influence on domestic politics in 2015: the Latvian presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) in the first half of the year and the European migrant and refugee crisis in the second half. The EU presidency proved challenging for the small and relatively young member state, both administratively and with regard to foreign policy, but Latvia completed the task and demonstrated to its citizens and European partners the country’s organizational and political capabilities. This period influenced Latvia’s image of itself as an equal player among the wider EU membership.

The European Commission’s plans to resettle refugees from the Middle East and Africa in EU countries prompted heated political discussions in the second half of the year. The Latvian public’s initial reaction to the plan was characterized by a lack of understanding and fears around integration. The redistribution of migrants drew opposition from many politicians, including some from the ruling Union of Greens and Farmers and National Alliance parties. Their objections shook the center-right coalition led by the Unity party. The mobilization of Latvian society, as well as municipal and national resources, in response to the crisis continued for months and is expected to increase with the arrival of additional refugees in 2016.

Domestically, the EU presidency—a six-month position held by member states on a rotating basis—largely overshadowed political processes as parties were kept on their best behavior. The June election of former minister of defense and Green Party politician Raimonds Vējonis as president of Latvia was the main domestic event in the first half of the year. The elections demonstrated a mature political process—all candidates were identified in advance and actively participated in public discussions in the media. Since the president is indirectly elected, by the parliament, this allowed for greater public participation in the process.

The second half of 2015 saw serious disagreements among the coalition partners and growing frictions inside the ruling Unity party, with competing liberal and conservative wings emerging. As a result, the board chair and parliamentary faction leader of Unity, Solvita Āboltiņa, a controversial politician in the Latvian political scene, emerged as a challenger to the prime minister’s office. Following a number of controversial developments, including the firing of Transport Minister Anrijs Matīss over his choice of a foreign investor for the national airline AirBaltic in early November and a persistent media campaign, Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma resigned on December 7. Straujuma took office in January 2014, continuing the work of Valdis Dombrovskis, who had stepped down following the 2013 supermarket roof collapse in Riga that left 54 people dead.

There were a number of political scandals in 2015. The biggest cases included an ongoing corruption investigation involving the president of the state-owned railway holding Latvijas Dzelzceļš, and an attempted fraud by the former mayor of Lielvārde, Jānis Āboliņš, who had illegally signed a bond for €200 million with a company based in Liechtenstein. The year also featured a continued struggle in the Latvian judicial system with lengthy court processes and some moves toward politicization of the country’s public media.

Although Latvia has continued using its 1922 constitution since it regained independence in 1991, the idea to amend it to introduce a popularly elected president has come up from time to time. The discussion received a boost in early 2015, when the Latvian parliament’s legal commission started working on a proposal by the conservative political party For Latvia from the Heart.

**No score changes.**

**Outlook for 2016:** The reshuffled coalition will remain in power, and once a new government is formed, 2016 is expected to be politically stable. Discussion of conservative “family values” will continue, not only as a reaction to the influx of people with different religious and cultural backgrounds but also because some political parties have chosen to seek support through increasing control over “morality.”

The migrant crisis and related political, economic, and social changes will continue dominating the domestic agenda, especially after the first refugees are settled in Latvia starting February 2016. A critical outlook on the European Union and its integration plans has emerged (as in many EU countries) and is influencing the Latvian political elite, especially the National Alliance.

Economic development is projected to be more positive than in 2014–15 due to the reorientation of exports away from sanction-ridden Russian markets and the continuous growth of income and productivity. Unemployment will continue to decrease.

# MAIN REPORT

## National Democratic Governance

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
2.00	2.00	2.50	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.00	2.00	2.00

- The Council of the European Union (EU) presidency—a six-month term representing one of the main decision-making bodies of the EU—dominated Latvian political life during the first half of the year. The administrative and political capacities of the country were devoted to chairing the Council, as well as managing the simmering conflict in neighboring Ukraine. Latvia’s political institutions demonstrated strength and skill during these important moments in the country’s modern politics.<sup>1</sup> The ruling parties all showed their support for democracy, Western values, and NATO membership.
- Although the Ukrainian conflict called for increased military expenditures and streamlining defense procedures, it has not changed Latvia’s institutional balance. Newly elected President Raimonds Vējonis initiated changes to the National Security Law, the Law on National Armed Forces, and the law regulating the functioning of the Cabinet of Ministers. On November 17, the Defense, Internal Affairs and Corruption Prevention Committee of the Saeima (parliament) supported the proposed changes,<sup>2</sup> which aim to improve coordination between the Cabinet of Ministers and the national army in case of a foreign invasion.<sup>3</sup> The main proposal shortened the response time in case of attacks by allowing the army to react without an order from the commander-in-chief.<sup>4</sup> The amendments to National Security Law, National Armed Forces Law, and Cabinet of Ministers’ Rules of Procedure were set to be adopted in early 2016.<sup>5</sup>
- The European migrant and refugee crisis became a major foreign policy issue in the second half of the year. The tripartite coalition of right-leaning parties (Unity, Union of Greens and Farmers, and National Alliance) split on the matter after the government expressed its willingness to welcome the first group of 250 refugees in July.<sup>6</sup> The government supported the allocation of an additional 526 refugees after a vote in September, despite a sharp reaction from the public and disagreements among the coalition partners. In the free vote, ministers representing the Union of Greens and Farmers and National Alliance voted against the allocation. While the right-wing, anti-immigration National Alliance objected on an ideological basis, only one of the ministers of the Greens and Farmers Union voted against what he considered an “erratic approach to the question by the government and the European Commission.”<sup>7</sup> The Saeima also actively discussed the issue, with the National Alliance arguing that approval should not be given solely by the parliament’s European Affairs Committee but by the Saeima as a whole. The Committee on Human Rights and Public Affairs unanimously supported the additional allocation on November 17, two weeks after the government adopted a detailed plan on refugee resettlement, material support, and integration into Latvian society.<sup>8</sup> President Vējonis played a significant role in influencing the parties’ positions.
- Disagreements over the third Greek bailout program and domestic opposition to the allocation of refugees brought to the forefront divisions in the ruling coalition that helped lead to the resignation of Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma at the end of 2015.<sup>9</sup> Doubts about the durability of Straujuma’s second government arose as early as October 2014,<sup>10</sup> and her popularity gradually declined within her own Unity party. The next blow came when Straujuma fired Minister of Transport Anrijs Matīss (Unity) on November 4 over his choice of foreign investors for AirBaltic, Latvia’s national airline. Despite a government decision to continue with the investor endorsed by Matīss, Straujuma blamed him for mismanaging the process.<sup>11</sup> Finally, persistent media attacks,<sup>12</sup> in combination with Unity chairwoman Solvita Ābolīņa’s active negotiations on a possible new coalition, pushed Straujuma to resign on December 7, right after the Unity party congress two days earlier. The adoption of the 2016 state budget on November 30 was the government’s last major achievement. The cabinet remained in power in a caretaker capacity during a prolonged coalition-building process.

- Years of successive postcrisis growth and a return to precrisis average wages continued in 2015. The nominal GDP increased by 2.7 percent<sup>13</sup> and is projected to grow by another 3 percent in 2016.<sup>14</sup> This growth, however, is slower than expected, mostly due to economic sanctions on Russia and a retaliatory embargo on food product imports from Latvia. Public investment related to the EU presidency and increasing domestic consumption compensated for the reduction in exports but did not fully stop tax revenues from falling. Unemployment fell to 8.4 percent,<sup>15</sup> a level last recorded in 2005. In January 2015, Latvia repaid a €1.2 billion loan received from the European Commission during the 2009 crisis. Later in the year, the country issued state bonds at record low interest rates<sup>16</sup> and refinanced part of its government debt.

## Electoral Process

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75

- Latvia's presidential elections took place on June 3, 2015. As expected, the parliament elected Raimonds Vējonis, former defense minister and member of the Green Party, with 55 votes for and 42 against.<sup>17</sup> A charismatic and well-connected politician with a strong stance on the Ukraine conflict and relations with Russia, Vējonis was seen as the most adequate candidate. He replaced the aging Andris Bērziņš<sup>18</sup> and became the first former minister to acquire the post, and only the second to have been an active member of a political party before the election. Another presidential frontrunner was Egils Levits, a respected Latvian legal theoretician, judge of the European Court of Justice, and author of the 2014 preamble to the Constitution of Latvia. The other two candidates defeated in the second and third rounds were Mārtiņš Bondars of Regional Alliance and Sergejs Dolgopolovs of Harmony.
- No popular elections or referendums took place in Latvia in 2015. In November, however, the Central Election Commission of Latvia allowed the nongovernmental organization Varu Latvijas Tautai (Power to the Latvian People) to start gathering signatures on the dissolution of the 12<sup>th</sup> Saeima. In accordance with changes to the electoral law introduced in previous years, the NGO must collect signatures from one-tenth of eligible voters in a 12-month period, which currently constitutes 155,224 signatures.<sup>19</sup>
- This incident demonstrates the general distrust in the current parliament, which only 18 percent of the population reportedly trusts.<sup>20</sup> Low popular support for both the parliament and government has become the norm in Latvia, caused by coalition politics riddled with scandals and disputes, unfulfilled political expectations, and an overall critical public opinion. Meanwhile, the parliament's inability to improve its image, policymaking culture, and public communication are further reasons for the low support.
- In March, the parliament reelected Arnis Cimdarsas as chairman of the Central Election Commission, along with seven other members. Cimdars was reelected for a seventh term but the first time by unanimous vote.<sup>21</sup> The commission's deputy chairman and secretary were also reelected.<sup>22</sup> Among the commission's greatest achievements in 2015 was the option to cast digital signatures in support of popularly proposed legislative motions using the online portal latvija.lv.<sup>23</sup> This was one of the key steps toward the introduction of a nationwide e-voting system.

## Civil Society

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
1.50	1.25	1.50	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75

- Latvian civil society and trade unions have experienced continued institutionalization and are increasingly involved in governmental decision-making. Organizations like the Employers' Confederation of Latvia, which represents 42 percent of Latvian businesses, and the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia are important and well-respected social partners of the Latvian authorities. Other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) regularly attend meetings organized by the State Chancellery and Prime Minister's Office and participate in different working groups on both domestic and foreign policy issues. The National Tripartite Cooperation Council—consisting of the Employers' Confederation, the Trade Union Confederation, and government representatives—directly engages in setting wages, budgetary procedures,<sup>24</sup> and other activities.
- The influence of NGOs varies from group to group. Due to Latvia's rising standard of living, the population's increased level of disposable income, and a change in attitudes among state institutions, civil society has gradually become a regular partner in policymaking. Depending on their skill and quality of recommendations, many NGOs have established permanent relationships with decision makers and are regularly covered by media outlets.
- In 2014, the so-called green book principle<sup>25</sup> was introduced in the legislative process, which allows civil society to express opinions before the drafting of legislation commences. The respective ministries publish these discussion papers, which are aimed at receiving first reactions and practical suggestions concerning planned legislative acts or policies.<sup>26</sup> Both civil society and state institutions demonstrated a growing interest in this process in 2015. A visible example of this was the long list of proposals published by the EU by the Ministry of Economics<sup>27</sup> and the State Chancellery.<sup>28</sup> Another relatively recent innovation is the Memorandum Council,<sup>29</sup> a consultative body consisting of an equal number of high-ranking civil servants from central state institutions and representatives of NGOs. The appointment of Mārtiņš Krieviņš as director of the State Chancellery in 2015 will likely bring an increased number of meetings, which currently take place approximately once a month.<sup>30</sup>
- Funding remains a central issue for Latvian NGOs. The country's civil society suffers from a lack of tradition regarding donations, which stems from the lack of private capital accumulation during the communist period and the slow increase in welfare afterward. To facilitate sponsorship and donations, the Latvian state introduced tax deductions for sponsors in 2010.<sup>31</sup> This provision applies to both individuals and companies. Another incentive was the establishment of a Concept for NGO Fund in 2014.<sup>32</sup> Its implementation was set to reach a new stage at year's end, with the government institution Society Integration Fund administering the money, drafting priorities, and appointing an evaluation commission.<sup>33</sup>
- While the exponential growth of the country's Russian-speaking population during Soviet times has left its mark on Latvian society, it has traditionally marginalized xenophobic NGOs and extremist politicians on either sides. Xenophobic statements toward racial minorities and those of Muslim faith have been seldom due to Latvia's limited exposure throughout its history. The 2015 migrant crisis stirred up xenophobia online and among some politicians. Hundreds of Latvians demonstrated against the taking in of migrants in August and September, and one of the rallies was attended by National Alliance members.<sup>34</sup>
- Discussion of conservative "family values" has gained a more prominent role both in the public discourse and in parliamentary debates. On June 18, the parliament adopted amendments to the Law on Education outlining that schools are responsible for educating children in accordance with values protected by the constitution—in particular, marriage as a union between a man and a woman. The amendments also state that the government must provide guidelines for teaching virtue, although these were watered down in the final version of the bill.<sup>35</sup>
- On December 4, journalist Inga Sprīģe, from the investigative website Re:baltica, published research demonstrating a link between politicians advocating for anti-liberal policies (mainly from Harmony, Regional Alliance, and National Alliance) and the ideological arguments currently presented in Russia.<sup>36</sup> These include opposition to European and Western values, especially those on gay rights. Such illiberal trends and their popularity, however, do not stem fully from Russian propaganda. To

some extent, they are a reaction to Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs’s public coming out in November 2014 and attempts by politicians to adopt laws that would de facto legalize same-sex marriage. Similar anti-liberal undertones present in other EU countries have also given a boost to right-wing politicians in Latvia.

## Independent Media

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
1.50	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	2.00	2.00	2.00

- The last two years have been difficult for Latvian independent media. In 2014, the sphere was dominated with biased information campaigns and propaganda from Russian-language media, which are popular and freely available on Latvian cable TV. In October 2015, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEMMC) fined the First Baltic Channel (PBK), the most popular Russian television channel in the Baltics, €10,000 for failing to uphold neutral and honest journalistic practices.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Latvian Radio received fines in the amount of €8,000 and €1,500<sup>38</sup> for repeatedly allowing the use of profanity on the youth-run national radio station *pieci.lv*.
- In a troubling signal of the increasing politicization of national media, the parliament fired the NEMMC chairman, Ainārs Dimants, in July, and a number of Saeima deputies submitted a proposal to dismiss all members of the five-person board.<sup>39</sup> Both national and international experts criticized the developments. While some suspected political motives,<sup>40</sup> the final decision to dismiss Dimants was attributed to his inability to prevent the use of profanity on one of the national radio channels, as well as accusations of embezzlement.<sup>41</sup> The latter charges included use of public money for personal transport, unclear allocation of €110,000 for infrastructure projects,<sup>42</sup> and disregarding public procurement procedures in awarding a €54,500 project.<sup>43</sup> Dimants immediately sued the parliament for the decision, and he was reinstated at the end of 2015 after a first-instance court ruling in his favor. His case was pending in the second instance at year’s end.<sup>44</sup>
- Early in the year, NEMMC announced a decision to establish a third national television channel that would be broadcast in Russian and cover all of Latvia’s territory.<sup>45</sup> The idea was scrapped at year’s end due to financial issues, although NEMMC chair Dimants had continually defended it throughout the year, especially after the plan to close Russian-language TV-5 in early 2016 was announced in February.<sup>46</sup>
- During the year, there were calls for greater control over who may participate in political discussions on public media; this was spurred by a widely discussed incident in October when Illarions Girss, a representative of an extremist pro-Russian organization and staunch supporter of Russian president Vladimir Putin’s policies, was invited to participate in the TV show *Točki nad i (Dots on “i”)* on radicalism in Latvia. Artuss Kaimins, a populist politician from Regional Alliance and himself a radio host, called for greater NEMMC control over the content of public discussions following the invitation.<sup>47</sup> No further steps were taken, however.<sup>48</sup> Ironically, Kaimins also argued against providing the regional channel RE:TV with additional funding for shows on political and economic matters during the debate on the national budget on November 30.<sup>49</sup>
- From a financial point of view, Latvian media—following a wave of consolidations and mergers during the economic crisis—have remained a powerful source of information for both the general population and foreign experts. Results from 2014 show that TV channel incomes are increasing steadily, with the Swedish MTG Broadcasting and Latvian TV3 and LNT leading with €3.08 million in profits.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, the popularity and revenues of print media continue to fall as they are outcompeted by online news portals. Another reason for their low popularity is the still relatively underdeveloped state of investigative journalism in the country.

- Latvia criminalized online defamation in May 2011, and hate speech has been punishable by law since the 1990s. Some comments have resulted in prosecutions over the years. The most visible case in 2015 involved criminal prosecution of an individual who repeatedly called in to the national radio’s programs and advocated racial, religious, and ethnic hatred, in one instance calling for setting refugee camps on fire and shooting refugees.<sup>51</sup>

### Local Democratic Governance

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25

- The most discussed development in Latvian local politics in 2015 was the refugee crisis and plan to accommodate 776 refugees relocated from Italy and Greece. Mucenieki, the only refugee accommodation center in Latvia, is located in the Riga region, which had already exceeded its capacity by May 2015.<sup>52</sup> Several meetings between the government and Union of Latvian Municipalities took place in fall 2015 to negotiate plans for accommodating refugees from Syria.<sup>53</sup> The mayor of Riga, Nils Ušakovs, strongly opposed the plans, stating that Riga would be where most of the immigrants would settle, in spite of the government’s aims to redistribute migrants across different municipalities.<sup>54</sup>
- Poor accounting and budgeting, the inability to attract domestic and foreign private investment, weak leadership, and allegations connected to foreign business trips remain among the main problems of local governments in Latvia. Reports from the State Audit Office show that many municipal officials lack the understanding or willingness to apply mandatory state requirements on accounting practices.<sup>55</sup> These officials often spend public money on business trips, without proper explanation of their goals or how they are spending their time.<sup>56</sup> Officials also use public funds to pay for team-building events, often without proper documentation to justify their expenses.
- At the end of 2015, a large-scale fraud attempt came to light that shocked locals in Lielvārde municipality.<sup>57</sup> Mayor of Lielvārde Jānis Āboliņš, without consent from the Lielvārde Council and Ministry of Finance, signed a €200-million bond agreement with the unregistered Liechtenstein-based company Riverside Hong Kong.<sup>58</sup> Latvian legislation allows municipalities to borrow only from the Treasury of the Republic of Latvia, unless the minister of finance gives permission to borrow from another source on better terms. Minister of Finance Jānis Reirs asked the General Prosecutor Office and the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) to start an investigation against the mayor at year’s end.
- The increasing financial gap between constituencies is related to economic performance. All municipalities depend on funding from taxes on personal income, property, gambling, and natural resources. Because of the uneven distribution of wealth and economic activity, an equalization fund allows for the transfer of money from wealthier to poorer municipalities. As of 2015, 17 local governments were paying out funds, while 91 were receiving funds. The capital city, Riga, alone contributed the overwhelming majority of the total assets of the equalization fund in 2015/2016.<sup>59</sup>
- The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development presented a plan to reorganize the municipality system in September.<sup>60</sup> The previous reform in 2009 divided the country into 110 municipalities and 9 major cities. The proposed changes intend to address Latvia’s unequal distribution of business activity, population, and resources among municipalities, where the biggest winners seem to be the largest municipalities. The new system would also address the lack of administrative resources and services (including police) in smaller municipalities, as well as demographic challenges, and could potentially attract more investors and improve absorption of EU funds. Initial discussions seemed to favor the establishment of 29 voluntarily cooperating territories around development centers of regional importance.<sup>61</sup>

## Judicial Framework and Independence

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
2.00	2.00	2.25	2.00	2.00	2.00	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75

- The debates in the judicial system in 2015 remained largely unchanged from previous years, with lengthy court processes and corruption dominating the discourse. Latvia’s primary measures to reduce the number of new cases were the introduction of the Law on Mediation (in effect since January 1) and the Law on Courts of Arbitration.<sup>62</sup> Although the system has yet to reveal the long-term effects,<sup>63</sup> these laws have demonstrated a determined move toward reducing the number of civil cases and lengthy proceedings by introducing new mechanisms for pre-court dispute settlement.
- The Staff Working Document of the European Commission’s 2015 country report for Latvia, published in February, indicated a number of problems regarding the Latvian judicial system. Above all, it concluded that proposed amendments to civil and administrative procedural laws to further expedite cases had yet to be implemented.<sup>64</sup>
- Lengthy court proceedings are among the main reasons why Latvia keeps losing cases in front of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In 2015, there were 7 judgments in 6 of which the court found at least one violation, while 406 applications were declared inadmissible or struck out.<sup>65</sup> The time needed to resolve civil, commercial, administrative, and other cases in the first instance requires around 180 days, which is less than in many other European Union countries but also more than the average.<sup>66</sup> In June, the Law on Judiciary Authority was amended<sup>67</sup> to allow, among other things, the merging of district courts to even the workload, thus initiating structural reform of the Latvian judiciary. The reform will allow for the introduction of an overhauled three-instance court system and more active communication with the public.<sup>68</sup>
- The infamous “digital-gate” scandal in which 12 people, including politically well-connected individuals, were found guilty of conspiracy to commit fraud during the initial stages of introducing digital television in Latvia in 2000 underlined problems with the length of adjudication.<sup>69</sup> It took a little less than seven years for the first-instance court to rule, and in its June 2015 ruling, the court admitted that the sentences had been reduced due to the time it took to arrive at a verdict.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, the defendants may still appeal and the ruling could take several years to finalize. Another important case began in September related to the supermarket roof collapse in Riga that killed 54 people in November 2013.<sup>71</sup> The complexity of the case and the five defendants involved make it likely that it will take several years to complete.
- Prison conditions remain a cause for concern for human rights advocates. Latvia took a step to address this issue in 2015, adopting plans for the construction of a new prison facility in Liepāja, to be finished by the end of 2018.<sup>72</sup>
- Several cases involving sexual molestation of minors drew public attention in 2015. After more than a year’s search, the police apprehended a dozen suspects and identified several more.<sup>73</sup> A court ruling that many saw as low-quality in one of the cases<sup>74</sup> and instances of child abuse put the issue of penalties for sexual offenders high on the political agenda. Public outrage and demands resulted in changes to the Criminal Law in November, introducing harsher penalties for child molestation.<sup>75</sup> The time period for probation was extended to up to five years, and was made a mandatory supplementary punishment regardless of whether the offender received prison time or penalty fees. Additionally, the maximum sanctioning for immoral acts with minors increased from three to five years, thus classifying the offense as a felony. In the case of involvement of a minor (a person under 16) in sexual activities, the penalty was increased from one to four years.

## Corruption

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
3.50	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.50	3.50	3.50

- While the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) secured several prosecutions in 2015, continuous administrative and political struggles between its director, Jaroslavs Streļčenoks, and his deputy, Jūta Strīķe, damaged the reputation of the organization. The powerful, multifunctional agency has a strong performance record but continues to suffer from these prolonged quarrels. Experienced investigators have quit the agency in past years, frustrated by the internal politics.<sup>76</sup> After the conflict between the two leaders made headlines again, Prime Minister Straujuma considered sending one of them to Ukraine as an anticorruption expert.<sup>77</sup> This took the issue out of the news for the rest of the year.
- Streļčenoks has fired Strīķe three times, but a court decision reinstated her on each occasion. Strīķe continues to publicly criticize Streļčenoks, claiming that his actions have destroyed KNAB and the organization is more interested in the internal balance of power than actual work.<sup>78</sup> International organizations like the OECD, which Latvia is hoping to join in 2016,<sup>79</sup> the European Commission,<sup>80</sup> and the former director of KNAB have all criticized the wrangling.<sup>81</sup> Despite these problems and the fact that KNAB is the least trusted of the security structures in Latvia,<sup>82</sup> Streļčenoks announced his intention to run for a second term in November.<sup>83</sup> The appointment is planned for the end of 2016.
- In 2015, KNAB started criminal proceedings against more than two-dozen individuals from state institutions and the police. The most prominent case is that of Uģis Magonis, president of the state-owned railway holding Latvijas Dzelzceļš, who is accused of accepting a bribe of €500,000 from influential Estonian entrepreneur Oleg Osinovskiy for the acquisition of several used trains. Magonis paid €400,000 in bail, which attracted further KNAB interest. The case, which is also a good example of collaboration between Latvian and Estonian anticorruption authorities, was ongoing at year's end.<sup>84</sup>
- KNAB requested that the parliament allow administrative prosecution of Minister of Health Guntis Belēvičs on several occasions in 2014 and 2015. Belēvičs was accused of a conflict of interest after his co-owned businesses won tenders solicited by the ministry. In November 2015, the parliament lifted Belēvičs's immunity for appointing his own son as member of the ministry's Consultative Council on the Pharmaceutical Industry and starting disciplinary proceedings against the then director of the State Agency of Medicines at the request of his son's company.<sup>85</sup>
- The public's tolerance for corruption has been decreasing over the years. In research published in April 2014, 64 percent of respondents indicated that they would not bribe an official, compared to 29.5 percent who said they would.<sup>86</sup> The Latvian Customs Police director, Edijs Ceipe, stated that the situation has been improving for years but there is still a lot to do.<sup>87</sup> He argued that providing positive incentives to honest cops and officials and accelerating court procedures could help tackle graft.
- Tolerance for petty corruption has also been decreasing due to regular information on unsuccessful attempts to bribe highway police, for instance. In October, a driver offered a bribe of €20 to traffic police and eventually tossed the banknote into the police car because the cops refused to take it.<sup>88</sup>

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