

Latvia

Country name	Latvia
State title	Republic of Latvia
Name of citizen	Latvian
Official language	Latvian (lv)
Country name in official language	Latvija
State title in official language	Latvijas Republika
Script	Roman
Romanization System	n/a. Latvian uses the Roman alphabet with three diacritics (see page 3).
ISO-3166 country code (alpha-2/alpha-3)	LV / LVA
Capital (English conventional)	Riga ¹
Capital in official language	Rīga
Population	1.88 million ²

Introduction

Latvia is the central of the three Baltic States³ in north-eastern Europe on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. It has existed as an independent state c.1918 to 1940 and again since 1990. In size it is similar to Sri Lanka or Sierra Leone. Latvia is approximately 1% smaller than neighbouring Lithuania, but has only two-thirds the population, estimated at 1.88 million in 2020². The population has been falling steadily since a high of 2,660,000 in 1989 source: Eurostat).

Geographical names policy

Latvian is written in Roman script. PCGN recommends using place names as found on official Latvian-language sources, retaining all diacritical marks. Latvian generic terms frequently appear with lower-case initial letters, and PCGN recommends reflecting this style.

Allocation and recording of geographical names in Latvia are the responsibility of the Latvia Geospatial Information Agency (Latvian: *Latvijas Ģeotelpiskās informācijas aģentūra* – LGIA) which is part of the Ministry of Defence (*Aizsardzības ministrija*). The geographical names database on the LGIA website: http://map.lgia.gov.lv/index.php?lang=2&cPath=3&txt_id=24 is a useful official source for names.

¹ Given the visual similarity between the conventional and Latvian names, PCGN usually recommends simply using the Latvian name on maps. The conventional name can be used in English text.

² UN data, 2020 estimate.

³ The grouping of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Since 1991 the state title has been “Republic of Latvia”. From 1945 to 1991, Latvia was part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as the “Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic” (SSR)⁴; one of fifteen (from 1956) such administrative divisions. The annexation of Latvia by the USSR was never formally recognised by the British Government.

Latvian practice for foreign names

It is standard on Latvian products for many place names outside the country to be rendered (transcribed) into Latvian spellings, with results such as *Ņūkāsla pie Tainas* (Newcastle upon Tyne). Latvian maps are therefore a particularly unreliable source for place names in other countries. This practice is also applied to personal names, e.g. *Džordžs Volkērs Bušs* (George Walker Bush).

Conventional English names

There are no conventional English exonyms in current use for places in Latvia. The Latvian names are simply used for towns, rivers etc. However, in the case of Riga and a few others the Latvian diacritics are omitted.

Languages

The only official language is Latvian (Latvian: *latviešu valoda*), a Baltic language most closely related to Lithuanian, although the two are not mutually intelligible. The Baltic languages form a sub-group within Indo-European, so share a common ancestor with most languages of Europe, though notably not Estonian.

The Latvian language used to be called “Lettish” in English, but this term has fallen out of use since 1945 and is now barely understood (the German word remains *Lettisch*).

Latvian has three or perhaps four main dialects, and a number of other languages described below.

Latgalian

Latgalian is spoken in eastern Latvia. Debates continue as to whether it is a dialect of Latvian or a distinct language. In support of the “language” label, Latgalian has a standardised writing system, some literary tradition and occasional use in road signs⁵, although it has limited official recognition⁶. Certain features of Latgalian are closer to Lithuanian than to standard Latvian. As of 2011 (census), Latgalian was spoken by 165,000 people in Latvia or less than 9% of the total population. Of these, about 60% lived in the Latgale region (villages more than towns) and 27% in Riga or its suburbs.

ISO 639 language codes:

ISO 639-2	lv	Latvian
ISO 639-3	lav	Latvian, including Latgalian
ISO 639-3	lvs	Latvian standard, excluding Latgalian
ISO 639-3	ltg	Latgalian

⁴ In Russian: Латвийская Советская Социалистическая Республика (*Latviyskaya Sovetskaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika*); in Latvian: *Latvijas Padomju Sociālistiskā Republika*

⁵ Example place names include Daugpiļs (standard Latvian: Daugavpils) and Latgola (Latvian: Latgale).

⁶ Example place names include Daugpiļs (standard Latvian: Daugavpils) and Latgola (Latvian: Latgale). PCGN recommends reflecting names as appear on LGIA sources (see policy section above).

Russian

In the 2011 census, Latvian was spoken by 62.1% of the population; Russian by 37.2%. The Latvian proportion has increased slightly since 2011. Russian speakers live mostly in Riga or in the south-east and form a majority in the towns of Daugavpils and Rēzekne. Russians were a majority in Riga until about 2006, decreasing to 41% in 2011. A referendum in 2012 rejected a proposal to make Russian a second official language.

All other languages are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people each. The most important are Belarusian, Lithuanian and Polish.

Orthography

Latvian is written in the Roman script in a form standardised in the early 20th century. Prior to this, spelling more akin to German was used. In the USSR, the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced for most non-Russian languages, but this was not done for Latvian. However, the USSR produced official military maps in Russian across the USSR including Latvia, where the place names were transliterated into Cyrillic. The transliteration of the Latvian Roman alphabet into Cyrillic is not reliably reversible, so Roman-script official Latvian sources should be used for all Latvian place names.

Inventory of characters (and their Unicode encodings⁷)

Latvian uses the Roman script excluding the letters Q, W, X and Y. There are no digraphs. Four distinct diacritics are used to produce a total of eleven additional characters.

Upper-case character	Unicode encoding	Lower-case character	Unicode encoding
Ā	0100	ā	0101
Č	010C	č	010D
Ē	0112	ē	0113
Ģ	0122	ģ	0123
Ī	012A	ī	012B
Ķ	0136	ķ	0137
Ļ	013B	ļ	013C
Ņ	0145	ņ	0146
Š	0160	š	0161
Ū	016A	ū	016B
Ž	017D	ž	017E

Capitalisation

Upper-case letters are used less often in Latvian than in English. Generic terms⁸ forming part of Latvian place names are usually lower-case. PCGN recommends retaining this style. Notably,

⁷ See www.unicode.org. Characters can be manually input into Microsoft Word documents by typing in these character codes and then holding down the ALT key and pressing /x/. The code will change to the required character. The letter can be copied and pasted into other programmes if required. Alternatively, the 'Insert – Symbol' command can be used; the code can be entered into the 'Character code' box which will show the corresponding letter. A GeoNames Soft-Copy Keyboard can be downloaded from the NGA website and used to enter the required letter-diacritic combinations for a particular region: http://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/gns_services.html.

⁸ A generic is a term in a geographical name that describes a feature.

BGN's GEONet Names Server (GNS) capitalises generic terms regardless of the original, so this should be borne in mind when using that dataset. Examples include, Laucesas ezers, where ezers is the generic term meaning 'lake'; and Dundagas novads, the long-form name for Dundaga Municipality (ADM1). Note that the ending of the specific part of the name may change when followed by a generic. For example in this latter case, Dundagas novads but Dundaga as the short-form name of the administrative division and the populated place.

International features

Some natural features (rivers etc.) are shared between Latvia and one or more neighbouring country, with slightly different names. On a map they should be labelled with each name in the appropriate country, with no preference given to either name. An exception may occur where the feature is almost entirely in one country, e.g. the river Gauja.

International physical features

Name in Latvian	Name in neighbouring country	Feature	Remarks
Ilzu ezers (also seen as Garais or Ilģis)	Lithuanian: Garajis or Ilgė or Ilgys	lake	Various names for a small lake on the border between Latvia and Lithuania. LGIA database confirms Ilzu ezers as official name.
Laucesas ezers (also seen as Smēlīnes ezers)	Lithuanian: Laukesas, Smėlynės ežeras	lake	The largest lake (1.9km ²) on the border between the two countries, SW of Daugavpils. Laucesas ezers confirmed by LGIA as official.
Peiteļa ezers (also seen as Pītelis, Piteļa)	Russian: Питель = <i>Pitel'</i>	lake	Lake split between Latvia and Russia. Peiteļa ezers confirmed by LGIA as official.
Riču ezers	Belarusian: возера Рычы = <i>vozera Richi</i> Russian: Ричу / Ричи = <i>Richu / Richi</i> .	lake	The largest of several lakes on the Belarus-Latvia boundary.
Daugava	Belarusian: Заходняя Дзвіна, Дзвіна = <i>Zakhodnyaya Dzvina</i> . Russian: Западная Двина = <i>Zapadnaya Dvina</i> . Sometimes abbreviated to Двина = <i>Dvina</i> .	river	The river flows through Belarus, Latvia and Russia and forms part of the Belarus-Latvia boundary.
Gauja	Estonian: Koiva	river	River mostly in Latvia, but forming part of the boundary with Estonia.
Mēmele	Lithuanian: Nemunėlis	river	
Mūsa	Lithuanian: Mūša	river	A small tributary of the Mēmele, forming part of the boundary between Latvia and Lithuania.
Sventāja	Lithuanian: Šventoji	river	The river forms part of the boundary between Latvia and Lithuania for 30km. Its mouth, on the Baltic Sea, is in Lithuania.
Vadakste	Lithuanian: Vadakstis	river	A small tributary of the Venta, forming part of the boundary between Latvia and Lithuania.
Venta	Lithuanian: Venta	river	

Administrative structure

The current administrative structure is due to change in 2021. Since January 2011, Latvia has been divided into 119 first-order administrative divisions (ADM1). The 119 ADM1s consist of nine “republican cities” (*republikas pilsēta*) and 110 municipalities (*novads*), each of which is centred on a smaller town. The republican cities are: Daugavpils; Jēkabpils; Jelgava; Jūrmala; Liepāja; Rēzekne; Rīga; Valmiera and Ventspils. A list of the 119 administrative divisions can be found on the [ISO Online Browsing Platform](#) (OBP). Shapefiles and maps can be found on the website of the [Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia](#).

In July 2020 the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) decided to simplify the ADM1 structure from 119 to 42 units, including ten cities (the existing nine plus Ogre). This is scheduled to take effect in 2021. The new larger units will be formed by amalgamating existing municipalities, generally without boundary changes.

(Source, with map: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/saeima/saeima-finally-approves-major-regional-reforms.a363362/>)

Useful references

- Administrative divisions: <http://www.statoids.com>
- BBC Country Profile for Latvia: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17522134>
- BGN Country Policy for Latvia:
https://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/Policies/Latvia_Country_Policy_webversion_Jun2018.pdf
- Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia: <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/sakums>
- CIA World Factbook Country Profile for Latvia: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/>
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Travel Advice
<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/latvia>
- Geographical Names Database of Latvia (in Latvian):
https://vietvardi.lgia.gov.lv/vv/to_www.sakt
- Homepage of LGIA <http://map.lgia.gov.lv/> The website is primarily in Latvian, with limited English-language pages. Click on the *Vietvārdi* tab for place names information
- https://ltg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suoku_puslopa Homepage for a thousand Wikipedia articles in Latgalian
- International Organization for Standardization (ISO): www.iso.org
- Language: www.omniglot.com/latvian/writing.htm
- *Latvijas vestūres atlants* [Historical atlas of Latvia]. Published by Jāņa Sēta (Riga) in 2005. Primary source for old administrative divisions
- *Stieler's Hand-Atlas*. Published by Justus Perthes at Gotha. 9th edition, 1922. [Source for German place names].
- Unicode consortium: www.unicode.org
- US Board on Geographic Names GEOnet Names Server (GNS): <http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/index.html>

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