

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 standard Roman script plus 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 / Area	1.88 million ² / 65,000km ²

Introduction

Latvia is the central of the three Baltic States³ in north-eastern Europe on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. Latvia is approximately 1% smaller than neighbouring Lithuania, but has only two-thirds the population, estimated at 1.88 million in 2023². The population has been falling steadily since a high of 2,660,000 in 1989 (source: Eurostat).

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. The annexation of Latvia by the USSR was never formally recognised by the British Government.

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 is a good 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 <https://stat.gov.lv/en>.

³ The grouping of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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

Latvian practice for foreign place names

It is standard on Latvian products for many place names outside the country to be rendered (transcribed and/or translated) into Latvian orthography, with results such as *Ņūkāsla pie Tainas* (Newcastle upon Tyne). Latvian maps are therefore a particularly unreliable source for place names in other countries.

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 the Indo-European family, so share a common ancestor with most languages of Europe, though notably not Estonian.

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

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 signs, although it has limited official recognition⁵. Certain features of Latgalian are closer to Lithuanian than to standard Latvian. It is spoken by around 15% of the total population, mostly in the Latgale region (villages more than towns) and in Riga or its suburbs.⁶

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

Russian

Latvian is spoken by around 62% of the population and Russian by 37% as a first language. Russian speakers live mostly in Riga or in the south-east and form a majority in the towns of Daugavpils, Rēzekne and Zilupe. A referendum in 2012 rejected a proposal to make Russian a second official language.

Other languages spoken include Belarusian 3%, Ukrainian 2.2%, Lithuanian 1.1% and Polish 1.9%.

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 not Latvian. However, the USSR produced official military maps in Russian across the USSR including Latvia, where the place names were transcribed into Cyrillic. The

⁵ 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).

⁶ <https://www.onlatvia.com/topics/culture-of-latvia/languages>

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. Three 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, BGN's [Geographic 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, Dundaga is the short-form name of the Dundagas novads 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.

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.

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.
Laucesas ezers (also seen as Smelīnes ezers)	Lithuanian: Laukesas, Smėlynės ežeras	lake	The largest lake (1.9km ²) on the border between the two countries, SW of Daugavpils.
Peiteļa ezers (also seen as Pītelis, Piteļa)	Russian: Питель = <i>Pitel'</i>	lake	Lake split between Latvia and Russia.
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= <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	

Map of Latvia



Map produced by PCGN for illustrative purposes only, and is not to be taken necessarily as representing the views of the UK government on boundaries or political status.

Administrative structure

In January 2011, Latvia was divided into 119 first-order administrative divisions (ADM1). In January 2022, the Law of 9th December 2021 simplified the ADM1 structure, and Latvia now has 42 units: seven “republican cities” (*republikas pilsēta*) and 36 municipalities (*novads*), each of which is centred on a smaller town. The republican cities are: Daugavpils; Jelgava; Jūrmala; Liepāja; Rēzekne; Rīga and Ventspils. Shapefiles and maps of the administrative divisions can be found on the website of the [Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia](#).

ADM1 name	Location	ISO 3166-2 code	Centre	Location
Ādažu novads	57° 4' N, 24° 20' E	LV-011	Ādaži	57° 4' N, 24° 20' E
Aizkraukles novads	56° 36' N, 25° 15' E	LV-002	Aizkraukle	56° 36' N, 25° 15' E
Alūksnes novads	57° 23' N, 27° 6' E	LV-007	Alūksne	57° 25' N, 27° 3' E
Augšdaugavas novads	55° 56' N, 26° 27' E	LV-111	Daugavpils	55° 52' N, 26° 32' E
Balvu novads	57° 8' N, 27° 15' E	LV-015	Balvi	57° 8' N, 27° 15' E
Bauskas novads	56° 25' N, 24° 17' E	LV-016	Bauska	56° 24' N, 24° 12' E

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

ADM1 name	Location	ISO 3166-2 code	Centre	Location
Cēsu novads	57° 16' N, 25° 23' E	LV-022	Cēsis	57° 19' N, 25° 16' E
Daugavpils	55° 52' N, 26° 32' E	LV-DGV	-	55° 52' N, 26° 32' E
Dienvidkurzemes novads	56° 33' N, 21° 9' E	LV-112	Grobiņa	56° 32' N, 21° 10' E
Dobeles novads	56° 39' N, 23° 14' E	LV-026	Dobele	56° 37' N, 23° 16' E
Gulbenes novads	57° 11' N, 26° 46' E	LV-033	Gulbene	57° 10' N, 26° 45' E
Jelgava	56° 39' N, 23° 43' E	LV-JEL	-	
Jelgavas novads	56° 39' N, 23° 43' E	LV-041	Jelgava	56° 39' N, 23° 43' E
Jēkabpils novads	56° 30' N, 25° 52' E	LV-042	Jēkabpils	56° 30' N, 25° 53' E
Jūrmala	56° 58' N, 23° 46' E	LV-JUR	-	
Ķekavas novads	56° 52' N, 24° 7' E	LV-052	Ķekava	56° 50' N, 24° 14' E
Krāslavas novads	55° 54' N, 27° 10' E	LV-047	Krāslava	55° 53' N, 27° 10' E
Kuldīgas novads	56° 58' N, 21° 58' E	LV-050	Kuldīga	56° 58' N, 21° 58' E
Liepāja	56° 31' N, 21° 1' E	LV-LPX	-	
Limbažu novads	57° 31' N, 24° 43' E	LV-054	Limbaži	57° 31' N, 24° 43' E
Līvānu novads	56° 22' N, 26° 11' E	LV-056	Līvāni	56° 22' N, 26° 11' E
Ludzas novads	56° 33' N, 27° 43' E	LV-058	Ludza	56° 33' N, 27° 43' E
Madonas novads	56° 51' N, 26° 13' E	LV-059	Madona	56° 51' N, 26° 13' E
Mārupes novads	56° 54' N, 24° 4' E	LV-062	Mārupe	56° 54' N, 24° 4' E
Ogres novads	56° 51' N, 25° 3' E	LV-067	Ogre	56° 49' N, 24° 36' E
Olaines novads	56° 46' N, 24° 0' E	LV-068	Olaine	56° 47' N, 23° 56' E
Preiļu novads	56° 18' N, 26° 43' E	LV-073	Preiļi	56° 18' N, 26° 43' E
Ropažu novads	56° 58' N, 24° 38' E	LV-080	Ropaži	56° 58' N, 24° 38' E
Rēzekne	56° 31' N, 27° 21' E	LV-REZ	-	
Rēzeknes novads	56° 31' N, 27° 21' E	LV-077	Rēzekne	56° 31' N, 27° 21' E
Rīga	56° 57' N, 24° 6' E	LV-RIX	-	
Salaspils novads	56° 51' N, 24° 21' E	LV-087	Salaspils	56° 52' N, 24° 21' E
Saldus novads	56° 40' N, 22° 30' E	LV-088	Saldus	56° 40' N, 22° 30' E
Saulkrastu novads	57° 15' N, 24° 25' E	LV-089	Saulkrasti	57° 15' N, 24° 25' E
Siguldas novads	57° 9' N, 24° 52' E	LV-091	Sigulda	57° 9' N, 24° 52' E
Smiltenes novads	57° 26' N, 25° 54' E	LV-094	Smiltene	57° 26' N, 25° 54' E

ADM1 name	Location	ISO 3166-2 code	Centre	Location
Talsu novads	57° 15' N, 22° 36' E	LV-097	Talsi	57° 15' N, 22° 35' E
Tukuma novads	56° 58' N, 23° 9' E	LV-099	Tukums	56° 58' N, 23° 9' E
Valkas novads	57° 46' N, 25° 57' E	LV-101	Valka	57° 46' N, 26° 0' E
Valmieras novads	57° 33' N, 25° 27' E	LV-113	Valmiera	57° 33' N, 25° 24' E
Varakļānu novads	56° 36' N, 26° 45' E	LV-102	Varakļāni	56° 36' N, 26° 45' E
Ventspils	57° 23' N, 21° 34' E	LV-VEN	-	
Ventspils novads	57° 23' N, 21° 33' E	LV-106	Ventspils	57° 23' N, 21° 34' E

Useful references

- BBC Country Profile for Latvia: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17522134>
- BGN Country Policy for Latvia:
https://geonames.nga.mil/geonames/GNSSearch/GNSDocs/policies/Latvia_Country_Policy_webversion_Latest.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 <https://www.lgia.gov.lv/en> 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
- ISO Online Browsing Platform (OBP): <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui>
- Language: <https://www.omniglot.com/writing/latvian.htm>
- *Latvijas vēstures 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: <https://home.unicode.org>
- US Board on Geographic Names Server (GNS): <http://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/>

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