

RESILIO

Country Report

Latvia



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November 2023

1. Introduction

According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Sustainable Governance Indicators (2014-2022), Latvia scored 8 out of 10 on the rule of law, above the EU average of 6.8,¹ and a slight increase from 7.87 in 2018. The rule of law is evaluated based on four factors: Legal certainty (9), Judicial review (8), Appointment of Justice (8), and Corruption prevention (7). The 2022 summary report noted that while Latvia's government and public administration generally exhibit predictability, they have faced legal challenges due to breaches in the principle of legal certainty, notably during the financial crisis. Concerns regarding legal certainty have been highlighted by the Foreign Investors Council (FIC), negatively impacting the investment climate. The FIC pointed out the ever-changing tax policy as a severe and chronic issue.²

The 2022 SGI report further noted that judicial appointments in Latvia follow a cooperative process, and efforts have been made to strengthen judicial

independence through evaluations. Despite improvements, a European Networks of Councils for the Judiciary (ENCJ) survey revealed concerns about judicial independence, with reported instances of pressure and corruption.³ Additional challenges arise from the administrative courts being overloaded with work, contributing to backlogs. The European Commission assessed the level of the digitalisation of the justice system as high in its 2023 Rule of Law Report. 'New equipment was also provided to courts, including a videoconference management tool, and in January 2023, 54% of all courtrooms were equipped with videoconferencing capabilities (compared to 43% in July 2022). Furthermore, an online dispute resolution system is being developed with the OECD26 to strengthen access to justice at all levels and reduce costs for citizens.'⁴ This should be a significant improvement where 'compared to other countries of the European Union, the amount of state fees is higher in Latvia, which may raise doubts about access to the court.'⁵

the Saeima confirms their appointment. ‘The Saeima may remove judges from office against their will only in the cases provided for by law, based upon a decision of the Judicial Disciplinary Board or a judgment of the Court in a criminal case.’¹³ The Constitutional Court reviews cases concerning the conformity of laws with the Constitution and other matters conferred within the jurisdiction thereof by law. The Constitutional Court is entitled to declare laws, other enactments, or parts thereof invalid.¹⁴

2.2 Most important systemic factor: political resilience

Political resilience, as Latvia's most relevant subsidiary factor, stems directly from the previously discussed robustness of constitutional design. Article 3 of the Satversme states: ‘The territory of the State of Latvia, within the borders established by international agreements, consists of *Vidzeme, Latgale, Kurzeme and Zemgale*.’ These historic counties/ lands, together with the capital city of Riga, form five electoral districts for parliamentary elections. Each district has its list of party candidates. Per Article 5: ‘Saeima shall be composed of one hundred representatives of the people’ who are to be elected ‘in general, equal and direct elections, and by secret ballot based on proportional representation’ (Article 6).¹⁵ Finally, Article 7 states: ‘In the division of Latvia into separate electoral districts, provision for the number of members of the Saeima to be elected from each district shall be proportional to the number of electors in each district.’¹⁶ This design inherently prevents the risk of gerrymandering as any changes to the above-mentioned electoral districts are likely to be considered anti-constitutional.

Parliamentary elections are regulated in more detail

by the law on the Election of the Saeima. To run in elections, a political party or an alliance of political parties must be established no later than one year before the elections, have at least 500 members, and submit their candidate lists to the Central Election Commission ‘within the period and following the procedures stipulated thereby.’¹⁷ For the candidate list to be registered by the Central Election Commission, the submitter must also pay a security deposit of EUR 1,400. To be elected to the Parliament, a political party or an alliance of parties must receive at least five per cent of the total number of valid votes cast in the country.

According to data published by The Register of Enterprises of the Republic of Latvia in August 2023, the total number of political parties and alliances of political parties was 65.¹⁸ This is partially explained by the regulation regarding establishing a political party, which requires as little as 200 founding members.¹⁹ Another factor contributing to such a large number of political organisations – in a country with a population of roughly 1.8 million – is that individual candidates cannot participate in parliamentary elections.²⁰ Thus, citizens are restricted from being members of political parties and standing for national elections.

Political parties in Latvia can be categorised according to the major cleavages: ethnic and socio-economic. ‘In the composition of the Saeima, two stable blocs are visible: right-wing centrist parties, which at the same time claim to defend the interests of Latvian identity, and left-wing parties, which also position themselves as defenders of the interests of Eastern Slavic minorities. [...] The ideological offer is further expanded by national-level parties that have not entered the Saeima, offering programs of xenophobic,

A new Whistleblowing Law was introduced in 2022, addressing offences against public interest. Combating corruption and money laundering have been prioritised, although reports suggest corruption levels remain challenging.⁶ In March 2023, the Order of the Cabinet of Ministers no. 178, 'On the development of the Shadow Economy Restriction Plan 2023-2025', was published, prioritising combating the shadow economy in construction, healthcare, and social care.⁷

In February 2023, information about possible violations while procuring logistics services for food delivery to the National Armed Forces (NAF) was made public. The allegations of the procurement process contravening the Public Procurement Law and the Law on the Prevention of Waste of Financial Resources and Property of Public Persons were later confirmed by the State Audit Office of the Republic of Latvia and the Defence Intelligence and Security Service. 'In connection with the procurement of logistics services for food delivery for the army's needs, two VALIC (State Centre for Defence Logistics and Procurement) and NAF officials have been dismissed, while two officials have been reprimanded. The two released officials had previously been suspended from duty. [...] Six more disciplinary cases are currently pending.'⁸ This incident can be expected to harm future assessments of public trust in public institutions where NAF usually enjoyed the highest ratings.

2. Analysis of the country case along the RESILIO model

2.1 Most crucial systemic factor: constitutional resilience

When examining systemic resilience in Latvia, the most relevant systemic resilience factor is constitutional

resilience, which stems directly from how the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia – *Satversme* – was designed. Adopted in 1922, *Satversme* is one of Europe's oldest and briefest constitutions. 'The term "Satversme" was coined by Atis Kronvalds, a leader of the *Jaunlatvieši* political movement, with the underlying idea that people have adopted laws for this reason to have shelter in time of need.'⁹ *Satversme* is comprised of 116 articles that are organised into eight chapters: General Provisions, The *Saeima* [Parliament of the Republic of Latvia], The President, The Cabinet, Legislation, Courts, The State Audit Office, and Fundamental Human Rights.

Satversme has only been amended fifteen times: '28 new clauses were added, the preamble was amended, and one clause was stricken.'¹⁰ Another notable factor concerning the *Satversme* that attests to its ability to withstand the tests of time and crises is that the Constitution was reinstated between 1990 and 1993 after being suspended for 50 years following the Second World War. Since the Constitution is so brief, many important constitutional issues are further regulated by additional laws, such as the Rules of Order of *Saeima* (the Latvian parliament) or the Law On Judicial Power. According to legal scholars, this brevity grants the Constitution an inherent flexibility by awarding the constitutional court substantial freedom of interpretation. Thus, the interpretation of constitutional provisions evolves along with society and its needs and values. For example, in his opening address at the international scientific conference '100 years of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia,' former President and judge of the Court of the European Union Egils Levits addressed an essential aspect of modern life that might eventually become a part of the Constitution: 'Thinking about the future, I

believe that it would be time to start a discussion about another small but important amendment to the Satversme, namely a new norm on fundamental rights in the digital environment.¹¹

The Constitution grants the Saeima the powers to elect the President, review the qualifications of its members, establish rules of order to provide for its internal operations and order, vote on closing otherwise public sessions, select committees and determine the number of members and their duties; appoint parliamentary investigatory committees for specified matters, and submit to the Prime Minister or an individual Minister requests and questions. The Saeima also has the power to grant amnesty, is tasked with determining the size of the Armed forces during times of peace and must vote to confirm judicial appointments.

The Saeima can be dissolved before the end of its term under certain conditions if no less than 1/10 of electors initiate a referendum and ‘the majority of voters and at least two-thirds of the number of the voters who participated in the last elections of the Saeima vote in the national referendum regarding recalling of the Saeima.’ However, an individual member of the Saeima cannot be recalled from office. The Satversme grants the members of Parliament some special privileges; for example, they are not to be subjected to arrest, search, or criminal prosecution without the consent of the Saeima.

The President serves as a ‘neutral and equalising power whose task is to maintain the balance between other state powers.’ The Satversme grants the President the rights to appoint the diplomatic representatives of Latvia and to receive diplomatic

representatives of other states; to implement the decisions of the Saeima concerning the ratification of international agreements; declare war based on a decision by the Saeima; grant amnesty to criminals; to convene and preside over extraordinary meetings of the Cabinet; and to initiate legislation. The President is tasked with proclaiming new legislation and has the right to send legislation back to Saeima to be reconsidered. The President also has the right to propose the dissolution of the Saeima if the parliament ‘is unable to work, random voting takes place, or the people's thoughts and opinions no longer agree with the composition of the Saeima.’ Should the people vote to dissolve the Parliament, the President must also be removed from office.

The Cabinet of Ministers has the right to proclaim a state of emergency should the State come under threat from various internal or external factors. The Cabinet also ‘deliberates draft laws prepared by individual ministries as well as matters which pertain to the activities of more than one ministry, and issues of State policy raised by individual members of Cabinet [...] and to attend sittings of the Saeima and its committees and to submit additions and amendments to draft laws.’¹² This includes the State Revenues and Expenditures Budget proposal, which is then approved or dismissed by the Saeima. The Prime Minister and the Cabinet must resign if the Saeima votes to express no confidence in the Prime Minister. However, should an individual Minister resign, they will be replaced by the Prime Minister.

The Satversme defines three levels of courts: first instance district (city) courts, second instance regional courts, and the highest instance is the Supreme Court. Judges are independent, subject only to the law, and

religious, socially liberal and other orientations. However, as mentioned above, parties outside the two blocs have been unable to prove their sustainability.²¹

Despite the number of political parties, only some have a realistic chance of being elected to Parliament. For example, for the 2022 parliamentary elections, 19 political parties and alliances submitted their candidate lists, totalling 1,829 candidates. Only seven parties gained representation, with between 9 and 26 mandates.²² The turnover of political parties after elections is notable; for example, in the 2018 elections, newly established political parties acquired 45 of the 100 mandates. In 2022, the figure was 30.²³ This stems from a lack of trust in political parties and the need for a clear and set party affiliation, thus making political parties compete for the same electorate. 'In the two-dimensional ideological space (identity dimension and socio-economic dimension), the ideological distance between these parties has not increased; Eastern Slavic parties have not been included in the ruling coalition at the national level.'²⁴

Additional laws that regulate elections are the Law on Financing Political Organizations (Parties), Electoral Register Law, Pre-election Campaign Law, Law on Pre-election Campaign, and the Law on Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau. Information about the financial contributions paid to political parties, as well as the annual statements, is available on the website of the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau. The Bureau is also tasked with taking the 'decision to refuse to grant the State budget financing to a political organisation (party) which conforms to the condition in Section 7.1, Paragraph one of Law (on Financing Political Organizations (Parties)).'²⁵

Media resilience also contributes to political resilience. According to the SGI, Latvia's 'private media are generally free from direct government influence. Licensing and regulatory regimes are politically neutral and generally do not create a risk of inappropriate political interference. [...] Media ownership is diverse in Latvia. Print media is privately owned, while broadcast media has a mix of public and private ownership. [...] no laws or self-regulatory measures provide access to airtime on private channels for political actors during election campaigns. Generally, the representation of different political groups is balanced.'²⁶

2.3 Most important systemic factor: social resilience

Contextual factors have proved the most challenging for Latvia. For example, according to the Index of Economic Freedom, since 1995, Latvia's climb toward the 'moderately free' category was derailed by the 2008/9 economic crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The economic freedom index fell from 61.4 to 59.3 (mostly unfree).²⁷ Latvia also needs to work on low trust in public institutions. For example, according to Eurobarometer surveys published between 2016 and 2021, the question concerning trust in public administration received a positive 'tend to trust' response from 28-35 per cent of respondents.²⁸

Contention has also surrounded the issue of social integration as political forces often proclaim the failure of integration policy. For context, in 2021, the ethnic makeup of Latvia consisted of 62.4 percent Latvians, 23.7 percent Russians, 3 percent Byelorussians, 3 percent Ukrainians, 1.9 percent Poles, 1.1 percent Lithuanians, 0.2 percent Romanians and Jews, 0.1 percent Estonians and 4.4 percent people of

other or not indicated ethnicities.²⁹ In an interview with Delfi TV, Mārtiņš Kaprāns, a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia, pointed out the emptiness of that claim as the politicians fail to see that ‘there have been no violent ethnic conflicts in the past 30 years. They fail to see that the number of Latvian language users has increased among ethnic minorities. They fail to see how much the sense of belonging to the Latvian State increases every year among ethnic minorities [...]. The integration policy has been successful. However [...] several strategic mistakes should have been addressed timely, e.g., education.’³⁰

The standard Eurobarometer surveys also support the successful integration policy assessment. In the 73rd (2010) Eurobarometer survey, 52 percent of respondents saw themselves as only Latvian, 33 percent as Latvian and European, and 8 percent as European.³¹ In the 2013 survey, 62 percent of respondents indicated that they regard themselves as a citizen of the EU.³² In the 2016 Eurobarometer survey, 71 percent of the respondents gave a positive answer to whether they feel like a citizen of the EU.³³ In the most recent survey, 89 percent expressed positive sentiments about their attachment to their country, and 71 percent to the EU.³⁴

Although more work is still needed, education and gender equality can also be mentioned as positive aspects of strengthening social resilience. For example, 40.1 percent of women have higher education, while the score for men is 25.2 percent.³⁵ In the UN Human Development Index, Latvia's HDI value is 0.863, ranking it 39th in the Very High category. Latvia scores above the world average in the Gender Development Index: 1,025 versus 0.958, respectively and below the

world average in the Gender Inequality Index – 0.151 versus 0.465, respectively.³⁶ According to the World Bank, Latvia is one of only six countries where women and men have equal legal work rights.³⁷ Latvia also offers the sixth-longest total maternity leave in the world (94 weeks)³⁸ The Labour Law prohibits an employee from being fired while on parental leave.

3. Impact of crises on the rule of law: the Russian war against Ukraine

On 23 February 2023, former Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš reaffirmed Latvia's resolve to continue supporting Ukraine: ‘Latvia has been one of the countries that has provided the most significant various types of support to Ukraine, namely more than 1% of the country's GDP. The Ukrainian people have also been widely supported by our society. We will continue to support Ukraine as long as necessary.’³⁹ According to the Ukraine Support Tracker, this number had increased to 1.091 percent of the GDP by May 2023.⁴⁰ According to Ziedot, the charity project *Twitter konvojs Ukrainai* (Twitter convoy for Ukraine) collected almost EUR 398,000 in donations and transported 950 vehicles to Ukraine in 2022.⁴¹ The law partly aided this form of assistance: amendments made to the Criminal Law in November permitted the donation of confiscated vehicles to help the war effort in Ukraine.

In terms of legislation, many steps were taken in 2022 that had previously been considered almost impossible. For example, in May, amendments were made to the law ‘On the agreements between the Republic of Latvia and the Russian Federation signed in Moscow on April 30, 1994’, and in June, the law ‘On the ban on exhibiting and dismantling objects glorifying the Soviet and Nazi regimes on the territory

of the Republic of Latvia' was introduced, which destroyed over 70 objects.⁴² In September, amendments were made to the Immigration Law so that Latvian language proficiency (at least level A2) is required for a permanent residence permit.⁴³ The same month, amendments were made to education legislation requiring the gradual transition to education programmes (ISCED-2011 levels 0-3) to be implemented in Latvian only.

The Latvian State Security Service, in their 2022 annual report state that 'the Latvian society demonstrated remarkable resilience. This took the form of the ability of most of the society to unite following the fragmentation of the pandemic years due to understanding the security threats to Latvia and our region and providing support for Ukraine and war refugees. [...] At the same time, despite occasional and individual incidents, last year, there were no mass activities in Latvia, which would be aimed at demonstrating support for the war launched by Russia in Ukraine. As a result of targeted counteraction by the Service, pro-Kremlin activists in 2022 could not mobilise similar-minded followers to street protests or disobedience, in which illegal support would be given to the atrocities committed by Russia in Ukraine.'⁴⁴

4. Conclusion

Latvia still faces many challenges in strengthening the resilience of the rule of law. Significant improvements must be made to improve economic resilience, civic resilience and engagement, social resilience and mobility, trust in public institutions, and judicial independence. Further progress is also needed regarding gender equality and the inclusion of various minority groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. Additional challenges are posed by the dissemination of Russian propaganda regarding its war in Ukraine and its efforts to fracture Latvian society and instigate conflict.

Despite all these challenges, Latvia has evolved as a society and integrated itself and its inhabitants into the EU, NATO, and other international organisations. An important contributing factor to this success has been the design of the Constitution, which was created with the values of democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human dignity and freedom in mind – values that have endured through time and Soviet occupation. The laconic design of the Constitution allows for more flexibility as the process of amending a specific law is more accessible than the process of amending the Constitution. Thus, the Satversme and other rules can evolve with the society it aims to protect. Another critical success factor is the ability of Latvian society to put aside their differences and come together when it matters, be it to celebrate a historic win in a sporting event or to lend a helping hand to the people of Ukraine to win the war against Russia.

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About the author

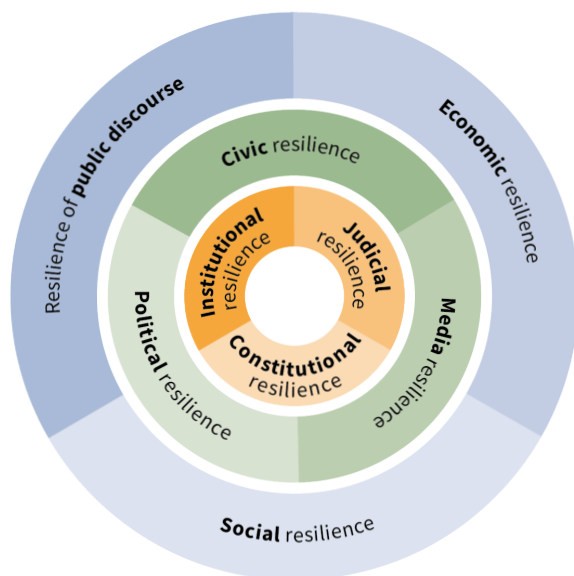
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About the project

RESILIO aims to identify institutional and societal factors that make the rule of law more resilient, thus adding a constructive contribution to academic and policy debates. It draws on a “thick” definition of the rule of law, understood as closely connected to democracy and fundamental rights. The resilience of the rule of law means that the rule of law can experience hazardous events or incremental threats without losing its core function, structure and purpose.

RESILIENCE FACTORS



RESILIO offers a multi-layered model of the rule of law resilience. Systemic dimension (orange) reflects upon the resilience of the legal setup; subsidiary dimension (green) looks at the phenomena and tendencies present in societies as possible facilitators; and contextual dimension (blue) analyses the broader habitat, determined by structural and systemic variables like economic growth, social cohesion, and general political climate. **RESILIO** also takes into account the horizontal effects of unpredicted and unprecedented crises that can affect all dimensions of rule of law resilience with different intensity.

While each factor is necessary for a resilient rule of law, they are only sufficient in combination.

The considerations in this paper are compatible with the developed conceptual model of the resilience of the rule of law. They focus on **social resilience** as a contextual factor strengthening the rule of law.

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on the rule of law in Europe

RESILIO is implemented by Institut für Europäische Politik in Berlin and funded by Stiftung Mercator.

For more information, visit the project website: www.iep-berlin.de/en/projects/future-of-european-integration/resilio/

