

LATVIA

A COUNTRY ON THE BALTIC SEA COAST

REFERENCE MATERIAL FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

2017

Informatīvais materiāls tapis projekta
"Atbalsta pasākumi starptautiskās aizsardzības personām" ietvaros.

Projektu Patvēruma, migrācijas un integrācijas fonda ietvaros īsteno biedrība
"Patvērums "Drošā māja"".

Projektu līdzfinansē Eiropas Savienība.

Granta līgums Nr. PMIF/9/2016/1/03.



Kultūras ministrija



CONTENTS

1. General information about Latvia	5
2. Identification documents in Latvia	6
3. Rights, obligations and duties of residents of Latvia	6
4. State holidays	7
5. History of Latvia	7
6. An asylum seeker's rights and obligations	8
7. Healthcare	9
8. Social security network	10
9. Social assistance system	12
10. Education	13
11. Learning Latvian	14
12. Employment and job seeking	14
13. Looking for an apartment; the housing market	16
14. Non-discrimination and equal opportunities	17
15. Religion	18
16. Banks and currency exchange	18
17. Leisure	19
18. Climate and weather in Latvia	20
19. Traffic regulations in Latvia	20
20. Public transportation	21
21. Telephone, mail and internet	21
22. Where to call if there is an emergency	22

1 GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT LATVIA

State flag of Latvia



Coat of Arms of Latvia



Map of Latvia



Form of government: Parliamentary Republic

Area: 64,589 km²

Total extent of national border: 1,862 km

Extent of the Baltic Sea coastline in Latvia: 494 km

Neighbouring countries: Latvia shares land borders with Estonia to the North, Russia to the East, Belarus to the Southeast and Lithuania to the South.

State capital: Riga

Administrative and territorial subdivision: As of 1 July 2009, Latvia is divided into 109 municipalities and 9 republican cities (Riga, Daugavpils, Jekabpils, Jelgava, Jurmala, Liepaja, Rezekne, Valmiera, Ventspils)

Historical regions of Latvia: Kurzeme, Zemgale, Vidzeme, Latgale

Largest cities, in order: Riga, Daugavpils, Liepaja, Jelgava, Jurmala, Ventspils

Country code: +371

Currency: the euro

Official language: Latvian

Other languages used in communication: Russian, English

Number of residents: 1,953,000 (2017)

Ethnic identity of residents: Latvian 61.8%; Russian 25.6%; Belarusian 3.4%; Ukrainian 2.3%; Polish 2.1%; Other 4.8% (2016)

2 IDENTIFICATION DOCUMENTS IN LATVIA

Identification documents used in Latvia are a passport and an identification card (ID).

During asylum procedure, an asylum seeker is provided with an asylum seeker's certificate.

Refugees are provided with a refugee's travel document and a residence permit.

Persons with alternative status are provided with a travel document (with alternative status) and a residence permit.

Further information is available on the PMLP website: www.pmlp.gov.lv.



3 RIGHTS, OBLIGATIONS AND DUTIES OF RESIDENTS OF LATVIA

The Latvian state recognizes and protects a person's basic rights and freedoms. They are included in the state's constitution (the Satversme) and laws. All persons in Latvia are equal in the eyes of the law and the court and have equal rights to protection under the law.

In Latvia, a court session is decided by a court regardless of a person's origin, social or material status, race or national affiliation, gender, education, language, attitude to religion, type or nature of occupation, political or any other views.

Each person is obliged to honour and respect the rights and freedoms of other persons.

Rule of Law

To avoid problematic situations, one should observe standards of public order:

- ◆ No laws (e.g. traffic regulations) should be violated;
- ◆ Corporal punishment (e.g. lashing of children, demeaning attitude to a family member) is prohibited by law;
- ◆ No noise should be made in public places, avoiding disturbance to others, aggressive attitude to others;
- ◆ Order and cleanliness of one's environment should be maintained;
- ◆ Alcoholic drinks should not be consumed and smoking in public places should be avoided;
- ◆ A special permit is necessary for keeping firearms;
- ◆ Quiet of the night should be observed: no loud activities, noise, listening to music to disturb the peace of others from 23.00 to 6.00.

The Labour Law specifies that each person has equal rights to work, a fair, safe and healthy work environment, to compensation for work.

The Law "On Social Security" specifies that, during provision of social services, there is a prohibition on differential attitude based on a person's race, ethnicity, colour of skin, political or other affiliations, national or social origin, material or familial status, or other circumstances.

Each person is provided with equal rights to access goods and services, e.g. access a necessary institution, shop, bank etc.



4 STATE HOLIDAYS

1 January – New Year's Day

Easter – the first Friday, Sunday and Monday of spring following a full moon

1 May – Labour Day; Day of Convocation of the Constitutional Assembly of the Republic of Latvia

4 May – Proclamation of Independence Day

23–24 June – Līgo Day and Jāņi Day, or Midsummer (Summer Solstice)

18 November – Republic Day

24–26 December – Christmas (Winter Solstice)

31 December – New Year's Eve

On these days, state and municipal government institutions and banks are closed.



5 HISTORY OF LATVIA

People have lived near the Baltic Sea for at least 4000 years, when a number of fisher and hunter tribes – Latgalians, Curonians, Semigallians and Livonians – started to settle down in this region. These Baltic peoples lived across a relatively territory around the Baltic sea, including the territory of Belarus and part of Russia. Latvian and Lithuanian emerged as languages as late as 16th century, after Baltic tongues had come together and drifted apart.

1201 – Latvia is conquered by German crusaders led by Bishop Albert, its capital Riga is founded.

1282 – Riga joins the Hanseatic League, at the time the most important merchant association in Europe. German rule would last for another 700 years.

1561 – Latvia is conquered by Poland and Catholicism starts to play a dominant role in the country.

1629 – part of Latvia, including Riga, is taken over by Sweden, with Riga becoming a powerful Swedish city.

18th century – Tsarist Russia takes power in Latvia.

1918 – on 18 November 1918, Latvia proclaims its independence, which lasts for just over 20 years, until the Second World War; in 1940, Latvia is occupied by Soviet forces.

1941– 1945 – World War II on Latvian land.

1991 – with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvia and the other Baltic states (Estonia and Lithuania) regain independence following 50 years of occupation. Latvia moves toward democratic values and a market economy, gradually adopting other European values.

2004 – Latvia joins NATO on 29 March.

2004 – Latvia becomes a European Union member-state on 1 May.

2007 – Latvia joins the Schengen treaty on 21 December.

2014 – the euro is introduced in Latvia as the single pan-European legal tender.



6 AN ASYLUM SEEKER'S RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS

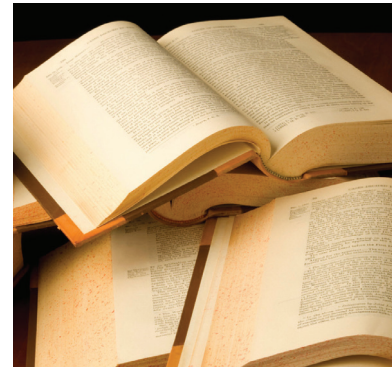
Rights:

- ◆ to submit an application and, during discussions, provide explanations in a language that you should be able to understand and in which you can communicate. If necessary, the State Border Guard will invite an interpreter, whose services will be paid from state budget funds that have been allocated for this purpose;
- ◆ to receive information from the State Border Guard and the Office for Citizenship and Migration Affairs (PMLP) Asylum Affairs Division about the asylum procedure, their rights and obligations during this procedure, and potential consequences of not fulfilling your obligations or failing to cooperate with institutions involved in the asylum procedure. As an asylum seeker, you are entitled to receive such information in a language that you should be able to understand and in which you can communicate;
- ◆ to involve a third party providing legal aid at your own expense. If the asylum seeker does not have the relevant funds, they have the right to free legal aid in the amount and according to the procedure specified in the State Ensured Legal Aid Law;
- ◆ to get acquainted with documents related to the application, except cases where disclosure of such information or its sources could harm the national security of the Republic of Latvia, the safety of organisations or persons that provide such information, or the safety of those to whom the information refers, or if the investigation interest of a competent institution in connection with reviewing the application or international relations might be compromised;
- ◆ to receive information regarding the Asylum Affairs Division's decision and the procedure for appealing it in a language that you should be able to understand and in which you can communicate, except cases where the asylum seeker is represented by a proxy or is being provided legal aid free of charge;
- ◆ to receive emergency medical aid and primary healthcare at the state's expense;
- ◆ to contact one's relatives and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or any other organisation providing legal or any other type of advice for asylum seekers;
- ◆ if one does not have sufficient resources to ensure living conditions that are adequate for one's state of health and one's stay during the asylum procedure, the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs accommodates the person in the accommodation centre for asylum seekers.

Obligations:

- ◆ to cooperate with the State Border Guard, allowing it to take fingerprints and photographs, to perform identification; to cooperate with the Asylum Affairs Division and other institutions involved in the asylum procedure;
- ◆ to participate in interviews and provide information personally even if you have a representative with you;
- ◆ to undergo a medical check in the interest of public health;
- ◆ to observe internal regulations while residing at an accommodation centre for asylum seekers. The internal regulations of the accommodation centre for asylum seekers are approved by the Cabinet of Ministers.
- ◆ to take part in integration activities – language courses, introductory courses about the country – and to cooperate with support personnel and your career advisor.

According to the law, the asylum procedure can take up to 15 months. Each asylum seeker's application shall be considered individually, objectively and fairly, using accurate and updated information from various sources, such as the European Asylum Support Office and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and relevant international human rights organizations on the overall situation in the asylum seeker's country of origin and, if necessary, countries through which they have travelled.



7 HEALTHCARE

An asylum seeker is entitled to receive emergency medical aid, primary healthcare, outpatient and inpatient psychiatric help if one has serious mental disorders, as well as all medical assistance to minors, without which the child's development and health would be threatened, according to the laws and regulations and at the expense of the state, taking into account the asylum seeker's specific reception needs. In order to receive the necessary medical assistance according to the scope and procedure prescribed by the laws and regulations, asylum seekers have to address employees of the accommodation centre for asylum seekers.

Following a decision on granting of protection, the person is included into the unified health care system of Latvia.

State-covered healthcare services in Latvia are also available to refugees and persons with alternative status.

Healthcare is subdivided into:

1. emergency medical aid – sudden illness or trauma presenting a threat to one's life. To receive emergency medical aid in Latvia, call **113** or **112**!

2. primary healthcare – at this level, a patient first meets with a provider of healthcare services. The Ministry of the Interior shall bear the cost of asylum seeker's primary health care services.

Primary healthcare is provided by family doctors, paediatricians, nurses, assistant doctors, obstetricians and dentists. Together with a certified nurse or certified assistant doctor, a family doctor is able to provide healthcare at the family doctor's practice or at your place of residence. A person with a temporary residence permit may freely choose what family doctor or specialist they visit.

To register with a family doctor, two copies of an agreement are filled out. If the patient is unhappy with their relationship with the family doctor, they may register with a different family doctor at any time.

Almost all doctors in Latvia are able to provide advice in a foreign language (Russian, English), however, one should check this before signing up at a doctor!

Inpatient residence at a hospital is a paid service.

Healthcare services in Latvia are provided by state, municipal, and private institutions (health centres, clinics, hospitals and doctors' private practices).

Before you go to a doctor to receive state-covered healthcare services where only the patient's contribution is paid, you can verify whether a given doctor or healthcare institution provides state-covered treatment by calling the toll-free number **80001234**. More detailed information is available on www.vmnvd.gov.lv.

AVAILABILITY OF HEALTHCARE SERVICES

Healthcare services are available in each municipality within Latvia. Secondary healthcare and highly specialised healthcare services are available mainly in major cities (<http://www.vmnvd.gov.lv/lv/469-veselibas-aprupes-pakalpojumi/veselibas-aprupe-slimnica>).

ACQUISITION OF MEDICINES

Medicines may be purchased at pharmacies. To buy some medicines, a doctor's prescription is required, other medicines are sold over the counter. Before taking a medicine, please consult with a doctor or pharmacist (pharmacy employee).



CHILD HEALTHCARE

The largest children's all-purpose healthcare facilities in Latvia are in Riga: the Children's hospital in Tornakalns and Children's hospital at Gailezers (www.bkus.lv).

PATIENT RIGHTS

A patient has the right to receive, in a manner that they understand, the doctor's information, about their diagnosis, examination and treatment plan, and other treatment methods, prognosis and treatment process. A patient may fully or partly refuse offered examinations or treatment, confirming such refusal with their signature. Complaints regarding the quality of healthcare services may be submitted to the Health Inspectorate (www.vi.gov.lv).

Regardless of their status, all residents of Latvia have access to free doctor's advice via telephone, provided in Latvian, English and Russian languages. The service is provided by the National Health Service (Nacionālais Veselības dienests, NVD) on business days from 17.00 till 8.00, as well as round the clock on weekends and holidays. To receive this service, call **66016001**.

Further information about the healthcare system in Latvia can be obtained from the National Health Service website www.vmnvd.gov.lv, as well as by calling **80001234** on business days from 8.30 till 17.00 or by writing to nvd@vmnvd.gov.lv.

8

SOCIAL SECURITY NETWORK

Social security is a complex (system) of measures to guarantee the state's social protection in a state of poverty, old age, disability, unemployment etc. Social welfare generally includes three major systems – social insurance, other income maintenance systems (mostly relief financed by state, municipal and private organisations) and social services. The following is a list of state-guaranteed social relief and services.

Asylum seekers receive a per diem allowance until a decision is made on granting them refugee or alternative status. They should use the allowance to purchase foodstuffs and hygiene products. During the asylum procedure, asylum seekers are lodged at an accommodation centre for asylum seekers, which provides essential living arrangements.



REFUGEES AND PERSONS WITH ALTERNATIVE STATUS

Upon receiving the refugee or alternative status, a person will receive an allowance that covers accommodation costs in the Republic of Latvia. If the status is granted to a family (regardless of the status), the first family member will receive an allowance of EUR 139.00, for subsequent family member – EUR 97.00. Spouses, by mutual agreement, specify in their applications to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (PMLP), who requests an allowance of EUR 139.00 and who – EUR 97.00. Once a month, until the tenth day of the month, the residence allowance is transferred to the credit institution account indicated in the person's application.

For an unaccompanied minor, the amount of the allowance will be EUR 97.00, which will be transferred to their legal representative.

Such allowances may be registered with the Office for Citizenship and Migration Affairs. For more information, go to www.pmlp.gov.lv.

Eligibility for state-guaranteed relief and services depends on social insurance. The State Social Insurance Agency (Valsts sociālās apdrošināšanas aģentūra, VSAA) is an institution providing state social insurance – retirement, family and child allowance – and allocating compensations. The VSAA website is www.vsaa.gov.lv.

A socially insured person is one that is or has been in a labour relationship and for whom mandatory social insurance contributions (i.e. the relevant taxes) have been paid.

A socially uninsured person is one that has not been in a labour relationship and for whom mandatory social insurance contributions (i.e. the relevant taxes) have not been paid.

STATE-GUARANTEED ALLOWANCES AND SERVICES

for a socially uninsured person with a permanent residence permit – person with a refugee status

Parental allowance (one-time) – EUR 421.17 for each child.

Child care allowance (until the age of one and a half years) – EUR 171.00 a month.

From the age of one and a half year still the age of 2 – EUR 42.69 a month.

During child care until the age of one and a half years, social insurance contributions for the caring parent are made by the state.

State family allowance (increased with each subsequent child) – EUR 11.38 for the first child in the family;
EUR 22.76 for the second child;
EUR 34.14 for the third child;
for the fourth child and any subsequent children – EUR 50.07 a month.

Allowance for looking after a disabled child and the State social security benefit are also available.

The State Employment Agency (Nodarbinātības valsts aģentūra, NVA) can grant unemployed status, give advice for job seeking and offer free attendance of training courses available from the NVA. Website: www.nva.gov.lv.

for a socially insured person with a permanent residence permit – person with a refugee status and a socially insured person with a temporary residence permit – a person with an alternative status

For parents: maternity allowance, paternity allowance, child care allowance, parental allowance, family allowance from the state, allowances for disabled children, state support to children with coeliac disease, compensation for foster care, guardianship, loss of a guardian, adoption, burial allowance.

For employed people: sick leave allowance, unemployment allowance, burial allowance, disability pension. Rights to disability pension in accordance with the law are granted to insured persons with at least 3 years of insurance experience who have been declared disabled.

Unemployment allowance: During a 16 month period, one must have to be employed for at least 12 months in order to qualify for unemployment allowance. Unemployed status is granted by the State Employment Agency (State Employment Agency (Nodarbinātības valsts aģentūra, NVA) website: www.nva.gov.lv).

Pension: the right to a retirement allowance is granted to persons residing in Latvia who have been subject to mandatory state pension insurance and have reached the retirement age specified in the law. As of **1 January 2014**, the age of retirement (62) **is increased by three months** each year, until it reaches **65 on 1 January 2025**. Required insurance experience is **15 years**, which will be increased to **20 years as of 1 January 2025**.

9 SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SYSTEM

As long as you have an asylum seeker status, different types of support are provided by a number of public administration institutions and non-governmental organizations. If you live in the Accommodation Centre for Asylum Seekers, significant assistance and support is provided by the employees of this institution, using the financial resources allocated by the government and attracting additional funding through the European Union projects.

Various programmes, including the European Union projects, ensure the assistance of non-governmental organizations, for example, support of social workers and social mentors until obtaining the status (for 3 months on average) and 12 months after obtaining the status.

For more information, visit www.beglis.lv/www.refugees.lv – in Latvian, English, Russian, Arabic, French and Dari.



Social assistance and social services are provided by Social Services based on a person's residence. There is a Social Service employing social workers in each municipality within Latvia. You can meet with social workers at a Social Service to receive advice, support and assistance with solving social problems. You can go to a Social Service **after receiving refugee or alternative status and declaring your place of residence in the municipality**. Social assistance and social services are provided on the basis of an evaluation of the person's material resources (income).

Information for finding a Social Service in Riga: www.ld.riga.lv, toll-free helpline: **80005055**.

If a refugee or person with alternative status lives in a different city in Latvia, the location of the relevant Social Service will be provided on that city's website.

A Social Service customer is entitled:

- ◆ to free information about opportunities for receiving social services and social assistance (material assistance), conditions and procedure for receiving them;
- ◆ to free advice from a social work specialist regarding solutions to social problems.

A Social Service customer is also obliged:

- ◆ to provide information about themselves;
- ◆ to fulfil their agreement with a social service in order to improve their situation;
- ◆ to work actively in order to improve their income.

10 EDUCATION

Everyone in Latvia has the right to state-guaranteed pre-school, primary school and secondary school education.

State and municipal educational institutions provide education in Latvian. Girls and boys at educational institutions are taught together within a shared space. The education system provides freedom of conscience. Students have the option of studying Christian studies or ethics, or both subjects at the same time.

Pre-school education

In Latvia, preparing children aged 5 and 6 for primary school is mandatory. Pre-school education programmes are available from state, municipal, and private kindergartens and schools. Pre-school education for special-needs children is provided by specialised pre-school educational institutions.

In state and local government pre-school education establishments, parents have to pay for the child's meals, except when any specific allowances are granted. The costs generally are EUR 2.00 to 4.00 per day for breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack. Additional expenses that should be considered are related to hygiene (toothbrush, indoor footwear, etc.) and teaching aids that are used individually by the child (paints, pencils, paper, etc.). Information on the necessary teaching aids can be found on the website of the pre-school education institution.

To get their child into a pre-school educational institution, parents should go to the chosen kindergarten or school and submit a copy of the child's birth certificate, a reference regarding their declared place of residence, as well as present a parent's passport. For more information, visit www.latvija.lv/DzivesNotikumi/izglitiba/pieteikties-bernodarza.

Primary and secondary education

Children in Latvia commence their primary educational programme at the age of seven at state, municipal as well as private schools.

Primary education is mandatory and takes 9 years. It may be received at a primary school, secondary school, or specialised educational institution.

There are two types of secondary educational programmes in Latvia:

- ◆ general secondary educational programmes.
- ◆ vocational secondary education programmes.

The main purpose of general secondary education programmes is preparing pupils for further studies at a tertiary (higher) educational institution. Professional secondary education programmes are targeted more specifically to providing professional qualifications.

If a child has special needs, they may attend a special educational institution adapted for children with handicaps in mobility, hearing, sight, or language use or mental health disorders.

To register a child in a school, the parents should go to the chosen kindergarten or school and submit a copy of the child's birth certificate, a reference regarding their declared place of residence, as well as present a parent's identification document. The schoolmaster may request a document confirming the content of the prospective pupil's prior education and may conduct a review of the child's knowledge.

Education is free at state and municipal schools but paid at private schools.

Tertiary (higher) education

Higher education in Latvia is available from state and private institutions. In order to apply to a tertiary institution, one will need a certificate of completing secondary education. Some study programmes will ask for the document to be submitted for review to the Academic Information Centre (www.aic.lv) if the certificate of secondary education has been granted in a foreign country.

Students willing to study at a tertiary institution have to take matriculation exams. Precise information about matriculation conditions will be available on the relevant tertiary institution's website or in contact with its representatives.

Academic programmes may be taken at universities and tertiary institutions only. Vocational study programmes may also be taken at colleges.

Tertiary education programmes in Latvia are available in Latvian, English and Russian.

A list of accredited tertiary institutions operating in Latvia is available on www.aiknc.lv/lv/list.php.



11 LEARNING LATVIAN

When they arrive in Latvia, asylum seekers are offered free Latvian learning courses.

Job seekers registered with the State Employment Agency (Nodarbinātības valsts aģentūra, NVA) may learn Latvian free of charge at NVA courses (www.nva.gov.lv). During the courses, a scholarship is provided for the unemployed.

A person who has been granted refugee status or alternative status is granted an allowance for learning the official language. The allowance is granted to persons from the age of seven and covers the actual cost of learning the official language, but not more than EUR 49.80 per month.

The Latvian Language Agency provides a number of online resources for learning Latvian. For more information, go to <http://maciunmacies.valoda.lv/>.

In order to promote availability of Latvian language learning opportunities and quality of learning, as well as acquisition of e-skills, Society "Shelter "Safe House"" offers the opportunity to learn the language in Moodle environment. If you want to learn the Latvian language, using this resource, please visit <http://moodle.patverums-dm.lv/moodle/> and sign up.



12 EMPLOYMENT AND JOB SEEKING

Persons with refugee or alternative status have the right to unrestricted employment. Persons undergoing asylum procedure have no right to employment. If the asylum seeker, within nine months after submission of the application for granting a refugee status or alternative status, has not received the PMLP's decision to grant a refugee or alternative status or refusal to grant the status, and it has not been due to the fault of the asylum seeker, the person is granted an identity document with a note "Entitled to work without a work permit".

The State Employment Agency (Nodarbinātības valsts aģentūra, NVA) may help to find a job or choose a profession; for more information, visit www.nva.gov.lv. NVA services are free of charge and available to anyone in search of work.

Knowledge of Latvian is a mandatory requirement for job seekers!

Information about the latest job openings on the labour market are available on: cvvp.nva.gov.lv (in Latvian only) www.e-darbs.lv, www.e-work.lv, www.doska.lv, www.ss.lv, www.cv.lv, www.workingday.lv, www.cvmarket.lv, www.vakance.lv, www.mansdarbs.lv (information is available in Latvian, English and Russian).

Usually, the candidate's CV (*curriculum vitae*, or resume) is sent to a prospective employer. A CV contains a brief description of education and professional job experience, allowing the potential employer to better understand the experience and qualifications of the job seeker (www.nva.gov.lv/UserFiles/File/cv%20paraugs.doc).

The employer might invite you to a job interview. A job interview is a discussion during which an employer tries to determine if a candidate meets the requirements and the job seeker tries to find out if the job is appropriate for them.



Suggestions for a successful job interview:

- ◆ Arrive on time, preferably 15 minutes before the interview, so you have enough time to get ready!
- ◆ Have a positive attitude and be open to discussion!
- ◆ Turn off your mobile phone!
- ◆ Greet each person who participates in the job interview!
- ◆ Remind yourself why you have come – to get a job!
- ◆ Treat the interview like a conversation about yourself with new people!
- ◆ Be ready for a variety of questions and do not treat them as signs of rejection or disrespect!
- ◆ Provide specific answers to the point!
- ◆ When you answer questions, underscore your skills and advantages!
- ◆ The way you behave during an interview plays an important role!
- ◆ It is normal to ask a question about employment agreement conditions and social benefits!
- ◆ At the end of the interview, ask when and how you will be informed about the results of the interview!
- ◆ Feel free to ask questions during the interview to express interest about their job and your future workplace!

An employer and employee will document their labour relations with an **employment agreement**.

The employer is entitled to request a reference regarding the employee's health to verify that they are suitable for doing the work that is needed.

The employment agreement is concluded in writing before work begins. The employment agreement is made in two copies, one of which is kept by the employee and the other by the employer.

The employment agreement should specify:

1. the employee's name, surname, identity number (personal code), place of residence, the employer's name and surname (or company name if the employer is a legal entity), registration number, and address;
2. the date on which legal labour relations commence;
3. the expected duration of legal labour relations (if the employment agreement is intended for a specific period);
4. the workplace (if fulfilment of job duties is not tied to a specific web-page, it should specify that the employee may be employed at various locations);
5. the employee's vocation, job title, speciality, and general description of the work that is expected;
6. amount and timing of compensation for work;
7. agreed working hours per day or per week;
8. duration of annual paid vacation;
9. the notice period for terminating the employment agreement;
10. the collective employment agreements and workplace regulations applicable to the legal labour relationship.

Permanent employment of children is prohibited. For purposes of labour legislation, a child is a person less than 15 years of age or one that continues to receive primary education before the age of 18.

Upon concluding an employment agreement, a probationary period may be specified in order to determine that the employee is suitable for doing the job that the employer trusts them with. Unless such a period is specified in the employment agreement, it is considered concluded without a probationary period. A probationary period is not specified for persons less than 18 years of age, and the duration of a probationary period may not exceed three months.

Important! Before you make a decision to conclude an employment agreement, verify that the work environment and working conditions are safe!

13 LOOKING FOR AN APARTMENT; THE HOUSING MARKET

When you start looking for a home, please consider how much of your income or savings you will be able to allocate towards housing-related expenses. These expenses consist of:

- ◆ lease fee,
- ◆ payment for basic services, which are integrally connected to use of the domicile (i.e. heating, cold water, sewerage, removal of municipal waste);
- ◆ payment for additional services, about which the lessor and the tenant will agree in the lease agreement (i.e. hot water, gas, electricity etc.).

Please remember that you would also have to pay for telecommunications services such as TV, internet and telephone.

To look for housing, you may:

- ◆ rely on your own efforts by asking friends, relatives and acquaintances;
- ◆ study one or more classified advertisement and real estate portals:
 - <http://www.nams24.lv/> (information available in Latvian, English, Russian, Estonian and Finnish);
 - <http://www.ss.lv/> (information available in Latvian and Russian);
 - <http://www.dzivoklis.lv> (information available in Latvian, English and Russian)
 - <http://www.latio.lv/> (information available in Latvian, English and Russian);
 - <http://www.arcoreal.lv/> (information available in Latvian, English and Russian);

To seek assistance with finding a home, you may also contact real estate firms, but expect to pay one month's rent on average to a real estate agency if you do.

Always remember to conclude a lease agreement in order to secure your rights as a tenant. A lease agreement should only be concluded in writing!

Documents necessary for a lease agreement; conclusion of a lease agreement

- ◆ Agree on the object of the lease – which specific spaces are being leased, where they are located and what is their floor area, what the lease fee is – by concluding an agreement on lease of spaces. The lease fee is specified by a written agreement between the lessor and the tenant.
- ◆ Agree on the timing and type of payment. The agreement should specifically indicate the way in which you will settle with the lessor. The agreement should also specify the time when a lease payment (and payment for other services provided by the lessor) is due.
- ◆ Ask for the lease agreement to specify:
 - the lessor's (1) full name and surname, (2) identity code, (3) address, (4) telephone number, and (5) e-mail address;
 - which payments are included in the lease fee and which ones the tenant will have to pay in addition, to whom and in what way you will be paying for the lease (in cash or via bank transfer).
- ◆ Request 2 copies of the lease agreement to be drawn up. Remember to keep one of the signed copies! The lessor will keep the other signed copy of the agreement.
- ◆ If you have insufficient command of Latvian or the language in which the lessor is communicating with you, ask someone who knows the language to help you.
- ◆ On the day of handover of the leased spaces, compile a delivery and acceptance statement together with the lessor, noting the spaces being leased, their condition, floor area, technical condition of plumbing and other equipment, and meter readings.

A lease agreement is the basis for registration at the place of residence (for the purposes of declaring a place of residence).



In what cases can the lessor terminate a lease agreement?

Remember that a lessor is entitled to terminate an agreement if the tenant:

- ◆ damages or destroys the residential space (including installed facilities and furnishings), other structures or spaces available for the tenant to use, or common-use spaces, utilities and equipment within a block of flats (termination without prior notice);
- ◆ otherwise violates residential space usage regulations, making living in the same flat or house impossible for other residents (termination without prior notice).

Never sign an agreement before reading all of it carefully!

If you have an opportunity to rely on a lawyer's assistance, it will be exceptionally useful at this stage of agreement conclusion. Before you pay the lessor (owner or manager) any amount of money, always make sure that you receive clear written consent to establishing a legal lease relationship regarding the residential space.

Always receive a document signed by the recipient for each payment, confirming the amount that has been paid, unless you are paying by means of a bank transfer (remember to keep the payment order).

14 NON-DISCRIMINATION AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

The government of Latvia recognizes and protects fundamental human rights in accordance with the Constitution, laws and international agreements binding upon Latvia.

In Latvia, all persons are equal before the law and the courts, they have equal rights to the protection of the law.

Everyone has a duty to respect other people's rights and freedoms.

All forms of discrimination are prohibited in Latvia – unequal treatment, exclusion or restriction, based on the person's:

- ◆ gender;
- ◆ race or ethnicity (including skin color, ethnic and national origin, nationality);
- ◆ age;
- ◆ disability;
- ◆ religion;
- ◆ political beliefs;
- ◆ national or social origin;
- ◆ property or family status;
- ◆ sexual orientation;
- ◆ other circumstances.

The prohibition of discrimination applies to employment (labour law), social security, access to publicly available goods and services, education.

In any case of discrimination, you may seek assistance at the Ombudsman's Office (Ombudsman's Office, Baznīcas Street 25, Riga, phone 67686768, e-mail tiesibsargs@tiesibsargs.lv, www.tiesibsargs.lv) – institutions for promotion of equal treatment, whose task is to help victims of discrimination.

The Ombudsman:

- ◆ considers individual complaints about all forms of discrimination. Complaints are considered free of charge, resulting in a settlement or recommendations being provided to the involved parties;
- ◆ provides legal assistance to victims of discrimination – legal advice, case preparation and representation in court, etc.



15 RELIGION

The most widely represented religion in Latvia is Christianity. The dawn of Christianity in Latvia dates back to the 12th century. This religion came to the region during the Crusades, later splitting into several denominations: **Catholic**, **Lutheran** and **Orthodox** are the largest denominations now, accounting for 97% of all believers in Latvia.

After the Christian Reformation of the 16th century, the **Lutheran** church became the dominant denomination in Latvia, with the exception of its Eastern part, in which **Catholicism** remains prevalent. More than 30 religious organisations (denominations) have been registered in Latvia, such as Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Old Believer, Jewish, Muslim, Hare Krishna, Mormon, Buddhist, and other world religions.

Latvian citizens' right to freedom of religion includes the right to freely determine their attitude towards religion, turn to any religion individually or together with others, or not to turn to any religion, to change their religious or other beliefs freely, to carry out religious activities, as well as express their religious beliefs. Direct or indirect restriction of citizens' rights or creation of advantages for citizens, as well as harassment or instigation of hatred due to their attitude towards religion **is prohibited**.

No person shall be entitled to ignore the law due to their religious beliefs.

In the Republic of Latvia, state is separated from the church. State authorities are of secular nature, and religious organizations carry out state functions only in cases foreseen by the law.



16 BANKS AND CURRENCY EXCHANGE

Banks in Latvia are open from Monday to Friday, 9.00–17.00. Some bank branches inside shopping centres work longer hours and are open also on Saturdays and Sundays.

To perform settlement operations, keep funds, and carry out other activities such as remittance of salary to an account by an employer, you should have a current account opened with a bank in Latvia. For refugees and persons with alternative status the easiest way is to open a bank account at JSC Swedbank together with an interpreter. Interpreter is invited, when it is necessary and if the client does not speak Latvian, English or Russian. A social worker or a social mentor will help to do that.

A payment card issued by a bank is a convenient method for paying invoices and purchasing goods or services. One has to pay a monthly service fee for using a card, which depends on the selected bank and the type of card.

There is no definite amount of money required to open a bank account. When opening an account, the client determines how much cash may be deposited to the account or withdrawn from it daily. Money transfers can be made at ATMs, bank branches, mobile applications or Internet bank (available in Latvian, English and Russian). The client is obliged to carefully protect and not to disclose the account access codes.



Currency exchange points in large cities remain open on weekends. They will give out and accept euros and a number of foreign currencies (in cash), applying their currency exchange rates and service fees (in some cases). The terms of service will vary and are dependent on the state of the foreign exchange market. Such a service may be more useful with larger amounts. If you need to purchase an exotic currency or a large amount in one of the more popular currencies, we recommend contacting a certain point of exchange or bank.

If a transaction is executed using a foreign currency, the bank's fee for such a service will be calculated and withheld in EUR based on the official exchange rate specified by the European Central Bank. Cash withdrawals might be limited outside the normal working hours of banks (i.e. 9.00–17.00 on business days).

Cash (banknotes and coins) may also be used for everyday payments. The easiest way to withdraw cash is from your bank's ATMs. A commission fee is applied for cash withdrawal at a branch.

17 LEISURE

People living in Latvia have the opportunity to engage in a wide range of pursuits for productive leisure. Local government websites, message boards, social services, youth centres, educational institutions, cultural centres, etc. will provide more information about them. From an early age, everyone can take part in a dancing or singing collectives, go in for various sports, learn foreign languages and take part in other activities.

Educational institutions and special centres offer interest education classes at different ages, regardless of previous education.

For further development of skills, **pupils and students** can participate in the self-government of their educational institutions and youth council of the local government.

To be actively involved in dealing with a social problem, one may join one of the non-governmental organizations of local, regional or national level. In Latvia, NGOs operate in various fields such as health, history, environment, arts, sports, etc. To learn more about them, visit www.nvo.lv.

Depending on the region, it is possible to practice water sports, fishing, orienteering, tourism, sports, and other similar activities throughout the year.

There are libraries, museums, theatres, cinemas and community cultural centres in rural areas as well as in cities, where one may spend their free time meaningfully every day. The larger a city is, the more leisure activities will be available.



18 CLIMATE AND WEATHER IN LATVIA

The climate in Latvia is affected by its location between the Atlantic Ocean and the Eurasian continent, making weather turbulent and difficult to predict. Latvia is within the temperate climate zone and has four distinct seasons – a frosty, snowy winter, spring thaw, a warm summer and a vibrant autumn.

Winter in Latvia generally lasts from December to late February. Air temperature may range from +5° C to –30° C. Extended periods of frost and snow may be observed towards the end of winter.

The beginning of spring in Latvia may be unpredictable– from late February to late April, as mean air temperature ranges from 0° C to +15° C.

Summer in Latvia is from June to September, with average air temperatures of about +19° C, occasionally reaching +30° C. Thunder and rainfall may occur with little warning in late summer.

In autumn (September, October, November), average air temperature in Latvia will decrease from +10° C in September to 0° C in November. In early autumn, brief periods of +20° C temperatures are expected, while October or November might bring the first snow. It tends to rain a lot in the second half of autumn.

You can keep track of weather conditions using this website: www.meteo.lv/laiks/.



19 TRAFFIC REGULATIONS IN LATVIA

Traffic in Latvia moves on the right side of a road. International road signs and right-of-way conditions apply. A driver in traffic must have a valid* driver's license and vehicle registration documents, as well as a document or sticker confirming state technical inspection and vehicle owner's civil liability insurance.

Vehicle registration, driver qualification examinations and issue of drivers' licenses, performance of technical inspections are ensured by state joint-stock company "Ceļu satiksmes drošības direkcija" (CSDD) – more on www.csdd.lv.

Traffic regulations must be observed by all participants of traffic, i.e. pedestrians, passengers and drivers.

The maximum allowed driving speed is up to 90 kilometres per hour on Latvian roads and up to 50 kilometres per hour in inhabited areas. Passengers inside a vehicle must use safety belts and children should be seated in special seats.

Pedestrians outside inhabited areas (as well as on unlit road and street sections in inhabited areas) must use reflectors, reflective vests, clothing with reflective elements, or a light.

* drivers arriving in Latvia from abroad are allowed to drive if they have a driver's licence issued by a Member State of the European Union or the European Free Trade Association or a licence specifying a driver's licence category prescribed in the Convention on Road Traffic (1968).

If the licence includes entries that are not written in Latin letters, one must present a notarised translation into Latvian. If you are staying in Latvia for more than one year, you must replace your driver's license according to the established procedure.



20 PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Public transportation is available in major cities and as intercity buses, minibuses and trains. Tickets are available before departure at a bus station or a train station as well as on board, although tickets bought this way will often be more expensive, for instance, in a train (if a ticket could have been purchased at the station where you came aboard). At bus stations, tickets can be purchased no later than 10 minutes before departure. It is recommended to have cash on you for public transport tickets, if you have to buy one on board, or it is not possible to pay by bank card at the point of sale.

More information: www.autoosta.lv (intercity and international bus and minibus transport) and www.pv.lv (Joint-Stock Company "Pasažieruvilciens" is the only domestic railway public transportation service provider in Latvia, the most popular routes of which are divided into 5 zones and intermediate zones).

International railway transportation is provided by State Joint-Stock Company "Latvijas Dzelzceļš", please refer to www.ldz.lv for more information.

In Riga, public transportation is provided via bus, tram or trolleybus. A one-time ticket in Riga costs EUR 1.15. For multiple use, plastic smart cards may be purchased, or non-refillable paper cards for up to 49 trips, as well as timed paper cards for 24 hours, 3 or 5 days. The card is valid 12 months after the acquisition. Upon entering a vehicle, a smart ticket (*e-talons*) needs to be registered by placing it next to one of the card readers. An *e-talons* may be activated (a plastic one may also be refilled) at ticket vending machines and points of sale throughout Riga.

When buying a ticket from the driver, it costs EUR 2.00.

More information: www.rigassatiksm.lv and etalons.rigassatiksm.lv.



21 TELEPHONE, MAIL AND INTERNET

Both landline and cell phone communication are available in Latvia. The international code for calls to Latvia is +371. Calls from Latvia to other countries should be preceded by 00 and the relevant country code.

There are three major mobile operators in Latvia: LMT, TELE2 and BITE. Each of them offers prepayment cards – Okarte, Amigo, ZeltaZivtiņa, Bite.

The main landline operator is Lattelecom.

Using an internet connection to a computer or mobile device, communication is possible with various institutions, one's family, friends and acquaintances worldwide.

Use of a wireless network (e.g. at cafes or during travel) may require entry of a Wi-Fi access code. A wireless network may be added using device settings or selected from a list of available wireless networks. Wi-Fi is a way of using wireless internet from your Wi-Fi-enabled laptop, tablet or smartphone. Free Wi-Fi coverage is available in many parts of Latvia, for example, Lattelecom Free (visit www.lattelecom.lv).

To find the most suitable Internet or telephone connection, you can use www.gudriem.lv.

There are 617 post offices in Latvia, 1,050 mail boxes for letters, and you may also receive postal items at 59 Statoil fuel stations. Postage services can be used for sending letters, postcards, packages, parcels, printed papers, and for making various payments, e.g. Western Union cross-border transfers.

Further information is available on www.pasts.lv.



22 WHERE TO CALL IF THERE IS AN EMERGENCY

Theunified emergency call line;
State Fire and Rescue Service

112

State Police

110

(If the threat concerns fraud, hooliganism, robbery etc., you should contact the police.)

First Aid Service

113

(call in cases of life-threatening sudden illness or injury);

66016001 – family doctor consultations (18.00-8.00) on business days and round the clock on weekends and holidays.

Gas Emergency Service

114

67086422 – Traffic Accidents

For more information and answers to questions, you may call one of the general paid helplines: **1188** or **1189**.



