

Latvia – people, culture, language

A guide for businesses



The country



Klostera Street in Old Riga
Source: European Commission

Historical overview: Ruled in turn by Germans, Poles, Swedes and Russians, Latvia finally achieved independence in 1918, only to be invaded again during World War II and absorbed into the USSR. Independence was reasserted in 1991; since then, Latvia has progressed rapidly to democracy and a market economy in which its Baltic ports play an important role. Indeed, its strategic location at the crossroads of northern and eastern Europe has formed the basis for Latvia's economic success.

Environment: Latvia offers a diverse panorama of low hills, white beaches, lakes and forests, and is one of the few countries left in the world where natural ecosystems, largely untouched by man, still thrive in over 50 percent of its territory. Latvia has five nature reserves, two national parks, and 240 protected areas.

People: Latvia is an ethnically diverse country. Just over half the population (57.7%) is Latvian, 29.7% are Russian, 4.1% are Belorussian, 2.7% Ukrainian, 2.5% Polish, and 1.4% Lithuanian.

Religion: Latvia is a predominantly Lutheran country with Roman Catholicism dominant in the East of the country. There is also a Russian Orthodox minority.

Riga: the Green City

Latvia's capital, Riga, was founded at the mouth of the river Daugava in 1201. 800 years of history can be seen in the amazing architecture of the city, from unique wooden structures and lavish Art Nouveau buildings on Alberta Street, to medieval churches and castles in the Old City. Since 1997 the central part of Riga has been included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. It is the largest city in the Baltic States, and one third of the country's 2.3 million inhabitants lives there. Today its streets are alive with new businesses, cafés and an exciting cultural renaissance. Riga is rightly called the 'Green City'. Even in its centre, visitors can find idyllic parks resplendent with old oak, lime and fir trees.

Business culture and etiquette

- **Meeting and greeting:** in general, business behaviour in Latvia is similar to that in the rest of Europe; a handshake before and after a meeting is customary and acceptable. Care should be taken to shake hands with everyone present at a meeting. A kiss on the cheek and a slight embrace is acceptable at a meeting of acquaintances. Immediately after shaking hands at the start of the meeting, it is customary to exchange business cards. See that you have a sufficient quantity of business cards.
- **Dress code:** the acceptable dress for a business meeting is a business suit for men. Women are recommended to dress fashionably, but not loudly.
- **Initial contact:** it takes some time to fix a meeting. Remember that frequently, senior executives acquired their experience in the former Communist regime. Confirm in advance, before the meeting, by fax or letter, that the meeting will take place.
- **In meetings:** Latvians tend to be formal and may appear cold at a first meeting. This impression is changed very quickly once a suitable acquaintanceship has been made.
- **Holidays:** you are recommended to avoid business meetings in the months of July and August or around the times of national holidays.
- **Gifts:** acceptable gifts for business meetings are items for the office, pens (including pens with your company logo) or selected wines.
- **Taboo topics:** Latvians are very proud of Latvian culture. Jokes that are detrimental to Latvian culture should be avoided.

Did you know..?

- The name "Latvia" originates from an ancient Baltic (Indo-European) tribe, the Latgalians (in Latvian: *latgali*), who formed the ethnic core of the Latvian people.
- Rainis (real name: Janis Pliekšāns, 1865-1929) is the most distinguished Latvian writer of all time and the author of a number of poetry collections. He has been acknowledged as the "Man of the 20th Century of Latvia."
- Latvia's president, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, was given 70th place in Forbes Magazine's list of the world's 100 most powerful women.
- The country has the highest female-male ratio of the new EU Member States.

Language

Official language: Latvian is the official language and is spoken by about 70-75% of the population. It is a Baltic language belonging to the Indo-European language family, and uses the Roman alphabet.

Other languages spoken: Russian is understood by most of the population, and German is the first foreign language for elderly people. Interest in other foreign languages (especially those of the Nordic countries) is increasing.

English: most business people in large cities in Latvia, particularly those under the age of 30, have a good command of English. Nevertheless, a few words in Latvian will turn the meeting into a warm and friendly encounter. The presence of an interpreter will help a business meeting to progress.

Finding translators/interpreters: in the UK, you can search for local, quality-assured providers on **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals). In Latvia, translators and interpreters are readily available – the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.

Basic Latvian phrases

The positive impression you will make by learning to speak a few basic Latvian phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases – if you are interested in learning the Latvian language, you can search for quality-assured trainers and courses at www.blis.org.uk.

	Latvia	Pronunciation
Hello	Sveika (to female) Sveiks (to male)	Svay-ku Svayks
Good morning	Labrit	Luhb-reet
Good day	Labdien	Luhb-dean
Good evening	Labvakar	Luhb-vuh-kar
Goodbye	Uz redzesanos	Uz-redz-eh-shuhn-aws
Yes / no	Ja / Ne	Yah / Neh
Please	Ludzu	Loo-dzu
Thank you	Paldies	Puhl-deas
You're welcome	Ludzu	Loo-dzu
Excuse me	Atvainojiet	Uht-vai-naw-yeat
My name is...	Mani sauc	Muhn-i sowts
What's your name?	Ka jus sauc? (polite) Ka tevi sauc? (familiar)	Kah yoos sowts? Kay teh-vi sowts?

Using an interpreter

Before the assignment: firstly, define the type of interpretation required (whispering or simultaneous). Fully explain the goals and objectives of the meeting or presentation. If you are making a speech or presentation, let your interpreter have a copy of the text in advance. Explain any important or difficult concepts and points. If you are part of a group, make sure they understand that only one person should speak at a time.

At the assignment: appreciate that interpretations may take much longer than the original speech. Speak clearly and slowly, and pause regularly – every minute; after a thought is complete; or after you have made a major point.

Make sure you avoid: long or complex sentences; slang, jargon, or colloquial expressions; jokes and humorous stories (humour seldom travels well and risks creating misunderstanding or causing offence); and interrupting the interpreter (unless it is really necessary, this can be confusing and appear rude).

A passion for music

Latvians have a strong passion for music, as can be seen from the vast number of music festivals throughout the summer months. This is a major part of their cultural heritage. The City Celebrations that are held in most Latvian towns throughout the summer are also lively events that include music, dance performances, sports and open-air markets.

Music festivals:

Festival of Organ Music, held in Riga in June.

Opera Music Festival, held in Sigulda in July.

Festival of Ancient Music, at Bauska Castle in July.

Rock festival, held in Liepaja in mid-August.

Signposting and resources

■ **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals) – an on-line, quality-assured database of translators, interpreters, language trainers and cultural consultants in your area. You can search for BLIS providers offering Latvian language services in the East Midlands.

■ **Resources** and organisations for more information:

Euro Information Centre www.euro-info.org.uk

British Embassy Riga - www.britain.lv

British Chamber of Commerce in Latvia – www.bccll.lv

British Council Latvia – www.britishcouncil.lv

Latvian Investment & Development Agency – www.lida.gov.lv

Latvian Chamber of Commerce & Industry www.chamber.lv

Local Business Directory – www.zl.lv

Tourism in Latvia – www.latviatourism.lv

Foreign & Commonwealth Office www.fco.gov.uk

UK Trade & Investment – www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk

Sources

Research and text: Central European Development Agency (CEDA) 01302 367662
Euro Information Centre www.euro-info.org.uk
International House www.ihworld.com

Photographs: European Commission www.europa.eu.int

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