



Vaira Vīķe Freiberga, former president of Latvia (1999-2007)

# LATVIANS



## Latvians and Singing

If you are around Latvians, be aware – sooner or later they are going to start singing. Be it humming under their breath, quoting a song in conversation, bursting into song after a few beers (note that the beers do not inhibit the Latvians' abilities to sing in harmony), or even putting on a proper choir concert – Latvia is the land that sings. The culmination of the Latvian singing tradition is the Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration which every five years gathers tens of thousands of singing Latvians on one stage.

## Serious Latvians

There are a number of things which Latvians take seriously. The Latvian language is dear to a Latvian, and also the history is taken very seriously. With independence regained only slightly more than 20 years ago, it is naturally cherished. Symbols which are best left untouched are the Latvian flag, the Monument of Freedom, the anthem. Latvians don't joke about them. You will not find humorous merchandise featuring these symbols; they are respected in an old-fashioned manner.

## Latvian Heroes

There is Lāčplēšis, or bearslayer, a young man who kills a bear by ripping its jaws apart with his bare hands,

and later on fights for his people. Antiņš, the third son, initially perceived as the juvenile one, with his persistence and ability to listen to his heart as much as to his mind, frees the princess from never-ending sleep; there is also Sprīdītis, a brave young boy who goes out into the world to look for happiness, he learns many things from nature, from signs he sees and people he meets, thus defeating evil powers along the way. A contemporary Latvian might add Vaira Vīķe Freiberga to the list of national heroes; she was the first female president (1999-2007) not only of Latvia but in all of Eastern Europe, respected at home and abroad. Māris Štrombergs, the first ever and now double, Olympic champion in BMX cycling is another contemporary hero for many Latvians.

## How to Become Latvian

Most Latvians (44%) would say that you have to be born to Latvian parents and slightly less (32%) admit that it is enough if you speak Latvian and accept Latvian culture to be considered Latvian. Culture and language are important for Latvians, and so is nature, and history. You might not know it, or not know it in the way that Latvians would want you to know it, but you should at least have an interest to get to know their history and to try to see it as a Latvian does. And that's a good start for becoming Latvian, or at least befriending one.

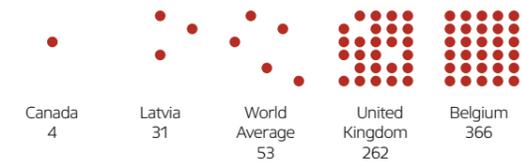
The true treasures of Latvia are nature, culture and Latvians; all inseparably related to each other.

When looking for a typical Latvian, you might hear of ancient wisdom and traditions, of the mythological Latvian, a figure which exists mainly as a Latvian self-image. The contemporary Latvian is much more difficult to grasp, because an average Latvian simply does not exist, instead there are more than 2 million unique ones.

## Where Can You Find Latvians?

Latvia has around 2 million inhabitants, more than one third of them live in capital city Rīga. In recent years several thousand Latvians have moved to Ireland, UK, Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere. In turn, several thousand have chosen Latvia as their new homeland. Forced migration caused by the world wars created Latvian communities in exile – in the US, Germany, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Brazil, the UK. Some Latvian villages still exist in Siberia (Russia) due to the forced deportations of Stalin's regime. Nowadays, you can meet a Latvian anywhere – ranging from the runway of the Japanese fashion industry to the campus of Oxford University.

### Density / people per km<sup>2</sup>



### Migration / Data 2012



### Latvians / Data 2013



The Latvian Institute

The Latvian Institute deals with promoting awareness and providing a wide range of information about Latvia. It works closely with local and foreign dignitaries, diplomats, academics, students and international media in developing an understanding of Latvia, its branding and its people.

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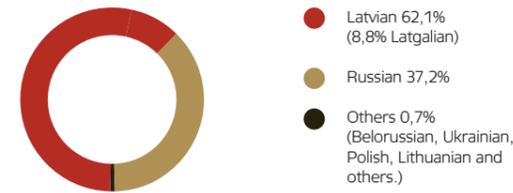
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Not for sale!

## Languages mostly spoken at home

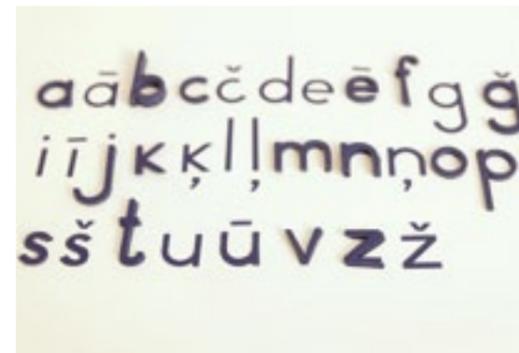
Data 2012



## What Language Do Latvians Speak?

A mythological Latvian speaks an ancient language, close to Sanskrit, non-Slavic, non-Germanic. It is a language that belongs to the Baltic group of the Indo-European family of languages; its closest and only living relative is Lithuanian. It is believed that Latvian and Lithuanian proto-dialects appeared in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.

A contemporary Latvian might speak one of the Latvian dialects – be it significantly different sounding Latgalian or lightly stained Courlandic, a contemporary Latvian might speak slang Latvian, where the slang is often borrowed from the English or Russian languages. Although with ancient roots, Latvian is as lively and ever-changing as any other language of the world. Some contemporary Latvians speak Russian at home. And 93% of Latvians know at least one language other than their mother tongue – it is common for Latvians to speak at least Latvian, Russian and English, though German and the Nordic languages are also popular.



## Little Weird Features of the Latvian Language

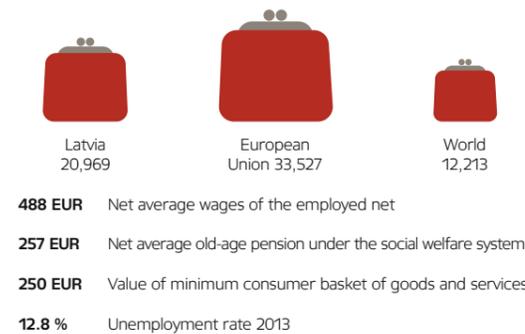
The Latvian language is based on the Latin alphabet with a few special features (diacritics): ā, ē, ī, ķ, ļ, ņ, š, ū, ž. Latvian is often described as melodic, but it is not the easiest language to learn – Latvian nouns have seven grammatical cases, verbs may inflect depending on the tense, mood, voice and person. You might derive the most fun out of the Latvian language when you see your name 'written in Latvian'. Latvians not only transcribe names and surnames as they are pronounced, but also add Latvian endings in order to

be able to use names and surnames in sentences (to conjugate). Therefore Charles Dickens becomes Čārlzs Dikenss, and something belonging to Jean-Jacques Rousseau looks like this: Žanam Žakam Ruso.

## How Well-to-Do is a Latvian?

When it comes to GDP, Latvians are not doing as well as the average European Union member, but are doing much better than the average world citizen. This is probably true for most criteria to do with well-being. With social services to a large extent being financed from tax revenue, Latvians have relatively high taxes and relatively low incomes. The average Latvian net salary is 488 EUR per month, yet you can receive a GP consultation for as little as 1,45 EUR. It is not a success story, nor a recipe for progress; it is a path in the making.

### GDP per capita / Data 2012, international dollars



## Latvians and Gender Equality

A mythological Latvian is convinced that Latvia has no problem with gender equality. Latvians had a female president for 8 years and that should be enough to prove it.

A contemporary Latvian is ranked as 36th in the Gender Inequality Index by the UN Human Development Report of 2013. Only 15% of Latvians think that boys and girls should be taught the same skills at school, Latvian women tend to be paid 16,5% less than their male colleagues. At the same time though Latvians of both genders are equally active in the labour market.

### Economically active Latvians / Data 2013, thsd



## Latvians and Faith

Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Orthodox are the most popular religious confessions in Latvia, but pre-Christian traditions closely related to nature are also very much alive. Latvians like to mix it all together with ease. Christmas might begin with a Christian church service; continue with folk songs and ancient Latvian fortune-telling traditions. Contemporary Latvians decorate their everyday life with ancient beliefs and sayings – one should not whistle indoors, otherwise devils come dancing on the table; there is a fern flower that blooms only on Midsummer's night, once you have found it, you gain happiness and well-being, etc. While they may seem like pure superstition at first sight, the sayings are actually several century old habits of politeness, wisdoms of the household or witty reasons for wondering the forest at night with your loved one.

## Latvians and Multiculturalism

A mythological Latvian is open-minded and has always lived together with a wide range of ethnicities - not only Latvians, but also Russians, Belarusians, Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Jews, Roma, Germans and others. A closer look into contemporary Latvians shows that there are two mayor ethnic identities – Latvian and Russian – among inhabitants of Latvia, followed by far less represented minorities. A look into history reveals that there were considerably more Jews and more Germans living in Latvia before WWII and there are considerably more Russians living here since Russification policies of the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

### Ethnic composition / Data 2013



## Latvians and Food

A mythological Latvian eats pearl barley, grey peas, rye bread, herring, and pork.

A contemporary Latvian would probably add a Greek salad, Italian pasta, Ukrainian Borscht, and many other foods to the menu, and all of it prepared from fresh, locally grown produce. For a Latvian, a salad is always part of the dish, soups are appreciated and so are full fat dairy products.



## Latvians and Nature

Latvians and nature are very close. Latvians do not approach nature through the "eco" brand yet, they simply know it, need it and live with it. Mushroom picking, tea-gathering, fishing, hiking along the coastline, walking in the morning dew, sleeping in a hay stack, extracting birch sap, gardening, taking boat trips, making flower wreaths – there are a million ways how Latvians are in nature and with nature without even knowing it.

## Latvians and Celebrations

The mythological Latvian celebrates pre-Christian festivities that are subject to the rhythm of nature – summer and winter solstice, the equinox, harvest time etc.

A contemporary Latvian is likely to have a mix of everything – everybody celebrates the summer solstice, called Jāņi, with folk songs and customs like jumping over the bonfire and singing 'til dawn. Christmas and Easter for a contemporary Latvian is likely to have elements both from Christian and pre-Christian traditions. There is also 8th of Match – International Women's Day, popular since socialist times, in recent decades also Valentine's Day and Halloween have made it into the Latvian calendar. For Latvians name's days are important, celebrated the same was as birthdays in honour of the name. Cemetery festivals are another very Latvian thing to do. Once a year Latvians gather, the cemetery is decorated with flowers and candles, there is a pastor-led church service or lay ceremony, followed by a buffet table or proper get-together at some relative's home.

