



# Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailed analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.

Latvia

Population: 2.17 millions (#144 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

## Geography

**Area:** 64,589 square km. Located in Eastern Europe on the Baltic Sea, Latvia borders Estonia, Russia, Belarus, and Lithuania. Climate is primarily influenced by the nearby sea, creating warm summers and wet moderate to cold winters. Fertile, marshy plains cover the landscape with few hills and no mountains. Environmental issues include pollution and waste management. Latvia is administratively divided into 110 municipalities and nine cities.

## Peoples

Latvia: 62.0%

Russian: 25.4%

Belarusian: 3.3%

Ukrainian: 2.2%

Polish: 2.1%

Lithuanian: 1.2%

Other: 3.8%

Latvians are the largest ethnic group. Russians primarily live in the larger cities and in some locations outnumber Latvians. Other ethnic groups tend to live near the nation's boundaries or in large cities.

**Population:** 1,923,559 (July 2018)

**Annual Growth Rate:** -1.1% (2018)

**Fertility Rate:** 1.52 children born per woman (2018)

**Life Expectancy:** 70.4 male, 79.7 female (2018)

**Languages:** Latvian (56.3%), Russian (33.8%), other (0.6%), unspecified (9.3%). Latvian is the official language and only language with over one million speakers.

**Literacy:** 99.9% (2015)

## History

A Baltic tribe named the Latgalians dominated modern-day Latvia between 700–1100 AD until coming under rule of surrounding nations. Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Russia ruled the region until independence occurred following World War I. The Soviet Union annexed Latvia in 1940, and independence was not recovered until 1991. Remaining Russian troops left in 1994. Since independence Latvia has established stronger relations with Western Europe, joining the European Union and NATO in 2004. Latvia became a member of the euro zone in 2014 and joined the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2016.

## Culture

Russian, Scandinavian, German, and indigenous practices influence Latvian culture. Rye bread, grains, dairy products, and potatoes are staple foods. Latvians tend to be passive in social interactions. Women traditionally bear the majority of household responsibilities. Latvian writers and artists suffered from Soviet censorship prior to independence and today contribute freely to the nation's culture. Divorce rates are comparable to Scandinavia and less than the United States. Latvia experiences high rates of cigarette consumption and alcohol use compared to Western Europe.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$27,700 (2017) [46.3% of U.S.]

**Human Development Index:** 0.847 (2017)

**Corruption Index:** 58 (2017)

Latvia experienced economic growth since the 1990s until the late 2000s, partially resulting from the global financial crisis. Latvia achieved its primary goal of European Union membership in 2004. GDP grew by 10% in 2007 but fell into steep recession, contracting by 4.6% in 2008 and 17.8% in 2009. The unemployment rate more than doubled between 2008 and 2009 to 16.6%. It took until 2017 for the economy to recover back to pre-recession levels. Prospects appear favorable for growth albeit population decline, the emigration of workers, and income inequality pose challenges. Services employ 68.1% of the workforce and produce 73.7% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 24.1% of the workforce and accounts for 22.4% of the GDP. Industry produces processed foods, wood products, and metals, pharmaceuticals, railroad cars, synthetic fibers, and electronics. Wood and wood products are a major export. Agriculture products include grain, rapeseed, sugar beets, potatoes, and vegetables. Primary trade partners include Lithuania, Russia, Estonia, and Germany.

Today Latvia ranks among the least corrupt nations in Eastern Europe. The perception of corruption in Latvia significantly improved in the 2010s to levels comparable to Costa Rica and Czechia. Previous corruption allegations include special interest favors by government for certain groups, misuse of EU funds, and tax evasion.<sup>[1]</sup> Illegal activity related to the shipment and consumption of illicit substances is a major concern.

## Faiths

Christian: 76%

Unaffiliated/Other: 24%

## Christians

### Denominations – Members – Congregations

Lutheran – 711,717

Latvian Orthodox – 365,476

Roman Catholic – 346,241

Seventh Day Adventists – 3,862 – 55

Jehovah's Witnesses – 2,278 – 36

Latter-day Saints – 1,234 – 5

## Religion

Most Latvians do not consider themselves religious. Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Latvian Orthodox are the three largest religious groups. Orthodox Christians primarily reside in large cities and are mostly ethnic Russians, whereas Catholics live in the east. There are 4,873 Jews and approximately 1,000 Muslims.[\[2\]](#)

## Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. Abuse of religious freedom by government or individuals is not tolerated. Nontraditional religious groups face greater bureaucratic requirements. Religious groups are not required to register to operate, but receive greater freedom to hold meetings, can have financial transactions, own property, and can obtain privileges concerning tax benefits to those who donate to the registered religious group. Religious groups who have been registered for less than ten years are required to re-register every year. There must be at least 20 adult members in order to register a congregation. Foreign missionaries may proselyte and hold meetings but they must be invited by a registered religious group and obtain a residency permit.[\[3\]](#)

## Largest Cities

**Urban: 68.1% (2018)**

Riga, Daugavpils, Liepaja, **Jelgava, Jurmala, Ventspils, Rezekne, Ogre, Valmiera, Jekabspils.**

Cities in **bold** do not have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Three of the ten largest cities have a Church congregation. Fifty-three percent (53%) of the population lives in the ten largest cities.

## Church History

The first missionary work in Latvia was conducted briefly in 1903 by Hungarian convert Mischa Markow.[\[4\]](#) The first Latvian members joined the Church in Germany in the 1950s.[\[5\]](#) The Russia St. Petersburg Mission sent the first four missionaries to Riga to open Latvia for missionary work in June 1992. Missionaries baptized the first convert the following month. There were forty Latvian members when Elder James E. Faust dedicated Latvia for missionary work the following year.[\[6\]](#) The Church created the Latvia Riga Mission, which also administered Estonia and Lithuania, in the summer of 1993. The first Latvian family was sealed in the temple in 1993 in the Stockholm Sweden Temple.[\[7\]](#) The Latvia Riga Mission was renamed and moved to Vilnius, Lithuania in 1996; headquarters returned to Latvia in 2001. Latvia became part of the Europe East Area in 2000. The mission was renamed the Baltic Mission in 2002.

## Membership Growth

**LDS Membership: 1,234 (2017)**

In the late 1990s there were approximately 200 members. By year-end 2000, membership reached 508. During the 2000s, membership increased by forty to one hundred members a year, usually at a rate between 5%–10%. Membership numbered 692 in 2003, 920 in 2006, and 1,025 in 2008. Membership growth significantly slowed in the 2010s to 0-3% for most years. Church membership totaled 1,102 in 2010 and 1,215 in 2015.

In 2017, one in 1,579 was a Latter-day Saint.

## Congregational Growth

### Branches: 5 (2018)

Missionaries were assigned first to Riga and Liepaja by June 1992.<sup>[8]</sup> In the late 1990s, there were five branches. The Riga Latvia District was organized in 1998. Missionaries opened Daugavpils in 2000.<sup>[9]</sup> By the end of 2000, there were three branches: Two in Riga and one in Liepaja. In 2002, a fourth branch was created in Daugavpils. The following year the Church created the Baltic Mission Branch for members living in remote locations or detached groups throughout the mission. In 2006, two Russian congregations were created in Riga, named the Riga 2nd and Imanta 2nd Branches, bringing the total number of branches to seven. Missionaries opened the city of Jelgava in the late 2000s and organized a member group. In 2012, the two branches in Imanta were consolidated into a single branch. In 2014, another branch closed in Riga. The Jelgava Group closed sometime in the mid-2010s. In 2018, there was one Latvian-speaking branch (Riga 1st) and one Russian-speaking branch (Riga 2nd) in Riga.

### Activity and Retention

In 2000, 200 youth throughout the Baltic States traveled to Lithuania for a youth conference.<sup>[10]</sup> In 2009, over 400 throughout the Baltic States attended a fireside with Elder L. Tom Perry in Latvia.<sup>[11]</sup> Sixty-five young single adults from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania met in Riga, Latvia in March 2010 for a young single adult conference.

In 1999, there were fifty-five attending the Latvian branch and eighty attending the Russian branch in Riga. Branches in Riga ranged from thirty to ninety active members in the late 2000s. In Liepaja, membership reached 240 by 2000. Twenty-five baptisms occurred in 2005, but sacrament attendance dropped to 20%.<sup>[12]</sup> The Daugavpils Branch had twenty out of seventy-five members attending church regularly in July 2009. In June 2009, the Jelgava Group had around ten members and investigators attending Sunday meetings. During the 2008–2009 school year, fifty-two were enrolled in seminary or institute. In 2018, there were approximately thirty active members in Daugavpils, forty-five active members in Liepaja, eighty active members in the Riga 2nd Branch, and 100 active members in the Riga 1st Branch. Member activity rates for the four branches range from 20-30%. However, convert retention rates for Latvia during a one-year period in the late 2010s was approximately 80% albeit only sixteen converts joined the Church nationwide at the time. In the late 2010s, there has been a significant surge in births in Latter-day Saint families.

The number of active members nationwide is likely around 250-275, or 20-25% of total Church membership.

### Language Materials

**Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture:** Latvian, Russian, Lithuanian.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most materials are available in Latvia, Russian, and Lithuanian. The Liahona magazine has two issues a year in Latvian and Lithuanian, and twelve issues a year in Russian.

### Meetinghouses

Larger branches, including those in Riga, meet in Church-built meetinghouses. The Liepaja Branch meetinghouse was completed in 2009 and was the largest in Latvia at the time at 6,500 square feet. The Daugavpils appears to meet in a rented facility.

### Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted sixty-nine humanitarian and development projects in Latvia since 1985 – nearly of which have been community projects.<sup>[13]</sup> In 2002, the Church donated 20,000 pounds of relief supplies to the city of Daugavpils for needy unemployed residents.<sup>[14]</sup> The Church has also donated office supplies and appliances to organizations that assist the needy.<sup>[15]</sup>

### Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

### Religious Freedom

The Church faces no restrictions on its missionary effort with full-time missionaries or local members. High levels of religious freedom allow greater variety of convert finding activities.

## **Cultural Issues**

Nonreligiosity resulting from decades of communism and the recent increase in materialism presents the greatest cultural and social challenge for mission efforts. Most do not regard religion as important in everyday life, making efforts for finding interesting individuals more difficult. However, Latvians appear more open to learning about the Church compared to other European nations. Nevertheless, many hold negative views about the Church based largely on misinformation. High cigarette use increases the incidence of investigators who face challenges overcoming addiction. Relapse in tobacco use following baptism may be a cause of member inactivity.

## **National Outreach**

Proselytism efforts remain limited to the three largest cities. Efforts to expand outreach to additional cities has been minimal in the past 15 years and have resulted in no permanent expansion of the Church. Tracting, street contacting, member-missionary work, service projects, and English lessons have been used by missionaries to find contacts interested in learning about the Church. Cities with mission outreach centers account for 41% of the national population. Congregations function in three of the nine administrative cities and in none of the 110 municipalities. Outreach in rural areas appears unlikely for the foreseeable future, as not all major cities have congregations. Once outreach centers are established in all the largest cities throughout the country, unreached rural areas may experience some mission outreach—particularly in areas surrounding large cities—with the coordination of local members. There are seven cities with 10,000 to 20,000 inhabitants and about fifty towns with 1,000 to 10,000 inhabitants without mission outreach. In addition to Riga, Daugavpils, and Liepaja, some limited missionary work may occur in Jurmala due to its close proximity to Riga and large population.

The Baltic Mission also administers Estonia and Lithuania, and consequently, mission resources must be distributed among three nations. Admittance of the Baltic States into the European Union in 2004 resulted in greater ease for missionaries traveling throughout the Baltic Mission since the late 2000s. This has allowed for greater ease in missionary transfers, especially for Russian-speakers who serve in all three countries.

The Church launched an Internet site for Latvia in both Latvian and Russian in the late 2000s at <http://www.jezuskristusbaznica.lv/>. The site provides information on Church teachings, meetinghouse locations and times for branches, missionary contact information, and a video on the Restoration. The Church also maintains a Latvian version of Mormon.org at <https://www.mormon.org/lav?lang=lav> and a Latvian version of its Mormon Newsroom website at <https://www.mormonnews.lv/>. These Internet sites provides opportunities for those wanting to learn about the Church but hesitant to meet with missionaries or living in areas where there is no Church establishment.

## **Member Activity and Convert Retention**

Convert retention was poorest in the 1990s when investigators received the least amount of pre-baptism preparation, and few members and local leaders were able to provide fellowshiping. Low member participation and poor convert retention in the 1990s likely contributed to the consolidation of congregations in Riga in the late 1990s. Convert retention has improved in the 2000s and 2010s as all branches have reported slight increases in church attendance compared to the early or mid-2000s. However, member activity remains a concern as increases in Church attendance has been less than nominal membership increases.

Many active members are noted for their high devotion to the Church. Local members serving as Church leaders are instrumental in the progress of missionary work to ensure the retention of new converts after baptism. Continued increase in the numbers of active members will strongly depend on increasing local leadership potential and member-missionary efforts. Activity rates are high for children, but dramatically decrease for adolescents.

## **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

Despite cultural and language differences, there is little friction between Latvian and Russian members, who together account for 87% of the population. Other ethnic minorities are more challenging to reach, as there are few members from these ethnicities.

## **Language Issues**

The large number of Latvian and Russian-speaking members allows for the organization of language-specific congregations in Riga. Outside of Riga, congregations must accommodate speakers of both languages. In Daugavpils, most speak Russian, whereas in other congregations most speak Latvian. However nonnative speakers of the dominant language in Church services can experience marginalization due to language barriers. The translation of all Latter-day Saint scriptures in both languages

allows greater ease in pre-baptismal teaching and understanding of Church doctrines. Additionally, gospel study and missionary materials in these languages are easily accessible online such as at Mormon.org. Lithuanian speakers are too few to merit concentrated outreach for this minority group, but interested speakers of Lithuanian can obtain translations of Church materials in their native language.

## **Missionary Service**

There were approximately thirty-five missionaries serving in Riga in September 2009 and about one hundred throughout the Baltic Mission. Reports from the late 2010s indicate the number of missionaries assigned to the mission have decreased significantly. Most recently, most branches have only one or two missionary companionships assigned. Latvia remains unable to become self-sustaining in its full-time missionary force, but reactivation efforts with youth and regular involvement of young men and women in member-missionary work may help increase the numbers of Latvian missionaries in the future.

## **Leadership**

The Church has achieved success in developing local leadership despite few members. In early 2010, all six branches were led by local branch presidents. In 2018, all five branches appeared to continue to be led by local branch presidents. The few Church employees do not appear to hold a disproportionate amount of leadership positions. In 2005, Gvido Senkans was called as an Area Authority, one of the first from the former Soviet Union. Elder Senkas was central to the Church's early establishment.<sup>[16]</sup> Increases in the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders capable of leading congregations will not only prepare branches to become wards in the future but also allow for additional congregations to be organized.

## **Temple**

Latvia is assigned to the Stockholm Sweden Temple district. Unlike Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia does not pertain to the Helsinki Finland Temple district due to cheaper airfare from Riga to Stockholm. Members benefit from the close proximity of the temple and temple trips occur regularly for the district.

## **Comparative Growth**

Latvia has experienced comparable growth to Estonia and Lithuania, as these nations have between 950 and 1,300 members. Estonia has the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints. Prior to 2012, Latvia was the only Baltic State with multiple Russian and non-Russian congregations in one city, indicating a greater degree of success in mission efforts among the native population and Russians. In 2018, only Riga and Vilnius, Lithuania have separate congregations for Russian and non-Russian speakers. Riga is the city in the Baltic States with the largest number of active members.

Most Christian denominations report stagnant membership growth or slight decline. Seventh-Day Adventists are among the more successful denominations in Latvia. However, Adventists have reported slight decline in membership during the 2010s. Jehovah's Witnesses operate three dozen congregations but have experienced slight decline in active membership in the 2010s.

## **Future Prospects**

Developed local leadership, recent increases in births among Latter-day Saint families, and continued convert baptisms suggest that slow, steady growth will continue in the coming decade. However, little progress will likely occur with more rapid growth until the Church more aggressively opens additional locations to proselytism and establishes member groups or branches in previously unreached areas. Additional large cities may open for missionary work or have more active missionary outreach, including Jurmala, Ventspils, Rezekne, and Jekabspils. Continued growth in the next two decades may lead to the establishment of a stake, but the current number of active members is likely half that needed for a stake creation. Greater outreach and progress in the Church will rely on local member-missionary efforts and mission and area vision for expansion, especially due to the limited number of full-time missionaries who must be shared with Estonia and Lithuania.



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