



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

## Latvians and Singing

Singing is bound to start eventually when Latvians are around. Latvia is a land that sings, be it humming, quoting lyrics, bursting into song after a few beers (which does not hamper the Latvian singing voice). The culmination of the Latvian singing tradition is the Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration which gathers tens of thousands of singers every five years.

## Serious Latvians

The Latvian language is dear to any Latvian, and so is the history. Having always had to fight for independence, it is naturally cherished. Symbols which are best left untouched are the Latvian flag, the anthem and the Monument of Freedom. Latvians do not joke about them. You will not find humorous merchandise featuring these symbols; they are respected in an old-fashioned manner.

## Latvian Heroes

Legendary Lāčplēšis, the Bearslayer, was a young man who killed a bear with his bare hands and went on to fight for his people. Another, Antiņš, is the typical youngest son. Initially considered naive, his persistence and conscience helps him free the princess from an eternal sleep and bring prosperity to his nation. Sprīdītis, the runaway boy, went looking for happiness. Using the

experience gathered from the world of nature and encounters, he is wise enough to overcome evil and find happiness at home.

A contemporary Latvian might add Vaira Vīķe Freiberga, the first female president (1999-2007) of Latvia and in all of Eastern Europe. Māris Štrombergs, the first and now double BMX cycling Olympic champion, is another contemporary hero for many Latvians.

Milda, the maiden on the Latvian Euro coin, is a celebrity in her own right. The same symbol was first used for Latvian national money in 1929. Latvian artist Rihards Zariņš portrayed a young woman as a symbol of freedom and statehood. The model, a proofreader of the State Printing House, might be the most popular Latvian girl in the world.

## 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 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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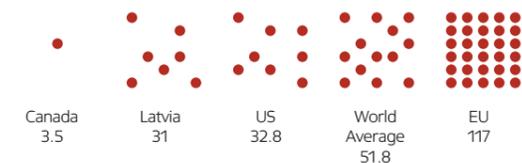
Not for sale!

# LATVIANS

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

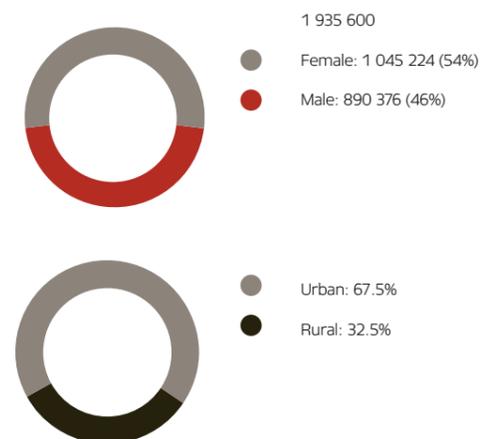
When looking for a typical Latvian, you might hear of ancient wisdom and traditions, of the mythological Latvian, a figure which exists mainly as a Latvian self-image. The contemporary Latvian is much more difficult to grasp, because an average Latvian simply does not exist, instead there are 2 million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

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



Data: 2012, Eurostat, UN World Population Prospects

Latvians / Data: July 2014, CBS



## Where Can You Find Latvians?

Latvia has around 2 million inhabitants, about one-third of whom live in the capital city of 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 world wars created Latvian communities in exile – in the US, Germany, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Brazil, the UK. Nowadays, you can meet a Latvian anywhere – ranging from the runway of the Japanese fashion industry to the campus of Oxford University.



The Latvian Institute

## Languages mostly spoken at home

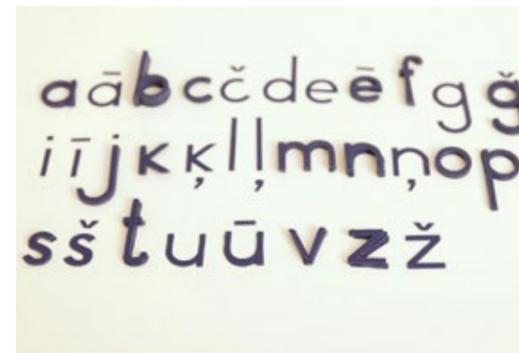
Data 2012



## 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 Balt 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. And 93% of Latvians know at least one language other than their mother tongue. It is common for Latvians to speak Latvian, Russian and English, though German and the Nordic languages are also popular. Some contemporary Latvians speak Russian at home.



## 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 doing much better than the average world citizen, but are still not quite at the EU average. After overcoming a painful recession in 2008-2009, Latvian GDP grows again, putting Latvia among the fastest growing economies in the EU. The robust growth has helped strengthen the economy allowing Latvia to introduce the Euro currency in 2014. The average Latvian net salary is 546 EUR per month, yet you can receive a GP consultation for as little as 1.45 EUR. It is not a success story yet; it is a path in the making.

GDP per capita / Data 2013 Eurostat, international dollars

Gross domestic product at market prices PPS (Purchasing Power Standard per inhabitant)



546 EUR Net average monthly wages and salaries of employees

264.84 EUR Net average old-age pension under the social welfare system

252.19 EUR Value of minimum consumer basket of good and services

Growth / Data 2013 Eurostat, Percentage change from previous year



## 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. Latvians of both genders are equally active in the labour market. In fact, some surveys show that 41% of the overall number of senior managers in Latvia are women, which is 2nd highest rate in the world.

Economically active Latvians / Data 2014 CSB, thsd



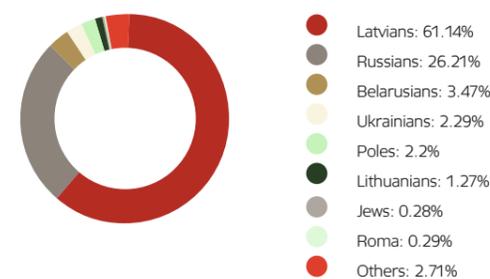
## Latvians and Faith

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 at contemporary Latvians shows that there are two mayor ethnic identities – Latvian and Russian – among inhabitants of Latvia, followed by wide variety of minorities. A look into complex history reveals that there were considerably more Jews and more Germans living in Latvia before the tragic changes brought by both World Wars; and there are considerably more Russians living here since Russification policies of the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

Ethnicities / Data 2013 CSB, % of all Latvian population



## 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 Borsch, and many other foods to the menu, and all of it prepared from fresh, locally grown produce. For a Latvian, salad is always on the menu, 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 March 8 – International Women's Day, popular since Soviet times; in recent decades also Valentine's Day and Halloween have made it into the Latvian calendar. For Latvians, name days are important, celebrated the same way as birthdays. 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.

