



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **77.3%**
- Agnostics : **18.5%**
- Atheists : **3.5%**
- Others : **0.7%**

1,956,000

64,573 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 99 of the Latvian constitution guarantees “freedom of thought, conscience and religion” as well as the separation of state and Church.<sup>[1]</sup> Limits to this are defined as any acts that threaten public safety, welfare, morals and the rights of others. Eight religious groups – Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jews – enjoy some special privileges. These include the right to offer religious instruction in public schools and to officiate at marriages without a civil marriage licence. Latvia’s Ecclesiastical Council, an advisory body chaired by the prime minister, meets periodically to discuss religious issues and to advise the government.

Recommendations made by the Council are not legally binding. Only the eight groups mentioned above are represented.<sup>[2]</sup>

The 1995 Law on Religious Organisations regulates questions concerning the registration of religious bodies.<sup>[3]</sup> Religious groups are not required by law to register, but doing so provides them with certain rights and privileges. These include legal entity status for owning property, conducting financial transactions and providing tax benefits for donors. Registered religious groups are permitted to conduct religious activities in hospitals, prisons and military units. With the agreement of local authorities, they may also hold services in public places such as parks and public squares. If an unregistered group carries out any of these activities, it is subjected to a fine. In order to register, a religious group must have at least 20 members over the age of 18 recorded in the population registry. Should the registration of a religious group pose a threat to human rights, democracy or public safety, the Ministry of Justice has the right to deny the application. The law requires religious groups to register each year for the first ten years.<sup>[4]</sup> This condition has been criticised by representatives of some religious groups as onerous, especially for those groups that have been present in the country unregistered for many years. Foreign missionaries may only receive a residence permit, hold meetings or proselytise if they are invited by registered domestic religious groups.

The law in Latvia permits halal and kosher slaughter.<sup>[5]</sup>

In 2016 the Latvian Parliament adopted a law banning the Islamic full-face veil. Government sources justified the decision as a preventive measure directed at future migrants, even though almost no one wears the full-face veil in Latvia.

## | Incidents

There have been no reports of anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim incidents to the Ombudsman or the Ministry of Justice. Leaders of both the Jewish and the Muslim communities have however cited instances of hate speech on-line, mostly comments on social media or readers' comments to news articles. For the ICCL, Islamophobia is an issue, primarily because of widespread anti immigrant sentiment. Members of the Muslim community itself, mostly Latvian converts to Islam, did not encounter problems with discrimination.<sup>[6]</sup>

According to Russia Today, Latvian authorities have at times shown a lenient attitude towards the swastika, a Nazi symbol that is highly offensive towards its victims. One such case occurred during the Christmas season in 2017, when a huge swastika was displayed as a Christmas decoration on the front of a house in Saldus, a town in western Latvia.<sup>[7]</sup>

In 2016 the leadership of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Latvia (ICCL) criticised the delay of the opening of a new prayer centre, calling it unwarranted and discriminatory. In a statement, the Riga City Construction Board said this was due to a failure to meet fire and safety requirements. The issue remained unresolved from February 2016 until the end of the year.<sup>[8]</sup> According to the homepage of the ICCL, the new building is now in use.<sup>[9]</sup>

In the same year, Latvian Security Police reported that the trend towards radicalisation among some Muslims seen in the rest of Europe had not spared the community in Latvia.<sup>[10]</sup> Over the past few years, the authorities have identified more people with extremist tendencies, including individuals who expressed the intention of joining the terrorist group Daesh (ISIS). According to the police, Latvian society nevertheless remains very moderate when compared to those of other EU countries, with, at best, only small radical fringe groups.

An ICCL representative told the press that a "sense of alienation" could be a reason that some Latvian Muslims had left for Syria to join Daesh. According to the security police, fewer than 10 Latvians enrolled in the terror group in 2016. There have been no official updates since then. In Riga, worshippers at a local mosque told the media that radicalisation was strongly discouraged.<sup>[11]</sup>

## | Prospects for freedom of religion

As elsewhere in Europe, there is a worrying trend towards radicalisation among some Latvian Muslims. This is being

closely monitored by the police and strongly discouraged by Islamic religious authorities. For now, the overall situation remains stable for Latvia's various religious communities.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Latvia's Constitution of 1922, Reinstated in 1991, with Amendments through 2016, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org), [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Latvia\\_2016.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Latvia_2016.pdf?lang=en), (accessed 29th April 2018).

[2] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Latvia', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 8th March 2018).

[3] Laws on Religious Organizations, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, [http://host.uniroma3.it/progetti/cedir/cedir/Lexdoc/Let\\_L\\_1995.pdf](http://host.uniroma3.it/progetti/cedir/cedir/Lexdoc/Let_L_1995.pdf), (accessed 22nd March 2018).

[4] Article 8.4, *ibid*.

[5] Rachael Pells, 'Islamic face veil to be banned in Latvia despite being worn by just three women in entire country', The Independent, 26th April 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/islamic-muslim-face-veil-niqab-burqa-banned-latvia-despite-being-worn-by-just-three-women-entire-a6993991.html>, (accessed 19th February 2018).

[6] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *op. cit*.

[7] 'Latvian man lights up swastika Christmas ornament, authorities say it's a folk symbol', Russia Today, 17th December 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/413433-latvian-display-not-swastika/>, (accessed 19th February 2018).

[8] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *op. cit*.

[9] Homepage, Islamic Cultural Centre in Latvia, [http://www.likc.lv/en/?page\\_id=1317](http://www.likc.lv/en/?page_id=1317), (accessed 21st February 2018. Site closed by April 2018)

[10] 'Latvia's Muslim community affected by radicalisation', The Baltic Times, 14th March 2016, [https://www.baltictimes.com/latvia\\_s\\_muslim\\_community\\_affected\\_by\\_radicalisation/](https://www.baltictimes.com/latvia_s_muslim_community_affected_by_radicalisation/), (accessed 20th February 2018).

[11] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *op. cit*.