

LATVIA 2014 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of Latvia is a multi-party parliamentary democracy. A unicameral parliament (Saeima) exercises legislative authority. Observers considered elections on October 4 for the 100-seat Saeima to be free and fair. Authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The most significant human rights problem was corruption.

Additional human rights problems included police abuse of persons in their custody; poor conditions in detention and prison facilities; delays in court proceedings, although these were fewer than in previous year, and incomplete restitution of Jewish communal property. Noncitizens, who constituted approximately 13 percent of the population, were naturalized at a slow rate and could not participate in elections. There were reports of violence against women; anti-Semitic incidents; trafficking in persons; and societal discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons.

The government took adequate steps to prosecute officials who committed abuses in most instances, although concerns remained regarding impunity for corruption.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances, abductions, or kidnappings.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the constitution and the law prohibit such practices, there were reports that government officials employed them. The Office of the Ombudsman (the

ombudsman) continued to receive complaints about police behavior, and reports indicated that police continued to abuse persons in custody. On March 11, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture released a report on its delegation's visit to the country in September 2013. The report noted that several detained persons complained to delegation members about police mistreatment.

During the first half of the year, the Internal Security Bureau of the state police received 151 complaints of alleged police violence, compared with 149 during the same period in 2013. Authorities dismissed 73 of these cases. Penalties included a reprimand and community service.

In the first half of the year, the ombudsman received complaints from 17 persons that police mistreated them while they were being detained or under investigation. Eight of the complainants alleged physical violence and nine alleged "moral violence." There were complaints also among inmates, including 10 cases alleging physical mistreatment and 19 alleging emotional violence.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Although improving, prison and detention center conditions generally did not meet international standards.

Physical Conditions: The Prison Administration reported that authorities held 4,963 persons in the country's 11 prisons and detention centers, including 1,433 detainees awaiting trial or the outcome of an appeal. The designed capacity of these facilities was 7,970. The law calls for the isolation of detainees from convicts, and the government enforced this provision.

The prison population included 40 juvenile males held at a separate juvenile facility that included a state-funded school and 360 women held in a separate prison. Authorities placed two juvenile female prisoners in a separate wing of the women's prison. The ombudsman and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) considered the physical conditions at the women's prison to be better than at other facilities.

In September 2013 the Prison Administration established a task force, staffed by Ministry of Justice personnel, to evaluate conditions at each of the prisons, prepare a five-year strategy paper on the mission and objectives of the administration, and develop a more efficient mechanism to respond to the 5,000 complaints inmates

submit to the administration each year. Preliminary findings of the task force identified inadequate health-care services, poor infrastructure, and insufficient living space. Some inmates were living in spaces of 27 square feet or less, as opposed to the 43 square feet stipulated in EU regulations. Prisoners generally had access to potable water. Food was adequate.

Four suicides (by hanging) occurred in prisons from January through mid-November. The circumstances of three of these cases remained under investigation as of mid-November. Authorities closed the fourth due to the lack of a crime.

The ombudsman received 46 complaints about prison conditions during the first six months of the year, compared with 97 during all of 2013. Twelve of the 2014 “complaints” were requests for information about results of earlier monitoring activities. The Justice Ministry received 48 complaints about prison conditions during the first eight months of the year, compared with 250 in 2013. Complaints concerned general living conditions, access to health care, and human rights abuses.

Administration: Recordkeeping on prisoners was satisfactory; administrators employed a central database of inmates established in 2012. Authorities employed sentencing alternatives, including reduced sentences and rehabilitation programs for nonviolent offenders, to minimize the prison population. Prisoners had reasonable access to visitors. Some NGOs characterized the use of a glass wall to separate prison visitors from inmates, which is not mandatory, as a violation of inmates’ right to privacy. Latvian Islamic Cultural Center representatives reported that Muslim prisoners’ access to prayer rugs and halal food was limited. Otherwise authorities allowed prisoners reasonable access to religious observance.

Prisoners and detainees could submit complaints to judicial authorities without censorship. Authorities generally investigated credible allegations of inhuman conditions and documented the results of investigations in a publicly accessible manner, although some NGOs alleged that prison officials did not review complaints in a timely manner.

The ombudsman monitored conditions in prisons and detention facilities. During the first six months of the year, the ombudsman made seven visits to prisons, monitoring overall conditions, resocialization programs, health care, security, and governance programs. The Ministry of Justice and other government offices investigated and monitored prison and detention center conditions.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring by independent nongovernmental observers.

Improvements: During the year the Prison Administration, under the Ministry of Justice, made concerted efforts to improve prison conditions. NGOs reported some improvements in prisons and other detention facilities. The Prison Administration provided programs designed to combat suicide and drug abuse. It restructured the health-care division.

The Prison Administration also addressed problems of foreign inmates, who numbered approximately 40. It created brochures for guards explaining how to treat foreign inmates, as well as brochures and an accompanying online tool to help foreign inmates understand basic terms in Latvian.

In July, following a recommendation from the Council of Europe, the government amended the law to introduce alternative sentencing, including electronic surveillance, to reduce the risk of overcrowding in prisons.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, and the government generally observed these prohibitions.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The state police, security police, and state border guards are subordinate to the Ministry of Interior. Municipal police are under local government control. Military forces, the Military Counterintelligence Service, the Protective Service, and the National Guard are subordinate to the Ministry of Defense. State police and municipal police forces share responsibility for maintaining public order. The law requires officials to protect the rights and lawful interests of persons irrespective of citizenship or socioeconomic or cultural identification.

State police are generally responsible for conducting criminal investigations, but security police, financial police, military police, prison authorities, the Bureau for Preventing and Combating Corruption, and other state institutions may also have jurisdiction. The security police are responsible for combating terrorism and other internal security threats. The armed forces and the National Guard are primarily responsible for external security.

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over security forces, and the government had effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. There were no reports of impunity involving the security forces.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

In most cases officials may only arrest persons lawfully using warrants issued by an authorized judicial official. Exceptions, specifically defined by law, include persons caught committing a crime by officers or identified by eyewitnesses, or persons who pose a flight risk. The law gives prosecutors 48 hours to either release arrestees or charge them and bring them before a judge. Authorities generally respected this requirement. Officials generally informed detainees promptly of charges against them. While a bail system exists, officials used it infrequently and did so most often in cases involving economic crimes.

Detainees have the right to an attorney who may be present during questioning. Detainees were usually informed of that right. The government generally provided attorneys for indigent defendants. The law differentiates between minors and adults with respect to charges and sentencing.

Authorities permitted detainees prompt access to family members. There were no reports that authorities detained suspects incommunicado or held them under house arrest.

Pretrial Detention: Under the law regulating the most serious crimes, pretrial detention is limited to no more than 15 months from the first filing of a case. The maximum allowable detention, including the trial, is 21 months. According to Ministry of Justice data, the average length of time between the first filing and the first court procedure was nearly 10 weeks for a criminal case and nearly two months for an appeal. NGOs continued to express concern about the length of pretrial detention, hearing postponements, and prosecutorial actions that tended to prolong trials. During the first 10 months of the year, the ombudsman received 69 complaints about legal maneuvers of prosecutors that resulted in lengthened trials.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence. There were problems, including inefficiency. The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair, public trial,

and most judges enforced this right. Many judges failed to satisfy the Ministry of Justice requirement, introduced in 2013, that they publish court judgments online. In some individual cases, the fairness of judges' verdicts remained a concern. During the first 10 months of the year, the ombudsman received 26 complaints over the lengthy proceedings and pretrial detention, compared with 134 in 2013.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right.

Defendants have the right to a presumption of innocence, to be informed promptly of the charges against them, and to an open trial, in most cases, without undue delay, although officials may close trials to protect government secrets or the interests of minors. Defendants also have the right to consult with an attorney in a timely manner, at government expense if they are indigent. The law provides for the right to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense. Defendants have the right to access government-held evidence, to confront witnesses against them, to present witnesses and evidence in their defense, to refuse to testify or confess guilt, and to appeal. Authorities generally respected these rights.

There is no jury system; a single trial judge hears most cases. Judicial proceedings take place in Latvian. Defendants who are not fluent in Latvian have the right to become acquainted with documentation concerning their case and to participate in the court process using their native language, with the assistance of an interpreter.

Both the ombudsman and NGOs expressed concern that long judicial delays often prevented access to the justice system. The problem was especially acute in administrative courts, where up to two years could pass before an initial hearing on even minor matters. The Ministry of Justice took measures to reduce backlogs in civil and criminal courts, including hiring additional judges. In the first six months of the year, the length of city and district court trials declined. The average civil case took eight months in city courts and four in district courts. The average criminal case required six months in city courts and three in district courts.

In January the government amended the law to require complete audio and written records of trial proceedings. Officials installed videoconferencing equipment in 66 courtrooms and audio recording equipment in 323.

In April the NGO Reporters without Borders expressed concern over a decision to bar the public from the trial of an investigative journalist who exposed alleged wrongdoing by the mayor of Riga and the trial of a private citizen who revealed details of government staffers' salaries in 2011. Reporters without Borders called for an open trial for both cases, contending that neither met the legal criteria for exceptions to public trials, which include trials involving minors, persons who are ill, family cases, or classified information. The NGO also expressed concern that the judge assigned to both cases lacked specialization in cases related to freedom of information.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The law provides for an independent and impartial judiciary in civil matters, including access to a court to bring lawsuits seeking damages for, or the cessation of, a human rights violation. Individuals can appeal cases involving alleged violations by the state of the European Convention of Human Rights to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The government generally upheld the law concerning civil procedures and generally enforced civil court orders.

Regional Human Rights Court Decisions

The ECHR issued 19 judgments related to the state and found violations of the European Convention on Human Rights in 17 of them. Most pertained to violations of article 3, the prohibition of torture and degrading treatment. Authorities generally complied promptly with ECHR judgments.

Property Restitution

A number of religious groups continued to seek restitution of communal and religious properties. Restitution of World War II-era Jewish communal property remained incomplete. The government and the Latvian Council of Jewish Communities did not reach a consensus on a legislative solution for restitution of Jewish communal properties or on the number of properties eligible for restitution. These properties included cemeteries, former synagogues, schools, hospitals, and community centers. The law does not provide a mechanism for the restitution of these properties.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and the law prohibit such actions, and there were no reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of speech, including for members of the press, but there were legal restrictions involving racial and ethnic incitement and denial or glorification of crimes against humanity and certain war crimes. Authorities generally respected the law.

Freedom of Speech: Although the laws generally provide for freedom of speech, incitement to racial or ethnic hatred and spreading of false information about the financial system are crimes. In May the Saeima amended the criminal law to make it illegal to glorify or deny genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against the country perpetrated by the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. According to the law, violation of these provisions can lead to a sentence of five years in prison, community service, or a fine.

In September security police began an investigation of three citizens for publicly inciting terrorism by displaying videos encouraging individuals to fight in southeastern Ukraine. The investigation continued as of December.

Press Freedoms: The independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views with few restrictions. The law requires 65 percent of all television broadcast airtime in national and regional electronic media to be in Latvian or dubbed or subtitled in Latvian. Extensive Russian-language programming was available.

In October the parliament updated several norms in the law on broadcast media to eliminate mixed-language programming on radio stations. All stations that were broadcasting more than 50 percent of their content in the Latvian language during the year must broadcast exclusively in Latvian starting on January 1, 2016, while those stations with less than 50 percent of their programming in Latvian must broadcast exclusively either in Latvian or a foreign language.

In August the Riga Central District Court froze nearly 23,000 euros (\$28,800) in assets belonging to a leading investigative weekly journal, *IR*, following a petition by an insolvency administrator claiming that the publication defamed him. The administrator sued *IR* in 2012 after it published an article entitled, “The Ugly Kitchen of Insolvency.” As of September the court had not heard the case. The court’s decision to freeze the assets of *IR* before hearing the case was unprecedented.

The case against journalist Leonids Jakobsons, charged in 2013 with violating the “right to private correspondence,” was pending as of December. Authorities arrested and briefly detained Jakobsons in 2011 on allegations of publishing private e-mails between the mayor of Riga and a foreign diplomat. The Latvian Journalists’ Association and other NGOs criticized his arrest as a restriction of freedom of the press.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: In April the government suspended the broadcasts of Russian television channel RTR for three months due to the channel’s dissemination of propaganda about the crisis in Ukraine. The Latvian National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) found that the broadcasts posed a threat to the public and national safety and constituted a violation of the Law on Electronic Mass Media. The NEPLP contended that RTR’s war propaganda and fomenting of hatred exceeded the boundaries of freedom of speech, making limitations on its broadcasting or rebroadcasting consistent with legal norms.

According to the State Language Center, municipalities can translate brochures about various topics into other languages provided they precede it with a Latvian version of the full text, using a font of equal size. Municipalities may not impose these materials on persons; for example, they may not put them into an individual’s private mailbox without specific permission or request.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

Internet speech was subject to the same restrictions as other forms of speech and the press. Security police launched eight criminal cases involving internet postings that allegedly incited ethnic, national, or racial hatred. In December the Riga District Court imposed a one-year suspended sentence on a man for inciting ethnic

hatred on Facebook by calling for a “Latvian Maidan” with the aim of inciting discord between Latvian and Russian residents.

According to the Latvian Internet Association, 82 percent of residents had access to the internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of assembly. The government generally respected this right, but there were some restrictions.

Organizers of demonstrations must provide authorities with a 10 days’ prior notice. Officials may deny or modify permits to prevent public disorder. Some observers continued to criticize the 10-day notification requirement as a restriction on freedom of assembly.

Numerous peaceful demonstrations took place without government or police interference. Police offered demonstrators appropriate levels of protection. Some groups seeking to organize pro-Russia demonstrations related to the crisis in Ukraine received refusals, however, with authorities citing potential provocations and threats to security.

In April, citing recommendations from the security police, the Riga City Council denied permission to the Noncitizens Congress to hold a demonstration and concert in downtown Riga. Security police claimed that the event was intended to split society in a provocative way and foment ideological and ethnic tensions and that it created a risk of physical confrontations.

On March 16, an annual march took place commemorating Latvians who fought in German Waffen SS units against the Soviet Red Army in World War II. The unofficial march was attended by far-right activists, veterans, and their families. Observers noted that, despite the presence of demonstrators and counterdemonstrators, the procession was peaceful. Earlier, on March 11, the Cabinet of Ministers issued a statement encouraging the population not to

participate in the unofficial remembrance. The prime minister issued a statement that “Latvia has consistently condemned the crimes against humanity committed by both totalitarian regimes, condemns the Holocaust, and honors the memory of the victims of totalitarian regimes.” The march took place without any appearance of Nazi or anti-Semitic signs or symbols. After the minister of environment and regional development stated his intention to participate in the march, the prime minister forced him to resign.

Freedom of Association

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right. The law prohibits the registration of communist, Nazi, or other organizations that contravene the constitution or advocate the violent overthrow of the government.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights, including with respect to its noncitizen resident population. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system to provide protection to refugees. The system was generally active, accessible, and subject to due process. The law grants asylum seekers the right to receive information from the State Border Guard about asylum procedures in a language in which they are able to communicate. The Latvian Center for Human Rights, an NGO that provided legal services to

some asylum seekers, expressed concern that asylum applicants and refugees did not always have prompt access to legal representation.

In the first 10 months of the year, according to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, 145 persons applied for asylum in the country. Authorities granted two applicants the status of asylum seeker during the first six months of the year; their applications for asylum remained under consideration. Authorities also granted three persons the status of refugee. They returned persons denied asylum to their countries of transit or origin.

Safe Country of Origin/Transit: The country generally did not adjudicate asylum cases based on the applicant's country of origin or country of transit. As an EU member state, the country adheres to the Dublin III Regulation, which permits authorities to return asylum seekers to their country of first entry into the EU if they arrive from other EU member states, except in cases involving family reunification or other humanitarian considerations. There were no credible complaints that authorities ignored exceptional cases or routinely returned asylum seekers to countries with poorly developed asylum systems.

Temporary Protection: The law provides temporary protection for individuals who may not qualify as refugees. No situations requiring this form of protection arose in the first 10 months of the year.

Stateless Persons

Citizenship derives primarily from one's parents. In most cases a person born to a Latvian-citizen parent acquires Latvian citizenship. The law also grants eligibility for automatic citizenship to children born in the country to resident noncitizen parents, provided one parent requests citizenship for the child at the time the birth is registered. According to the government, 83 percent of newborns to noncitizen parents received automatic citizenship during the year, compared with only 52 percent of such newborns registered as citizens between July 2011 and October 2013, when automatic citizenship took effect. The law also provides a simplified way for minor children of noncitizens to claim citizenship.

The law also provides for procedures by which other members of the resident noncitizen population can obtain citizenship. In many cases these procedures include a test of Latvian language skills and the applicant's knowledge of the constitution and the history of the country. The law exempts certain persons from the tests, including persons with disabilities and persons who completed high

school with a curriculum taught at least 50 percent in the Latvian language. The law allows dual citizenship in some circumstances.

According to the UNHCR, there were 267,789 stateless persons in the country at the beginning of the year. As of July the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs listed 282,876 persons as “noncitizen residents,” 176 as stateless persons of Latvian origin, and 43 as stateless persons from Estonia, Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, Finland, and Spain. Although the UNHCR included most of the country’s large noncitizen population in the stateless category, the government preferred to designate most of them as noncitizen residents, because most of them were eligible to naturalize under the law. The government recognized as stateless only persons with no claim to foreign citizenship or noncitizen resident status. Stateless persons may pursue citizenship through naturalization after obtaining a permanent residence permit and lawfully residing in the country for five years. Noncitizen residents accounted for approximately 13 percent of the population.

Noncitizen residents, mostly persons of Slavic origin who moved to the country during the Soviet occupation and their descendants, did not automatically become citizens when the country regained sovereignty in 1991. They have permanent residence status; consular protection abroad; the right to return to the country; the right to all government social benefits; and employment rights except for some government and private sector positions related to the legal system, law enforcement, and national security. Noncitizens may not vote in local or national elections and may not organize a political party without the participation of at least an equal number of citizens.

Despite some relaxed eligibility requirements, most noncitizen residents did not apply for citizenship. While they frequently cited the perceived “unfairness” of the requirements, a May public survey of noncitizen residents by the SKDS marketing and public research agency showed that the vast majority of noncitizens did not undertake the naturalization process because they believed they did not need citizenship--noncitizens can travel visa-free to both Russia and the EU. Through August authorities received 821 naturalization applications; they approved 418 and rejected 403, because applicants either failed the examination three times or failed to appear for the examination. Some observers continued to express concern that the passage rate for the naturalization test had fallen in recent years.

The ombudsman, NGOs, and the Council of Europe’s Committee for the Prevention of Racism and Intolerance continued to criticize the government’s

failure to allow noncitizen residents to participate in local elections and to reduce the list of professions in which noncitizens may not work.

Section 3. Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The constitution and law provide citizens the ability to change their government through free and fair elections, which they exercised through elections based on universal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: International observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights assessed the October parliamentary elections for the 100-seat Saeima as free and fair. According to the report, the elections took place in a democratic and pluralistic environment with minimal violations and offered voters a genuine choice.

Political Parties and Political Participation: Citizens can organize political parties without restriction. The law prohibits the country's noncitizen residents from organizing political parties without the participation of at least an equal number of citizens. The election law prohibits persons who remained active in the Communist Party or other pro-Soviet organizations after 1991 or who worked for such institutions as the Soviet KGB from holding office.

Participation of Women and Minorities: In January, Laimdota Straujuma became the country's first female prime minister. Following October elections there were 18 women in the 100-member Saeima, including the speaker of parliament, and three in the Cabinet of Ministers. Two of six judges on the Constitutional Court were women, as were 26 of the 53 Supreme Court justices.

Approximately 13 percent of the country's population and 36 percent of the ethnic-minority population were noncitizens. They could not participate in elections and had no government representation. Members of ethnic minorities who were citizens, including Russians, Belarusians, Poles, and Ukrainians, served on various elected bodies. For example, the mayor of Riga, the country's largest city, was a member of the ethnic Russian minority. The Harmony Party, which included many ethnic Russians, won the most seats during the October parliamentary

elections. One of the newly elected Saeima members is a naturalized citizen from Lebanon.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. Officials sometimes engaged in corrupt practices, and there was a perception that some did so with impunity. There was a widespread perception that corruption existed at all levels of government, and the government did not effectively engage with the public to counter that perception. According to the February European Commission and Eurobarometer reports, 83 percent of respondents in the country believed that corruption was widespread and 57 percent indicated that they would not know where to report corruption if they experienced or witnessed it.

Corruption: The Bureau to Prevent and Combat Corruption (KNAB) is the primary body responsible for fighting corruption. Government officials and NGO representatives expressed concern that a continuing public dispute among KNAB's senior officials had a negative impact on the institution's ability to fulfill its mandate. A newspaper survey showed a significant loss of public trust in KNAB over the previous two years. Through June KNAB recommended 11 criminal cases for prosecution, involving 32 persons. During the same period in 2013, it opened 46 criminal cases. The court sentenced 104 persons for corruption from January until November, in comparison with 105 in 2013.

The official investigation into the November 2013 collapse of the Maxima supermarket in Riga, which resulted in 54 deaths, continued at year's end. Among potential causes under investigation were allegations that corruption in the construction industry may have been a contributing factor of the collapse.

In June the Supreme Court upheld a lower court's conviction of Constitutional Court Judge Vineta Muizniece of forging official documents while she was chair of the Saeima Legal Affairs Committee. The Supreme Court also upheld the lower court's order that Muizniece pay a fine of approximately 3,000 euros (\$3,750) and resign from the Constitutional Court.

Financial Disclosure: The law requires public officials to file income declarations annually, and authorities investigated irregularities in the declarations.

KNAB is responsible for overseeing the activities of public officials and implementing conflict of interest laws. KNAB reviewed 100 cases during the year and fined 61 persons a total of 5,755 euros (\$7,190) for conflict of interest; 30 other public officials received reprimands. In most cases violations involved failure to provide the required income declarations or observe restrictions on outside employment and commercial activities. In five cases the declared incomes of public officials or their relatives were not commensurate with their lifestyles, which triggered audits by the State Revenue Service.

Public Access to Information: The law provides for public access to government information, and the government generally provided citizens, noncitizens, and foreign media with requested information.

Under the law government officials must provide public access to general information and do so within 30 days of a request. Information that does not require extra processing is provided free of charge. Government may levy fees for more complicated searches, but these may not exceed the expenses incurred. Applicants may request an exemption from fees and government institutions may waive or reduce charges. Applicants have the right to appeal a refusal to provide information. The law does not stipulate criminal or administrative sanctions for noncompliance. Government institutions have specific instructions to take into account an applicant's visual or hearing disabilities when providing information.

NGOs, including the Latvian Center for Human Rights, criticized attempts by the State Language Center to restrict dissemination of printed information by state institutions in languages other than Latvian, including Russian and English. For example, the State Language Center restricted distribution of Russian-language flyers in hospitals that included medical information for patients. Other documents that could not be distributed included Russian-language municipal newspapers and information on public safety, the census, and English-language signs by tourism agencies.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials met with NGOs, often cooperated with them, and responded to their views and inquiries.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Office of the Ombudsman has the responsibility to monitor the government's performance on human rights problems. The office received some cooperation from the government and operated without direct government or party interference.

NGOs continued to criticize the Ombudsman's Office, asserting that it lacked institutional authority and any clear focus or strategy. They complained that the office frequently put forward numerous issues with little follow-through. As required by law, the office made public its annual report describing its activities and making recommendations.

The Saeima has a standing committee on human rights and public affairs, which met weekly during the parliamentary session to consider initiatives related to human rights.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and social status. The government enforced most of these prohibitions.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law specifically criminalizes rape but does not recognize spousal rape as a distinct crime. Criminal penalties range from probation to life imprisonment depending on the nature of the crime, the age of the victim, the criminal history of the offender, and the dependence of the victim on the offender. Through June prosecutors brought 35 rape charges. When police receive a report of rape, they are obliged to open an investigation.

Domestic violence is an aggravating factor in certain criminal offenses. There are penalties for causing even "minor" bodily harm when the victim and perpetrator are spouses or former spouses. In the first six months of the year, police initiated 287 criminal cases in which the victim was a family member. They resolved 106 of those cases through mutual agreement between the claimants, dropped their investigation in 22, and continued to investigate 159. The NGO Marta Resource Center received 139 complaints about domestic violence through July.

Amendments to the law that took effect in April allow victims of domestic violence to request restraining orders from police officers and require police and

judges to respond to such requests within one business day. Under the previous procedure, victims had to apply for restraining orders through a lengthy court process. Another change requires perpetrators to leave the home where the victim lives, replacing the previous practice that burdened victims with the search for a new home or shelter. The amendments provide a broader definition of violence, which includes physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence, and improve protection for vulnerable and abused children by empowering courts to remove them from violent homes if parents or guardians cannot do so or are themselves perpetrators of the violence.

Between April and September, police and judges issued 228 restraining orders. During the same period, authorities initiated 27 criminal proceedings against perpetrators who violated restraining orders.

There were no designated shelters for battered or abused women. Women who experienced violence sought help in family crisis centers. These centers had limited capacity and gave priority to women with children. There were no dedicated rape or assault hotlines; NGOs managed four general crisis hotlines. The NGO Marta Resource Center for Women operated websites that provided information and legal assistance to female victims of violence.

In July the Marta Resource Center launched an online petition, Stop Rape-Victim-Blaming in Court, and sent an open letter to the prosecutor general following comments by one prosecutor, who asserted that in some cases women were to blame for the rape or domestic violence to which they fell victim.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): There were no specific laws against FGM/C and no reports that it occurred.

Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment is illegal but was reportedly common in the workplace. Victims have the right to submit complaints to the ombudsman and the State Labor Inspectorate. As in the previous year, the ombudsman received no complaints regarding sexual harassment, which observers blamed in part on procedures required to register incidents. Additionally, cultural factors discouraged women from filing sexual harassment complaints.

Reproductive Rights: The government recognized the right of couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children; to have the information and means to do so; and to attain the highest standard of reproductive health free from discrimination, coercion, and violence.

Health clinics and local health NGOs operated freely in disseminating information on family planning under the guidance of the Ministry of Health. There were no restrictions on access to contraceptives. The government provided free childbirth services as well as services for the management of complications arising from abortion. Men and women had equal access to diagnosis and treatment for sexually transmitted infections. The Cabinet of Ministers appropriated 602,855 euros (\$754,000) for reproductive services during the year for childless couples. Only a small number of families received state funding for treatment. In April, 422 families were on a waiting list for reproductive services.

Discrimination: Women enjoy the same rights as men, including rights under family law, labor law, property law, inheritance law, and in the judicial system. The law prohibits employment discrimination. There were cases in which women faced hiring and pay discrimination, particularly in the private sector. During the first six months of the year, the ombudsman initiated two cases of discrimination against women allegedly due to their pregnancy.

The law prohibits work and wage discrimination based on gender and requires employers to provide equal pay for equal work. Government regulatory agencies did not fully implement the law. According to the Ministry of Welfare, the average salary of a female worker was more than 17 percent lower than that of a male worker.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship derives from one's parents, and only one parent must be a citizen to transmit nationality to a child. Children born in the country to citizen and noncitizen parents are by law citizens at birth. Either parent of a child born to noncitizens may request immediate registration of the child as a citizen. Both citizen and noncitizen children have access to educational and social services. There were no reports of systemic or widespread failure of authorities to register births immediately.

Child Abuse: As of August, according to the Ministry of Interior, authorities had received five reports of child abuse and were investigating 29 others based on reports from previous years. The ombudsman received six complaints of violation of children's rights. The Ministry of Welfare, which is responsible for the rehabilitation of abused children, provided rehabilitation-related services to 1,561 children during this period.

Police effectively enforced laws against child abuse, although NGOs observed that coordination among agencies involved in the protection of children's rights was weak.

A 2013 law to improve protection of children's rights expands the range of cases police may investigate by defining physical violence against a child and by expanding the definition of emotional violence. It also specifies minimum qualifications for teachers and other professionals who work with children.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18 years. According to 2014 statistics, marriages of boys and girls under the age of 18 years constituted approximately 0.4 percent of all marriages. Lawful marriage under the age of 18 years is possible only with parental permission and if one party is at least 16 years old and the other is at least 18 years old.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): There were no specific laws against FGM/C and no reports that it occurred.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Statutory rape and child pornography are illegal. The minimum age for consensual sex is 16 years. Statutory rape is punishable by four years' imprisonment or six years if the victim is particularly young. State police can initiate proceedings against a sexual abuser without receiving a complaint if the victim is a minor. The purchase, display, reproduction, or distribution of child pornography is punishable by up to three years in prison. Involving a minor in the production of pornography is punishable by up to 12 years in prison, depending on the age of the child.

A special police unit in Riga worked to prevent the sexual abuse of minors and to eradicate child-sex tourism through aggressive prosecution of pedophiles and other child abusers. The unit publicized the potential dangers posed to minors by internet chat rooms and worked closely with local social networking sites to identify potential internet predator cases.

In 2013 state police detained a 39-year-old man on suspicion of pedophilia, including raping several underage girls and recording pornographic scenes with underage girls. They also suspected him of grooming approximately 200 underage girls through social networking websites. According to police information, the man carried out his illegal activities over a 10-year period. In September police sent the criminal case to the court for further prosecution, where it remained pending at year's end.

In April a court convicted a man of sexual abuse of a five-year-old girl and gave him a suspended sentence of two years and probation of three years.

Institutionalized Children: The ombudsman and several NGOs raised concerns about the continued use of orphanages despite the provision in the law providing that “every child has the inalienable right to grow up in a family.” Approximately 2,000 children remained in orphanages, with that figure growing annually in recent years. Nearly 6,000 children lived in foster families and other forms of family environment.

The State Inspectorate for Children’s Rights reported high levels of peer-to-peer abuse in government-run orphanages and boarding schools for children with special needs. The organization’s inspections uncovered nine such cases during the first six months of the year. The inspectorate considered the figure fell well short of the actual level of abuse because heavy inspector caseloads and the brevity of the inspectors’ three-day visits limited their ability to uncover abuse. During a one-week hotline campaign in May, the inspectorate provided 244 consultations responding to inquiries about cases of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of children. During the year the inspectorate investigated 273 cases of children’s rights violations.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For information see the Department of State’s country-specific information at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/english/country/latvia.html.

Anti-Semitism

The Central Statistical Bureau estimated that approximately 5,400 persons self-identify as Jews, while the Council of Jewish Communities estimated the Jewish population at between 6,200 and 11,000. The law prohibits all forms of speech that involve incitement to racial or ethnic hatred.

There were continued reports of anti-Semitic incidents, including some cases of anti-Semitic statements, but no reports of anti-Semitic attacks against individuals. Anti-Semitic sentiments persisted in some segments of society. The government condemned anti-Semitism and responded to anti-Semitic incidents.

Jewish community representatives, government officials, and foreign diplomats attended the July 4 Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Riga.

In February the Prosecutor General's Office forwarded a case involving online anti-Semitic hate speech to the Riga Regional Court. The accused individual had allegedly published hateful comments toward Jews in an article about Israeli politics. The prosecutor recommended a one-year suspended sentence. The case was under investigation as of December.

In May unknown perpetrators hung a sign reading "Juden Frei" (Free of Jews) outside a nursery school in Riga. Authorities removed the sign and opened an investigation, which they later closed due to lack of evidence.

In October theaters in six cities across the country showed performances of a musical celebrating the life of Herberts Cukurs, an aviation pioneer who became a member of the Arajs Kommando, an infamous Latvian auxiliary police unit under SS command during the German occupation. According to eyewitness accounts, Cukurs was responsible for the killing of Latvian Jews during the Holocaust. Several high-ranking officials, including the foreign minister, condemned the play.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, or the provision of other state services, and the government generally enforced these provisions. The law mandates access to air travel and other transportation for persons with disabilities, and the government and municipalities partially implemented the law. According to 2013 data from the Ministry of Welfare, there were approximately 163,000 persons with disabilities.

Although the law mandates access to public buildings for persons with disabilities, most were not accessible. The NGO Apeirons reported that approximately 80 percent of new and renovated buildings throughout the country were not accessible to persons with disabilities, and only 2 percent of all buildings were fully accessible.

In May, Ministry of Welfare officials contacted state police to report the alleged abuse of residents at the Ziedkalni shelter for persons with mental disabilities in the southern region of Zemgale. Police initiated an investigation, which continued at year's end.

In July the government increased state benefits for persons with disabilities to up to 213 euros (\$266) per month, depending on the category of disability and level of care needed. In 2013 the government began providing a personal assistance service to persons with disabilities. NGOs, including Apeirons and Zelda, noted that many persons with disabilities were dissatisfied with the service, largely due to scheduling difficulties. The government adopted policy-planning guidelines in 2013 to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities during 2014-20. The document focused on four main priority areas: education, employment, social protection, and public awareness. The document also addressed problems regarding the personal assistance service, particularly for persons with mental disabilities.

The law grants additional assistance to children with disabilities, allowing them and their caretakers to use public transportation free of charge. The law also allows families of children diagnosed with a disability to receive state-funded counseling. Children with disabilities attended school. The majority attended specialized schools, but they could also attend regular schools that accommodate their needs. In 2012 the government began providing eligible children with disabilities with assistants in schools.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The law prohibits discrimination based on race and all forms of speech that involves incitement to racial or ethnic hatred. NGOs representing minority groups claimed discrimination and harassment of national minorities was underreported to authorities. Through June the ombudsman received five written complaints of racial or ethnic discrimination, compared with one during 2013.

Through July police initiated eight criminal cases alleging incitement of ethnic or racial hatred. Complaints generally involved hate speech on the internet. One individual received a nine-month sentence in January for hateful comments about Russians published on the internet.

In September some girls attacked a younger schoolgirl from a Ukrainian refugee family in Jelgava, knocking out several teeth and inflicting head injuries. Authorities closed an investigation of the incident in November, citing lack of evidence.

The Romani community continued to face widespread societal discrimination and high levels of unemployment and illiteracy. The Office of Citizenship and Migration estimated there were 8,195 Roma in the country. Observers continued to criticize the government's action plan to address unemployment and educational problems in the Romani community, claiming the plan was underfunded and insufficient to bring about substantial improvements in conditions for Roma (see section 7.d.).

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

There were reports of violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity. The ombudsman reported receiving one report of alleged discrimination based on sexual orientation. LGBT representatives reported that cooperation between the ombudsman and the LGBT community was limited. NGOs complained that intolerance of LGBT persons was widespread and that attacks and discrimination they encountered were underreported.

The NGO Mozaika received 17 reports of LGBT rights abuses, which ranged from physical and verbal attacks to discrimination at work and bullying in schools. As of year's end, two criminal investigations opened in 2013 against alleged perpetrators continued. One involved an extremist who allegedly collected munitions for an attack on the EuroPride 2015 events planned in Riga, and the other involved persons accused of issuing death threats to a board member of Mozaika.

According to a September survey, *Attitudes Toward Sexual Minorities*, by Mozaika, intolerance of LGBT individuals increased. The survey showed that 65 percent of respondents opposed hosting EuroPride events in Riga in 2015, compared with only 4 percent in favor. More than one-fourth of respondents condemned homosexual relations.

In December a regional political party chair made homophobic statements via Twitter. Officials, including her party leadership, harshly criticized her statement

and forced her to step down from the party's board. Police initiated an investigation to determine whether the incident was classifiable as a hate crime.

On May 17, on the International Day against Homophobia, unknown persons tore down a rainbow flag and flagpole from the residence of the Dutch ambassador. Police opened an investigation into the incident, which remained pending at year's end.

In November the foreign minister publicly announced via social media that he was gay. He was the first high-ranking politician in the country's history to make public his sexual orientation.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the rights of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination and employer interference in union functions and provides reinstatement for unlawful dismissal, including dismissal for union activity. In November a law entered into force that eliminated some restrictions on establishing trade unions.

Several limitations on these rights remained. Uniformed members of the military may not form or join unions. While the law provides for the right to strike, it prohibits strikes related to public safety and by personnel classified as essential, including judges, prosecutors, police, firefighters, border guards, employees of state security institutions, prison guards, and military personnel. The law prohibits "solidarity" strikes by workers who are not directly involved in a specific labor agreement between strikers and their employers, a restriction criticized by local labor groups. The law provides arbitration mechanisms for essential personnel who could not strike.

The government generally enforced applicable labor laws. Resources, inspections, and remediation were adequate. Penalties for violation ranged from a few hundred to several thousand euros but were insufficient to deter violations. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays and appeals. Labor rights organizations expressed concern about employer discrimination against union members.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were generally respected. Worker organizations were sometimes independent of the government or political parties, employers, or employers' associations.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor. There were no reports of forced labor during the year.

The government effectively enforced the law. The Ministry of Welfare's State Labor Inspectorate, the agency responsible for enforcing labor laws, conducted regular inspections of workplaces and reported no incidents of forced labor. Resources were not completely adequate to sustain long-term investigations into forced labor. The government sponsored NGOs that performed educational outreach throughout the country to raise awareness about forced labor. Penalties ranged from fines to 15 years' imprisonment and were sufficiently stringent compared with similar serious crimes.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The statutory minimum age for employment is 15 years, although children who are 13 years old or older may work in certain jobs outside of school hours with written permission from a parent. The law prohibits children under the age of 18 years from performing nighttime or overtime work. Inspectors from the State Labor Inspectorate are responsible for enforcing child labor laws and did so effectively. There were no reports of labor abuses involving children. The inspectorate's resources and inspections were adequate. Penalties for violations are monetary and range significantly, depending on the severity and frequency of the violation. They were generally sufficient to deter violations.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

Labor laws and regulations prohibit discrimination regarding race, sex, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, HIV-positive status or other communicable diseases, or social status. The government effectively enforced these laws and regulations. Discrimination in employment or occupation occurred with respect to gender and ethnicity.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

In January the government increased the monthly minimum wage to 341 euros (\$426).

The law provides for a mandatory 40-hour maximum workweek with at least one 42-hour rest period weekly. The maximum permitted overtime is 144 hours in a four-month period. Employees may not work more than 24 hours consecutively, 56 hours in a week, or overtime on more than six consecutive days. The law requires a minimum of 100 percent premium pay in compensation for overtime, unless the parties agree to other forms of compensation in a contract. The law entitles workers to 28 calendar days of paid annual vacation.

The law establishes minimum occupational health and safety standards for the workplace. While the law allows workers to remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, authorities did not effectively protect employees in these situations.

Investigation into the causes of the collapse of the Maxima supermarket in November 2013 that killed 54 persons, as well as work-safety standards at the retail store, continued throughout the year.

Through November the inspectorate reported 33 workplace fatalities, 12 from natural causes, and 129 serious workplace injuries. The majority of workplace injuries and fatalities were in the construction, wood-processing, and lumber industries.

The State Labor Inspectorate is responsible for enforcing minimum-wage regulations, restrictions on hours of work, and occupational health and safety standards. The inspectorate had adequate resources to inspect and remediate labor standard issues. There were 109 labor inspectors. Penalties for violations are monetary and range significantly dependent on severity and frequency of the violation, but they were generally sufficient to deter violations.

According to the 2012 Labor Force Survey, the most recent such data available, 34.1 percent of employees reported receiving a net monthly wage that was lower than the legal minimum. The true number of working poor was difficult to calculate due to the sizeable informal economy, which, according to some estimates, accounted for up to 39 percent of gross domestic product. Workers in low-skilled manufacturing and retail jobs, as well as some public sector employees, such as firefighters, were reportedly most vulnerable to poor working conditions, including long work hours, lack of overtime pay, and arbitrary remuneration.