

LATVIA 2019 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of Latvia is a multiparty parliamentary democracy. A unicameral parliament (Saeima) exercises legislative authority. Observers considered the elections in October 2018 for the 100-seat parliament to be free and fair.

The State Police and municipal police forces share responsibility for maintaining internal security. The State Border Guard and the armed forces, the Defense Intelligence and Security Service, the Constitution Protection Bureau, the State Security Service, and the National Guard are responsible for external security but also have some domestic security responsibilities. The State Police, State Security Service, and State Border Guards are subordinate to the Ministry of Interior. Municipal police are under local government control. The armed forces, the Defense Intelligence and Security Service, Constitution Protection Bureau, and National Guard are subordinate to the Ministry of Defense. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

There were no reports of significant human rights abuses.

The government took steps to investigate and prosecute officials accused of committing human rights abuses.

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

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

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

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

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

The law prohibits such practices. Following its visit in 2016, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) reported in 2017 receiving complaints of physical abuse by police officers, most during apprehension of a suspect.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Some reports regarding prison or detention center conditions raised human rights concerns. Prisoners complained about insufficient ventilation, hot water, hygiene, cleaning supplies, and insects.

Physical Conditions: The CPT noted in 2017 that specific detention facilities had deteriorating physical conditions and that interprisoner violence remained a problem at the Daugavgriva, Jelgava, and Riga Central Prisons. Health care in the prison system remained inadequate with a shortage of medical staff. As of September, 8.4 percent of prison health-care positions were vacant.

In 2017 the CPT noted that most of the prisoner accommodation areas in the unrenovated Griva Section of Daugavgriva Prison were in poor condition and severely affected by humidity due to the absence of a ventilation system. It also found the Valmiera Police Station to be in a "deplorable state of repair." In the Limbazi Police Station, according to the CPT, custody cells had no natural light due to opaque glass bricks in the windows. In addition, the in-cell toilets were not fully partitioned, and most of them were extremely dirty.

Through September the ombudsman received 32 complaints from prisoners regarding living conditions and 10 complaints about the availability of health care in prisons. The CPT noted in 2017 that most patients in the Olaine Prison Hospital Psychiatric Unit and a great majority of prisoners sentenced to maximum security at the Daugavgriva and Jelgava Prisons were locked in their cells for up to 23 hours a day.

Administration: Prison authorities generally investigated credible allegations of mistreatment and documented the results of their investigations in a publicly accessible manner. In the first eight months of the year, the Office of the Ombudsman of Latvia received 22 complaints of mistreatment and, separately, the prison administration received 53 complaints from prison inmates against prison officials for violence against them. These complaints were forwarded to the Internal Security Bureau for investigation.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring by international human rights monitors, including the CPT and independent nongovernmental observers.

Improvements: The ombudsman noticed some improvements in living conditions of prisoners but considered the improvements unsatisfying and not covering all his recommendations.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. The government generally observed these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

In most cases officials require a warrant issued by an authorized judicial official to make an arrest. Exceptions are specifically defined by law and include persons caught by police in the act of committing a crime, suspects identified by eyewitnesses, or suspects who pose a flight risk. The law requires prosecutors to charge detainees and bring them before a judge within 48 hours. The 2017 CPT report found that police frequently detained suspects in detention facilities well beyond the statutory limit of 48 hours, pending their transfer to a remand facility. Through September the ombudsman received nine complaints concerning detention without timely charges.

Officials generally informed detainees promptly of charges against them. Some detainees complained that authorities failed to provide verbal information about their basic rights immediately upon arrest. Instead they received information sheets explaining their rights and duties. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that the information sheets often used dense, legalistic language and were available only in Latvian even for detainees who spoke Russian as a first language. While a bail system exists, judges 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. In 2017, however, the CPT noted receiving a number of accusations from detained persons (including juveniles) that they had been subjected to informal questioning without the presence of a lawyer, prior to the taking of a formal statement in the lawyer's presence. Some detainees alleged they were physically mistreated or

threatened with physical violence during such periods of initial questioning. The government generally provided attorneys for indigent defendants.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality.

In individual instances complainants criticized the fairness of judges' verdicts and alleged widespread judicial corruption, particularly in insolvency cases.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair and public trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. Defendants are presumed innocent and have the right to be informed promptly of the charges against them. Defendants have the right to a fair and expeditious and, in most cases, open trial, although officials may close trials to protect government secrets or the interests of minors. Defendants have the right to be present at their trial as well as to consult with an attorney in a timely manner and, if indigent, at government expense. The law provides for the right to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense. Defendants have the right to the free assistance of an interpreter if they cannot understand or speak Latvian, to confront prosecution or plaintiff witnesses, and to present witnesses and evidence in their defense. Defendants may not be compelled to testify or confess guilt and have the right to appeal.

NGOs and government officials expressed concern that defendants often exploited these legal protections in order to delay trials, including by repeatedly failing to appear for court hearings and forcing repeated postponements. Several high-profile public corruption trials have lasted more than a decade. NGOs remained concerned that this contributed to widespread public belief that high-level officials enjoyed impunity for corruption.

Judicial reforms completed in March 2018 shortened wait times for administrative court hearings and civil cases. Through September the ombudsman received five complaints concerning lengthy proceedings.

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. Individuals and organizations may bring a lawsuit through domestic courts seeking civil remedies for human rights violations. After exhausting the national court system, individuals may appeal cases involving alleged government violations of the European Convention on Human Rights to the European Court of Human Rights.

Property Restitution

The government has established limited programs for Jewish private and communal property restitution dating from the Holocaust era. Although the country's Jewish community estimated that approximately 265 communal properties still require restitution, a 2012 parliamentary working group identified only 80 eligible communal properties. Subsequent attempts to restart a parliamentary working group to reconcile the proposed list of properties with the Jewish community and officials from the World Jewish Restitution Organization failed to secure sufficient support. Some government officials asserted that the return of five properties seized during World War II resolved the restitution issue. Properties identified by the Jewish community included cemeteries, synagogues, schools, hospitals, and community centers.

Coalition parties acknowledged the importance of the issue and included Jewish communal property restitution as one of five priority issues in its coalition agreement, despite opposition to restitution on the part of some coalition members.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful 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 Expression, Including for the Press

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of expression, including for the press, and the government generally respected this right. An independent press

and judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for the press. The government legally restricts racial and ethnic incitement, denial, or glorification of crimes against humanity, and certain war crimes.

Freedom of Expression: Although the law generally provides for freedom of speech, it criminalizes incitement to racial or ethnic hatred and the spreading of false information about the financial system. The law forbids glorifying or denying genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against the country perpetrated by the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. Violation of these provisions can lead to a five-year prison sentence, community service, or a fine. There are also restrictions on speech deemed a threat to the country's national security. The law criminalizes nonviolent acts committed against the state or that challenge its "independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, or authority."

As of October authorities investigated individuals for inciting national, ethnic, or racial hatred, but issued no indictments.

Press and Media Freedom, Including Online Media: Independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views with few restrictions. The law requires that 65 percent of all television broadcast time in national and regional electronic media be in Latvian or be dubbed or subtitled. Extensive Russian-language programming was also available in all national and local media. Restrictions on speech that incites racial hatred, spreads false information about the financial system, or glorifies or denies genocide, crimes against humanity, or crimes against the country by the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany also apply to print and broadcast media, the publication of books, and online newspapers and journals.

Electronic media are legally required to present news and current affairs programs with due accuracy and impartiality. All companies, including the media and other publishers, are required to disclose their ownership, and this data is publicly available. Electronic mass media are required to disclose their ultimate beneficiaries and report any changes to the media regulator. NGOs stated that opaque ownership of many of the largest media outlets posed a threat to media independence and transparency.

The Latvian Journalists Association expressed concern about local newspapers' independence and viability. Some municipalities provided funding to local

newspapers in exchange for editorial control, or even published their own newspapers to drive independent competitors out of business.

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 media.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

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

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution and law provide for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of peaceful assembly. The government generally respected this right, but there are some restrictions. Organizers of demonstrations typically must notify authorities 10 days in advance. Authorities can approve demonstrations within 24 hours if longer advance notice is “reasonably impossible.” Officials may deny or modify permits to prevent public disorder.

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 <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

The constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

e. Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. 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.

Safe Country of Origin/Transit: The country adheres to the EU's 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. The government made an exception to this policy to participate in the EU's efforts to address high levels of migration into Europe.

Durable Solutions: Some observers expressed concern that the government did not take sufficient steps to integrate asylum seekers granted refugee status in the country. Refugee benefits fell well below the country's poverty line.

Temporary Protection: In the first eight months of the year, the government provided no subsidiary protection status to any individual who did not qualify as a refugee.

g. Stateless Persons

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported 225,572 stateless persons in the country at the end of 2018. This number included 224,666 persons the government considered "noncitizens." The government recognized as stateless only those persons with no claim to foreign citizenship or noncitizen resident status. Persons categorized by authorities as stateless may pursue citizenship through naturalization after obtaining a permanent residence permit and lawfully residing in the country for five years.

UNHCR included most of the country's noncitizen population in the stateless category, but as of 2018 also considered them persons to whom the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons does not apply. The government preferred to designate this population as noncitizen residents, since they were eligible to naturalize under the law. 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 independence in 1991. They have permanent residency status, equal protection in the country and consular protection abroad, the right to leave and return to the country, and the right to all government social benefits. They also have employment rights, except in 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.

Noncitizen residents may seek naturalization in the country. From January to September, authorities received 714 naturalization applications; of these, 530 received their citizenship by September, and 31 failed to pass the language exam but can reapply. Of the other 153 applications, some did not yet take the test; some withdrew their applications, and some passed away. In public surveys of noncitizen residents, the majority of respondents who did not seek naturalization reported that, in addition to language barriers, their reasons for not doing so included political objections to the requirement and their understanding that Latvian citizenship was not necessary for them to travel to Russia and EU-member states.

A subset of these noncitizen permanent residents hold citizenship in a different country, such as Russia, although the exact number and percentage were unknown, and dual citizenship for noncitizen permanent residents older than age 25 is not legal. This subgroup while living in Latvia may not only travel in the Schengen area like other noncitizen permanent residents but may also travel visa-free to and from Russia.

A new law promulgated on November 5 grants automatic citizenship at birth to children of noncitizen residents born after January 1, 2020, resolving a long-standing dispute in the country.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provide citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal 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 parliamentary elections in October 2018 as free and fair.

Political Parties and Political Participation: Citizens may 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 from holding public office who remained active in the Communist Party or other pro-Soviet organizations after 1991 or who worked for such institutions as the Soviet KGB.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws limit the participation of women and members of minorities in the political process, and they did participate. Approximately 28 percent of the ethnic minority population were noncitizen residents who could not participate in elections and had no representation in government.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not consistently implement the law effectively. Officials sometimes engaged in corrupt practices, and polling data consistently showed that the majority of the public believed corruption was widespread and that officials were rarely held accountable.

Corruption: Corruption was a problem. Investigation of corruption cases improved, but prosecutions were slow, and conviction rates low. NGOs noted that the Bureau for Combating and Preventing Corruption (KNAB) and media outlets focused more attention on large-scale corruption cases, such as the case of European Central Bank Governor Ilmars Rimsevics, corruption in transportation procurement, construction businesses, and waste management.

In September KNAB initiated criminal proceedings against an alleged construction industry cartel that used illegal agreements between cartel members to divide work

on some of the country's largest public sector projects among them. KNAB indicated it had reason to believe that at least 10 of the largest construction companies in the country were involved in the illegal arrangement.

Financial Disclosure: The law requires public officials to file income and asset disclosures annually. Declarations are made public, and there are sanctions for noncompliance. While authorities investigated some irregularities, NGOs stated that the State Revenue Service had limited capacity and thus could not effectively oversee these disclosures.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses 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 often cooperated with NGOs and responded to their views and inquiries.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Office of the Ombudsman is responsible for monitoring the government's performance on human rights. The ombudsman received some cooperation from the agencies it monitored and operated without direct government or political interference.

NGOs continued to criticize the Office of the Ombudsman for lacking the institutional authority or capacity to investigate and act on allegations of discrimination. The office also encountered difficulties resolving problems that required parliamentary funding or changes in the law. In a report published on March 5, the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) observed that the ombudsman's mandate does not include providing independent assistance to victims of racism and racial discrimination. The ombudsman cannot enforce its recommendations or levy fines, although it may apply to the Constitutional Court to initiate proceedings against a public institution that has failed to address a source of discrimination. The ombudsman can also file a complaint in an administrative court if it is in the public interest or bring a case to the civil courts if the problem concerns a violation of equal treatment, ECRI stated. As required by law, the Office of the Ombudsman published an annual report describing its activities and making recommendations to the government.

A standing parliamentary committee on human rights and public affairs met weekly when parliament was in session. It considered initiatives related to human rights but generally focused on public media policy.

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

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law specifically criminalizes rape. Spousal rape is explicitly considered rape with “aggravated circumstances.” Criminal penalties for rape range from four years to life imprisonment. When police receive a report of rape, they are required to open an investigation. Through September police initiated 60 criminal charges for rape against 28 individuals, of which six cases were sent to the prosecutor’s office and three cases to court. Because the Ministry of Justice does not distinguish between spousal rape and nonspousal rape cases, whether any spousal rape case has been prosecuted was hard to determine.

The law provides a broad definition of violence that includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. Domestic violence is considered an aggravating factor in certain criminal offenses. There are penalties for causing even “minor” bodily harm when the victim and perpetrator are spouses, former spouses, or civil partners.

The law, as amended during the year, allows police to investigate domestic violence without a victim’s prior approval and criminalizes stalking. The law allows victims of domestic violence to request police officers issue an order for eviction of the perpetrator for eight days. Upon such a request, police must react immediately, on the spot, if necessary. Only courts can issue restraining orders and must respond to such requests within one business day. Once a restraining order is issued, it remains in force until a court revokes it.

Domestic violence remained a serious problem. In the first eight months of the year, police initiated 193 criminal proceedings for domestic violence and detained 70 persons. In the same period, police issued 497 restraining orders, similar to 2018. NGOs stated that in some domestic violence cases, police and doctors were reluctant to act to restrain or arrest domestic partners. Complaints to police about domestic abuse rarely resulted in the police’s issuing separation orders. Instead, police initiated criminal proceedings, administrative cases, or inspections. A pilot project in Liepaja focused on improving police training, communications,

procedurals, and referrals. NGOs and government officials noted a strong increase in issued separation orders in Liepaja compared to previous years.

The government funded shelters with social support, although there were no anonymous government-run shelters designated specifically for battered and abused women. There was one government-funded victim support hotline and several NGO-managed crisis hotlines; none was dedicated exclusively to rape or assault. The government hotline referred victims to an appropriate NGO for further support.

Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment was prosecuted under discrimination statutes. Penalties range from a reprimand to imprisonment. Victims have the right to submit complaints to the Office of the Ombudsman and the State Labor Inspectorate. During the year there were no complaints of sexual harassment.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

Discrimination: The law provides for equal treatment of women. The government enforced its antidiscrimination laws effectively. There were instances of hiring and pay discrimination against women, particularly in the private sector (see Section 7.d.).

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship derives from one's parents. Only one parent must be a citizen to transmit nationality to a child. A law promulgated by President Egils Levits on November 5 mandates automatic birthright citizenship for children of noncitizen residents born after January 1, 2020, and replaces a system that required permission from at least one of the parents for such a child to acquire citizenship. Prior to the law, fewer than approximately 50 children per year were born into this situation. Those children are still eligible for citizenship via naturalization.

Child Abuse: Violence against children was a problem. The law provides for protection of children against violence, exploitation, sexual abuse, involvement in prostitution, and serious threats to the life, health, or development of the child, such as hazardous conditions. Violation of the law is punishable by imprisonment, community service, or a fine and supervised probation for a period of up to three years. The law empowers courts to remove vulnerable and abused children from

violent homes if parents or guardians cannot do so or are themselves perpetrators of the violence. Police effectively enforced laws against child abuse. NGOs and local government officials stated some improvement in access, coordination and information sharing, crediting implementation of a 2017 law. The ombudsman received complaints of violence against children in educational institutions. NGOs also reported a continuing overall problem with discipline and bullying in schools, citing an administrative culture of conflict avoidance as an aggravating factor. NGOs stated that their access improved during the past year as a result of a new law.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18. Persons younger than 18 may legally marry only with parental permission and if one party is at least 16 and the other is at least 18.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits the commercial sexual exploitation of children, the sale of children, offering or procuring a child for prostitution, and practices related to child pornography. Authorities generally enforced the law. Through September police initiated 92 criminal proceedings for the sexual exploitation of minors younger than 16, a 12-percent drop from 2018. Through September the ombudsman received one complaint of sexual violence against children. 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. The minimum age for consensual sex is 16.

Institutionalized Children: In the first eight months of the year, the State Inspectorate for Children's Rights reported three cases of peer-on-peer physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in government-run orphanages and boarding schools for children with special needs. The inspectorate believed the actual figure was much higher, but cases remained underreported due to infrequent visits by social workers and limited opportunities for observation.

Due to its complexity and sensitivity, the criminal investigation of serious abuses at the Ainazi children's psychiatric clinic, initiated in 2018, remained under review by authorities. Among other abuses, children at the clinic were found to have been bound to beds for prolonged periods of time.

NGOs stated that their access in orphanages improved since 2018 as a result of the adoption of a law in 2017 that mandates government coordination with local and national agencies as well as with NGOs.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

Government sources estimated that between 4,500 and 8,200 Jewish residents lived in the country. There were no reports of anti-Semitic attacks against individuals, although there were public references to stereotypes on the internet by some fringe groups. Anti-Semitic hate speech followed the election on May 29 of Egils Levits, who is of Jewish heritage, as president of the country and the introduction in parliament of a bill on Jewish property restitution in June. The leadership of the Jewish community stated that relations were generally positive.

On March 16, four members of parliament from the right-wing populist National Alliance party attended the annual march to commemorate Latvians who fought in German Waffen SS units against the Soviet Army in World War II. No Nazi symbols or insignia were seen at the march. Domestically, the march was generally viewed as a commemoration of national identity and remembrance of those who fought for independence, rather than as a glorification of Nazism. Authorities told ECRI that, although they do not support the March 16 commemoration, they are unable to prevent it taking place because of court judgments overturning the Riga City Council's ban of the event. Authorities underlined that they remained vigilant and would intervene if any symbols of Nazism were displayed during these events.

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

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The constitution and law prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities, and the government generally enforced these provisions.

Although the law mandates access to public buildings for persons with disabilities, there was no corresponding provision for private buildings. The NGO Apeirons reported that during the year only 3 percent of all buildings were fully accessible. Accessibility to state and local government buildings generally extended only to the first floor.

While children with disabilities were allowed to attend regular schools that could accommodate their needs, very few schools outside of Riga could accommodate them.

While health and labor services are provided as stipulated by law, NGOs stated that most persons with disabilities had limited access to work and health care due to a lack of personal assistants, poor infrastructure, and the absence of specialized programs for such persons.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

NGOs representing minority groups stated that discrimination and harassment of national minorities, including what they considered hate speech, remained underreported to authorities. Through September the ombudsman did not receive any written complaints of racial discrimination, although they did receive two complaints of ethnic discrimination. ECRI heard from NGOs, minority representatives, and the ombudsman that victims of hate speech often did not report incidents to police because they distrusted the willingness and ability of police to investigate these cases effectively.

In the first eight months of the year, the State Security Service initiated five criminal cases for incitement of social hatred and enmity.

The Romani community continued to face widespread societal discrimination and high levels of unemployment and illiteracy. The Central Statistical Bureau reported 4,983 Roma lived in the country.

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

The law prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. NGOs expressed concerns about the lack of explicit protection in the law against incitement to hatred and violence on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. ECRI also pointed out that the government does not collect data regarding sexual orientation and gender identity and thus is not in a position to evaluate the need for specialized services, and especially the magnitude of the problem.

NGOs reported widespread intolerance of and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. Unions may not have fewer than 15 members or less than 25 percent of the total number of employees in the company (which cannot be fewer than five). The law prohibits antiunion discrimination and employer interference in union functions, and it provides reinstatement for unlawful dismissal, including dismissal for union activity.

There were several limitations on these rights. Uniformed members of the military, members of the State Security Services, and border guards may not form or join unions. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, collective bargaining in the public administration is a formal procedure with no real substance, since all employment conditions are fixed by law.

While the law provides for the right to strike, it requires a strike vote by a three-fourths majority at a meeting attended by at least three-fourths of the union's members. It prohibits strikes in sectors 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. It also bans political strikes. The law provides arbitration mechanisms for essential personnel not permitted to strike.

The government generally enforced applicable labor laws. EU labor regulations also apply. Resources, inspections, and remediation were adequate under the law.

Penalties for violations ranged from a few hundred to several thousand euros and 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. The law on trade unions requires trade unions to be independent under the law. Anticorruption officials and press reports stated, however, that external funding and support appeared to make some union individuals or groups lack independence. Press reports stated that one of the largest worker unions in the country, LABA, was reportedly under the unofficial control of the Riga City Council. Recent corruption scandals have significantly weakened LABA.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor. The government effectively enforced the law, although staffing problems hindered more effective enforcement. Penalties range from fines to imprisonment and were generally sufficient to deter violations. The Ministry of Welfare's State Labor Inspectorate, the agency responsible for enforcing labor laws, conducted regular inspections of workplaces, and reported three incidents of forced labor through September. One forced labor case resulted in a September conviction and sentencing. The inspectorate reported a high employee turnover, with approximately 11 percent of positions unfilled, a situation exacerbated by perennial wage issues.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The government effectively enforced child labor and minimum age laws, and penalties were sufficient to deter violations. The statutory minimum age for employment is 15. Children who are 13 or older may work in certain jobs outside of school hours with written permission from a parent. The law prohibits children younger than 18 from performing nighttime or overtime work. By law children may not work in jobs that pose a risk to their physical safety, health, or development. There were no reports of labor abuses involving children. Through September the State Labor Inspectorate reported four cases of unregistered employment of youth.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

Labor laws and regulations prohibit discrimination. Following Soviet-era russification and relocation programs and the creation of a sizeable Russian-speaking minority, the government required the use of Latvian as the officially recognized language where employment activities “affect the lawful interests of the public.” Citing the continuing political and economic threat posed by Russia to Latvia, the government restricted some sensitive civil service positions for candidates who previously worked for the former Soviet intelligence apparatus.

There were instances of hiring and pay discrimination against women, particularly in the private sector. Because this type of discrimination was underreported, during the first eight months of the year the ombudsman did not open any cases of employment discrimination. According to the World Bank Group’s *Women, Business and the Law 2019*, women in the country have equal legal standing with men.

Employment discrimination also occurred with respect to sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnicity. Persons with disabilities experienced limited access to work due to a lack of personal assistance, poor infrastructure, and absence of specialized programs. The Romani community faced discrimination and high levels of unemployment.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law sets a monthly minimum wage which was above the official poverty line. The government enforced its wage laws effectively.

The law provides for a maximum workweek of 40 hours. The maximum permitted overtime work may not exceed eight hours on average within a seven-day period, which is calculated over a four-month reference period. 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; however, this was rarely enforced.

The law establishes minimum occupational health and safety standards for the workplace, which are current and appropriate for the main industries. While the law allows workers to remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardizing their employment, these regulations were not always

followed. Workers are able to complain to the State Labor Inspectorate when they believe their rights are violated.

The State Labor Inspectorate is responsible for enforcing minimum wage regulations, restrictions on hours of work, and occupational health and safety standards. These standards were not always enforced in the informal economy. Penalties for violations are monetary and vary widely, depending on the severity and frequency of the violation, but they were generally sufficient to deter violations. The inspectorate had adequate resources to inspect and remediate labor standards problems and effectively enforced labor laws.

Through September the State Labor Inspectorate reported 39 workplace fatalities. The majority of these were classified as due to natural causes. The inspectorate also reported 122 serious workplace injuries. The State Labor Inspectorate commented that most of the injuries were actually minor injuries, such as a broken finger. Workplace injuries and fatalities were primarily in the construction, wood-processing, and lumber industries.

Real wage estimates were difficult to calculate in the sizeable informal economy, which according to some estimates accounted for approximately 24 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.