



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Latvia social briefing:**

### **State of Emergency and its Impact on Social Life in Latvia**

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# **State of Emergency and its Impact on Social Life in Latvia**

## **Introduction**

Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 and the increasing risk of overloading the healthcare system in Latvia, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November the Parliament approved the Decision on declaring a state of emergency.<sup>1</sup> According to the Decision, the state of emergency in Latvia will be in force until 6 December. The population will have access to those face-to-face services that are especially important for a healthy and safe life and are urgent. With an understanding of the impact of emergency measures on the economy and society as a whole, work is simultaneously underway to develop mechanisms to support employers, employees and those groups of the population most affected by measures to limit the spread of the virus. In this briefing the impact of the state of emergency on social life of the Latvian population is observed, and the following topics are analyzed:

- Restrictive measures provided by the Decision of the state of emergency;
- Activities, which are still allowed for residents of Latvia;
- Legitimization of remote education;
- State support for businesses, which were affected the most by the state of emergency situation;
- Lāčplēsis Day<sup>2</sup> commemoration in accordance with the restrictive measures.

## **Restrictive measures**

For the duration of the state of emergency, a number of restrictive measures have been introduced, including the postponement and prohibition of all on-site public events. If meetings, demonstrations, and outdoor pickets are held with up to 50 participants, the prohibition does not apply, however, all recommendations to prevent the spread of the virus must be respected.

Private gatherings of not more than 10 people from not more than two households at a time are allowed. A funeral can be attended by not more than 10 people, but from more than two households at the same time.

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<sup>1</sup> Latvijas Republikas Saeima. Saeima approves government decision on declaring state of emergency due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 (10.11.2020.). Available on: <https://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/29302-saeima-approves-government-decision-on-declaring-state-of-emergency-due-to-the-rapid-spread-of-covid-19>

<sup>2</sup> Latvian: Lāčplēša diena

The prohibition applies to bars, nightclubs, discos, water parks, SPAs, bathhouses, skating rinks, casinos, places for children's parties, entertainment centers and other places. However, catering establishments can only provide takeaway food. In addition, beauty treatment (except hairdressing services), piercing and tattooing services, and commercial services related to entertainment and well-being are prohibited.

Besides, on weekends and holidays, only the following types of stores can operate in all shopping centers: grocery stores, pharmacies, including veterinary pharmacies, optics stores, pet stores, bookstores, newsagents, hygiene and household goods stores, telecommunications sites, as well as points for receiving goods purchased online.

### **Allowed activities during the state of emergency**

The good news is that according to the Decision, cultural sites, exhibition sites, sports sites, sites where religious activities are performed should be open after 6:00 and close by 20:00, except for sports centers which may be open until 22:00. Therefore, measures taken are serious but there is no lockdown in Latvia.

There are public nature trails for individual recreation; museums, exhibitions, libraries, and other cultural sites will remain open; however, there will be no events held during the state of emergency.

### **Legitimization of remote education**

COVID-19 has made significant changes in the educational procedures around the world and Latvia is not an exception. According to the Decision on declaring the state of emergency, educational institutions should ensure remote education. Only pre-school educational programs and general education programs from grade 1 to 6 will be held on-site. In addition, practical work of higher education programs and practical work of vocational education programs, which requires to obtain professional qualifications on-site can be held face-to-face.

The important step was made to legitimize the remote education. On November 12, the Parliament supported the amendments to the Education Law as urgent, according to which in the future the procedure for organizing and conducting distance learning will be determined by the Cabinet of Ministers. The government have to issue the regulations on the organization and conducting distance learning by 30 January 2021.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Latvijas Republikas Saeima. Attālināto mācību organizēšanas un īstenošanas kārtību noteiks Ministru kabinets, lemj Saeima (12.11.2020). Available on: <https://www.saeima.lv/lv/aktualitates/saeimas-zinas/29308-attalinato-macibu-organizesanas-un-istenosanas-kartibu-noteiks-ministru-kabinets-lemj-saeima>

There is a significant necessity in the law amendments because the risk of Covid-19 infection is still high. Therefore, educational institutions have to ensure distance learning on a daily basis in order to provide access to education for learners and implement the educational programs.

The amendments to the law define the term “distance learning”, indicating that it is part of the full-time learning process in which students study, including using information and communication technologies, without being physically in the same room or study place with the teacher. In addition, the law clarifies the concepts of "forms of full-time education" and "teaching aids".

The school board will have the right to decide which individualized teaching materials should be provided to the student's parents. The law also sets out the conditions under which teaching aids are provided from the state budget and earmarked grants from the state budget and the condition according to which local government may finance the purchase or subscription of e-resources, interactive learning platforms, teaching and communication software or subscription fees for educational institutions subordinate to him.

### **State support for businesses**

COVID-19 and especially state of emergency time is difficult for businesses in Latvia. Therefore, Latvian government is ready to support those who have been affected the most by the state of emergency. There are three following opportunities provided by the state<sup>4</sup>:

1. Downtime allowance is paid to the merchant in the amount of 70% of the declared average salary for the last three months (August, September, October). The subsidy shall be paid to the employee - employed, self-employed and patent payer. The minimum subsidy will be EUR 330, this amount is determined based on the minimum wage in Latvia<sup>5</sup>; for each dependent another EUR 50 is planned to be paid; the maximum subsidy amount is EUR 1000 (net). The assistance paid to employees should not exceed 80% of the gross salary.
2. An employee's salary allowance will be provided in the amount of 50% of the declared average monthly gross salary for the period from August 1 to October 31, 2020, but not more than EUR 500 per month per employee. Besides, the employer

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<sup>4</sup> Informative page about the spread of Covid-19 in Latvia. Frequently asked questions and answers. Available on: <https://covid19.gov.lv/en/covid-19-frequently-asked-questions-and-answers>.

<sup>5</sup> The minimum monthly wage in Latvia within normal working hours, starting from 1 January 2020, is 430 euros. Available on: <https://www.lm.gov.lv/lv/minimala-darba-alga>

must pay the employee the difference between the amount of the allowance received and the salary, thereby ensuring that the employee receives 100% compensation.

3. For entrepreneurs 30% of the total gross salary of the company will be available as a current asset's subsidy, if salary taxes were paid from August to October 2020. The maximum amount for the support period is EUR 50,000 and the maximum amount for the related group of people is EUR 800,000.

### **Lāčplēsis Day commemoration in the state of emergency conditions**

State of emergency influenced an important event for Latvian citizens – Lāčplēsis Day on November 11. On this day, soldiers and national defenders killed in the Freedom Fights and other military conflicts are commemorated. The celebration of Lāčplēsis Day was established shortly after November 11, 1919, the date on which the Latvian Armed Forces won the largest and better-armed West Russian Volunteer Army, the so-called Bermont troops.

Across Latvia, in order to reduce the spread of Covid-19, municipalities have abolished many traditional memorial events, torchlight processions, instead calling on residents to individually mention freedom fighters and put out candles. The police, public officials, and municipalities have previously called on citizens to celebrate the holiday responsibly, in compliance with all epidemiological safety requirements, thus protecting their own health and health of others.

There were two privately announced torchlight marches in the town of Ogre. It is important to mention that marches were carried out in compliance with epidemiological safety requirements, and the number of people in them did not significantly exceed the promised - 30-50 people per march, according to data from national information agency LETA.<sup>6</sup>

### **Summary**

As it is observed that the state of emergency significantly influences social life of Latvian population. However, restrictive measures in Latvia prohibit less in comparison with most of European countries. Residents of Latvia treat all restrictions consciously and with respect, taking care of their health and the health of others.

Hopefully, the result of the restrictive measures will be seen in the nearest future. Meanwhile, people have access to all health and safety provision goods and services but

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<sup>6</sup> LETA nacionālā informācijas aģentūra. Šogad Lāčplēša dienā tautas varoņus piemin bez liekas drūzmēšanās. Available on: <https://www.leta.lv/home/important/B00C9C09-ED37-46C3-88AF-EBBEB5B9D6F3/>

restricted in the unnecessary face-to-face contacts with others. The most significant impact is on the entertaining sector of Latvia as nowadays people tend to spend their spare time outside of their homes but due to restriction provided by the government it is forbidden until 6 December.

COVID-19 has a significant impact on the educational system around the world. Every educational institution in Latvia has to ensure distance learning for the students. Such a rapid development of technologies in the educational environment can be widely used after the state of emergency and COVID-19. For example, it is possible to organize remote study programs for foreign students or conduct classes even if the teacher cannot attend them physically.