



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Latvia social briefing:**

## **Analysis of Criminal Activity in Latvia Reveals Negligence of Law Enforcement**

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# **Analysis of Criminal Activity in Latvia Reveals Negligence of Law Enforcement**

## **Summary**

*The crime situation in Latvia has become a matter of growing concern. Notably, there has been a troubling increase in sexual offenses and hate crimes in Latvia, indicating an urgent need for comprehensive action. This briefing explores the crime tendencies observed in Latvia during 2022, with a particular focus on the rise in sexual offenses and hate crimes. These issues have a significant impact on vulnerable groups, especially the youth, who are at risk of engaging in criminal activities. The importance of providing support for hate crime victims and implementing administrative accountability for hate speech is emphasised. By closely examining the crime landscape and implementing proactive measures, Latvia can work towards safeguarding its citizens and building a stronger, more secure future for the nation. Additionally, addressing the issues faced by at-risk youth, such as providing creative centers like "Open," can be a step towards diverting them from criminal activities and fostering a safer society.*

## **Introduction**

Crime is a growing concern in Latvia, and it is essential to understand and address the trends in criminal activities. As society changes and faces new challenges, it is crucial to analyze crime patterns and come up with effective strategies for prevention and law enforcement. The recent increase in sexual offenses and hate crimes in Latvia is particularly alarming. To create a safer and more inclusive society, it's crucial to understand the root causes and dynamics behind these trends. In this Social briefing, crime tendencies observed in Latvia during 2022 will be analysed, focusing on the rise in sexual offenses and hate crimes, as well as their impact on vulnerable groups like youth, providing recommendations to address these challenges effectively.

## **Overview of Crime Tendencies in 2022**

The past year has presented numerous challenges for the Latvian State Police. The annual Latvian State Police report highlights an increase in thefts and hate crimes, but also indicates a decrease in overall registered incidents when compared to 2021 and 2020. The report further

explores various crime categories, including homicides, sexual offenses, and drug-related offenses.

Instances of sexual offenses have shown a significant increase, with 116 reported cases of rape. This represents the highest number of sexual violence incidents in the past five years. It is important to mention that the majority of victims were females. Additionally, in 86% of cases, the perpetrators were adults with prior records of committing such offenses, often known to the victims, such as fathers, relatives, or friends.

The year 2022, marked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, saw an increase in hate crimes in Latvia. The police registered eight criminal cases related to inciting social hatred and intolerance, along with 13 cases involving national, ethnic, and racial animosity. These incidents were primarily driven by provocative messages on building facades, comments on the internet, and disseminated videos, often linked to the events surrounding the war in Ukraine. Police Chief Mr. Ruks emphasized that the police prioritized countering these manifestations of hatred and sought to enhance their capacity to address such issues.

The report debunked the prevailing myth that Ukrainian civilians in Latvia are intentionally targeted. Instead, it highlighted that only 111 Ukrainian citizens were involved in criminal proceedings in 2022, with 75 of them being victims. Most of these cases involved property crimes, such as property damage and thefts from vehicles, with no evidence of targeted attacks based on nationality.

Despite the complexity of the past year, the Latvian State Police has made progress in various areas of crime prevention and law enforcement. However, challenges persist, particularly in addressing hate crimes and sexual offenses.

### **Hate Crimes**

In Latvia, there is a pressing need to establish administrative accountability for hate speech, as emphasized by Kristīne Dupate, an associate professor at the University of Latvia's Faculty of Law. She presented research on hate crimes and hate speech, which revealed that hate crimes are poorly recognized and not given priority as significant social and political issues in the country. Unlike other European nations where hate speech is condemned, Latvia still tolerates violence, normalizing what would be considered hate speech or hate crimes elsewhere. This societal perception acts as a barrier to identifying and addressing hate crimes effectively.

The research also uncovered a lack of understanding about the root causes of hate crimes in national policy formulation and implementation. Hate crimes are seen as isolated incidents rather than criminal acts arising from deep-rooted societal prejudices. Ms. Dupate warned that if hate crimes are not addressed early on, they could pose a threat to public order, national security, and even lead to terrorism.

Hate crime victims often require additional support due to the significant harm inflicted on their social and personal identity. However, the existing support mechanism in Latvia is deemed insufficient to address these issues adequately. From a legal perspective, the research found that protection against hate crimes and hate speech is primarily addressed within criminal law, leaving administrative and civil law accountability for hate speech fragmented.

The research highlighted some concerning practices in hate speech cases, with most being resolved through plea agreements, where the accused admit guilt, leading to limited analysis of qualifying criteria for hate speech. This narrow boundary between freedom of speech and hate speech could potentially violate individuals' freedom of expression and result in cases being brought before the European Court of Human Rights.

To address these issues, experts recommended consolidating relevant articles in the Criminal Law concerning hate speech and hate crimes. Additionally, they suggested considering administrative accountability for hate speech outside the criminal law framework and strengthening the legal doctrine on hate crimes and hate speech. Training professionals and the public on the subject is crucial, and policymakers need to allocate adequate resources to combat hate crimes effectively.

Recently, Latvia has taken steps to address hate speech and hate crimes. Collaboration between the University of Latvia's Faculty of Law, the Society Integration Foundation (SIF), the Court Administration, the prosecutor's office, and the State Police resulted in training 64 judges, prosecutors, State Police, and SIF employees. This training aimed to enhance their expertise in identifying and investigating hate speech and hate crimes and applying relevant legal norms. The evaluation of the current legal framework was also part of this effort to combat hate crimes in the country.

### **Youth as the Risk Group**

Over an extended period of time, the proportion of juvenile delinquency has remained relatively stable, as assessed by the State Police, indicating that there is currently no observable trend in serious crime statistics. Among the groups at risk for committing or reoffending such

crimes are disadvantaged youth, some of whom are engaged with creative centers like "Open". Representatives of the project conclude that there is a growing demand for such facilities.

In 2022, children aged 14 to 17 committed 570 criminal offenses, which is 27 more crimes than in 2021. In comparison, five years ago, juveniles committed around 800 crimes. Most juvenile offenders engage in less serious crimes such as theft, fraud, intentional property damage, and vandalism, while more severe offenses like bodily harm and particularly serious crimes such as murder are less common.

According to analysis of the State Police Inspection, during the period when children were studying remotely, there were strict limitations in place, and the police conducted extensive monitoring. Notably, there was a decrease in offenses related to morality and sexual integrity, crimes against personal health, as well as hooliganism and the use, acquisition, storage, or production of intoxicants. However, there was an increase in property-related crimes. Theft and petty theft, in particular, often involved stealing items from commercial establishments. Sometimes, children stole food, while other times they took items they desired. In contrast, when children returned to in-person schooling, there was an observable shift in this statistic, with offenses against sexual integrity, personal health, and substance abuse and acquisition showing an increase.

Last year, juveniles committed a total of 49 particularly serious crimes. Any serious crime committed by juveniles is a cause for concern. There were two murders, one more than in 2021. Despite this, they cannot categorize it as a trend, as only 0.13% of all registered children in the country have been involved in criminal offenses. Furthermore, police data indicates that in some cases, children engage in repeat offenses, and these offenders come from both affluent families and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, including so-called street youths.

## **Conclusions**

In 2022, Latvia faced various challenges related to crime, as indicated in the annual Latvian State Police report. While there was a decrease in overall registered incidents compared to previous years, certain crime categories saw alarming trends. Sexual offenses reached a five-year peak, with a majority of victims being females, and the perpetrators often known to them, such as relatives or friends. Hate crimes also surged during the year, in part due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, leading to cases of inciting social hatred and intolerance, driven by provocative messages and videos linked to the conflict. Hate crimes need urgent attention, necessitating the establishment of administrative accountability for hate speech and a stronger

legal framework, while also focusing on supporting the victims. Additionally, youth, especially disadvantaged ones, emerged as a risk group, with a rise in crimes committed by juveniles, particularly property-related offenses. Hate crimes must be prioritized as significant social and political issues, providing comprehensive support for victims, monitoring and intervening early in juvenile delinquency, and educating society on the consequences of hate crimes. Moreover, efforts must be made to address the root causes of hate crimes and prevent repeat offenses among youth.

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