



# Weekly Briefing

**Latvia political briefing:**  
**Echoes of Freedom: Celebrating Latvia's Journey from 1918 to**  
**Today**  
**Institute of Economics at the Latvian Academy of Sciences**

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# Echoes of Freedom: Celebrating Latvia's Journey from 1918 to Today

## Summary

*As dawn breaks over Riga on November 18th, the air is filled with more than the chill of an autumn morning. It's filled with a sense of pride, memory, and celebration that touches every corner of Latvia. This is the day when Latvians, young and old, remember their journey to independence, a testament to their resilience and unyielding spirit of freedom.*

*On this day back in 1918, amidst the ruins of a world torn by war and the collapse of empires, the People's Council of Latvia, led by the visionary Kārlis Ulmanis<sup>1</sup>, stood in defiance of oppression and proclaimed the birth of a nation. The streets of Riga, once silent in anticipation, erupted in jubilation, marking the beginning of a journey that has shaped the heart and soul of this nation.*

*Through the years of occupation and the dark shadows of foreign rule, the flame of independence never flickered out in the hearts of the Latvian people. It was rekindled with fervor in 1990, as Latvia stood once again as a sovereign state. Today, this flame is carried through the streets in the annual torchlight processions, a moving tribute to the enduring courage and unity of the Latvian people.*

*As families gather and children wave their national flags, the story of Latvia's struggle for independence is retold, not as a distant historical event, but as a living legacy that continues to inspire. It's a day when every Latvian, whether at home or abroad, feels a profound connection to their heritage and a shared sense of destiny.*

## Introduction

Every year on November 18th, Latvia celebrates a milestone that is deeply etched in its national consciousness - the Proclamation Day of the Republic of Latvia. This date marks the

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<sup>1</sup> **Kārlis Ulmanis** was a Latvian politician who served as the Prime Minister and later as the authoritarian leader of Latvia during the interwar period until the Soviet occupation in 1940.

declaration of Latvian independence in 1918, an event that forged a new path for a nation at the crossroads of history. Situated between the powers of Germany and Russia, Latvia's journey towards self-determination is a compelling narrative of resilience and aspiration in the face of overwhelming odds.

The significance of this day extends beyond the historical proclamation made by the People's Council of Latvia<sup>2</sup>; it is a celebration of Latvian identity, culture, and the unbroken spirit of a people who have navigated through periods of foreign domination and oppression. In the annals of history, the Declaration of Independence stands as a testament to Latvia's unwavering quest for sovereignty, which was once again demonstrated when the country reclaimed its freedom from Soviet occupation in 1990.

This briefing seeks to explore the multifaceted dimensions of Latvia's Independence Day. It will delve into the historical events that culminated in the proclamation of independence, the sociopolitical context of the time, and the subsequent challenges faced during the Soviet era. Further, it will shed light on the modern-day celebrations that embody Latvia's enduring pride and its place in the global community. Through a blend of historical analysis and contemporary observation, this briefing aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Latvia's Independence Day, not only as a national holiday but as a symbol of the enduring human spirit and the pursuit of self-determination.

## **Historical Background:**

### **The First Latvian National Awakening (1850-1880)**

The First Latvian National Awakening (1850-1880) was a crucial period in Latvia's history, marking the beginning of its journey towards statehood. This cultural and national revival was spearheaded by the Young Latvians, a group of well-educated Latvians who stood against the dominance of Baltic Germans in the Livonia and Courland Governorates. Their efforts were centered around promoting the Latvian language, culture, and traditions, thereby fostering a strong national identity. Influenced by the broader European romantic nationalism movements, key figures such as Krišjānis Valdemārs and Juris Alunāns played pivotal roles. They led cultural gatherings and debates, which were instrumental in awakening a sense of

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<sup>2</sup> **The People's Council of Latvia** was the legislative body that declared the independence of Latvia from Russia on November 18, 1918, and functioned as the provisional government during the initial period of statehood.

Latvian nationalism and unity. This awakening laid the foundation for the eventual push towards an independent Latvian nation-state.

### **The impact of World War I**

World War I and the subsequent Russian Civil War dramatically affected the Baltic region, including Latvia. The collapse of the Russian Empire and the retreat of German forces created a power vacuum, allowing for the emergence of national movements. Latvia, under the provisional government supported by allies such as Estonia, Poland, and the United Kingdom, found itself in a complex conflict involving Soviet Russia, the Bolsheviks' Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic, and German and Baltic nobility interests. The Latvian War of Independence, fought from December 1918 to August 1920, was marked by several stages of conflict, including Soviet offensives, German-Latvian liberation efforts, and battles against the Bermontian forces.

### **Proclamation of Independence and the Role of the People's Council**

On November 18, 1918, a defining moment in Latvian history unfolded as the People's Council of Latvia, under the leadership of Kārlis Ulmanis, proclaimed the Independence of the Republic of Latvia. This proclamation was a direct challenge to the prevailing power structures, particularly to Soviet Russia. Within weeks, in December 1918, Soviet Russia responded with military aggression, invading the nascent state. This act of invasion marked the beginning of a tumultuous period for Latvia, which had to defend its newfound sovereignty against a formidable adversary.

Despite the odds, the Latvian forces, bolstered by the strong leadership of Ulmanis and supported by international allies, engaged in a determined struggle to maintain their independence. This period was not just a military conflict; it was a fight for national identity, sovereignty, and the right to self-determination. The resolve of the Latvian people during this time was remarkable, showcasing a deep commitment to the ideals of freedom and national unity.

The actions of the People's Council, and particularly of Kārlis Ulmanis, were pivotal in setting the course for Latvia's future. Their courage in the face of overwhelming opposition laid the foundations for a sovereign Latvian state.

## **Challenges and Triumphs in the War of Independence**

During the Latvian War of Independence, Latvia faced numerous challenges. A significant one was a coup in April 1919, organized by the Baltic nobility, which resulted in a puppet government. Despite this, the Latvian forces and their allies persevered. They bravely fought back and regained control of Riga from the Bolsheviks in May 1919. They also engaged in crucial battles, including the significant battle to capture Cēsis. The support from the Allies, particularly the United Kingdom, played a vital role in reinstating the rightful government under Kārlis Ulmanis and incorporating the Baltic German Landeswehr<sup>3</sup> into the Latvian National Army.

## **Conclusion of the War and Peace Treaty**

The conflict ended with the Latvian-Soviet Riga Peace Treaty signed on August 11, 1920. This treaty officially concluded the war, allowing Latvia to emerge as an independent country. Throughout the war, the resilience and unity of the Latvian forces, alongside their Estonian, Lithuanian, and international allies, were instrumental in securing Latvia's independence. This period is remembered for the determined spirit and cooperation of these forces in their journey towards freedom.

## **Occupation and Re-independence**

The Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940, a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was a pivotal event that altered the course of Latvian history. The pact, a secret agreement between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, led to the division of Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, with Latvia falling under Soviet control. This occupation was later deemed illegal by the European Court of Human Rights, the European Union, and other international entities, and even condemned by the USSR<sup>4</sup> itself in 1989.

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<sup>3</sup> **The Baltic German Landeswehr** was a military force formed by the Baltic German nobility in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire, playing a significant role in the fight against Latvian and Estonian independence during the Russian Civil War and the Latvian War of Independence.

<sup>4</sup> **The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)** was a socialist state that existed from 1922 to 1991, comprising 15 republics including Russia, and was the world's first constitutionally socialist state with a single-party system led by the Communist Party.

Latvia's journey towards independence began after World War I, with its declaration of independence on November 18, 1918, following the October Revolution of 1917. After a prolonged War of Independence against Soviet Russia, a peace treaty was signed in 1920, where Soviet Russia recognized Latvia's independence. Latvia's independence was also recognized by the Allied Supreme Council and other states, leading to its admission to the League of Nations in 1921. Latvia also signed a Non-Aggression Treaty with the Soviet Union in 1932, based on the 1920 treaty.

Before World War II, Latvia and the USSR had ratified treaties such as the Kellogg–Briand Pact and a Non-aggression treaty. However, during talks in Moscow in 1939, Soviet leader Stalin hinted at a potential Soviet occupation of Latvia. The Baltic states, including Latvia, took this threat seriously and eventually signed agreements with the Soviet Union. Latvia's agreement was signed by Foreign Minister Vilhelms Munters and Soviet Commissar Vyacheslav Molotov in October 1939.

The actual military occupation began in 1940. On June 12, 1940, the Soviet Baltic Fleet was ordered to blockade Estonia, and soon after, on June 15, Soviet troops invaded Lithuania and positioned themselves to invade Latvia. The invasion of Latvia occurred on June 16, 1940, with Soviet troops delivering ultimatums to establish pro-Soviet governments and demanding the free passage of Soviet troops into Estonia and Latvia. Latvia, unable to resist on its own, capitulated under the threat of bombings and overwhelming military force. The next day, Soviet troops occupied key strategic locations across Latvia.

The Soviet occupation led to significant changes in Latvia's political and social landscape. The occupation suppressed Latvia's independence and sovereignty, altering the course of its history until the nation began its journey toward re-establishing independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The restoration of Latvia's independence in the late 20th century was a multifaceted process marked by both political maneuvers and popular movements. In July 1989, a significant step was taken when the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR adopted a "Declaration of Sovereignty." This declaration asserted the supremacy of Latvian laws over those of the USSR, laying a foundation for re-establishing independence. The subsequent democratic elections in 1990 saw the Latvian Popular Front, a pro-independence political organization, gaining a majority in the Supreme Council. This shifted the political landscape considerably towards independence.

On May 4, 1990, the Supreme Council declared its intention to restore full Latvian independence, initiating a transitional period towards complete sovereignty. This act represented a bold assertion of national self-determination in the face of ongoing Soviet control.

However, the path to independence was fraught with challenges. In January 1991, Soviet political and military forces attempted to overthrow the legitimate Latvian authorities, an effort that ultimately failed. The failed Soviet coup attempt in August 1991 further expedited Latvia's journey to independence. Following these tumultuous events, Latvia declared de facto independence on August 21, 1991. Subsequently, Latvia received international recognition, including acknowledgment from the USSR and the United States, which had never recognized Latvia's annexation by the USSR. The U.S. resumed full diplomatic relations and recognized Latvia's independence in September 1991.

In recent years, Latvia has commemorated its struggle and celebrated its regained independence through initiatives like the "White Tablecloth Day." Launched in 2016 as part of the Latvian Centennial celebration, this initiative emphasizes community and national unity. It serves as a reminder of the relentless action, courage, and audacity of individuals who contributed to the restoration of Latvian independence.

## **Modern Celebrations and Traditions**

**1. Torchlight Processions:** Torchlight processions are a significant feature of Independence Day celebrations in Latvia, held since the 1920s. The largest procession, organized by the National Alliance, occurs in Riga, attracting thousands of participants annually. The procession traditionally begins at the monument of Kārlis Ulmanis and concludes at the Freedom Monument. This event is a powerful symbol of national unity and remembrance.

**2. Military Parades:** The Latvian National Armed Forces parade, reintroduced in 1998, is another key tradition. The parade, held at the 11 November Embankment in Riga, showcases the strength and discipline of the armed forces. It includes various military units, heavy weapons, and equipment, and sometimes features naval ships anchored in the Daugava. The inclusion of all five National Guard brigades and the participation of NATO allied countries since 2004 highlight Latvia's military alliances and the importance of defense in national identity.

3. **Cultural Significance:** These celebrations play a crucial role in contemporary Latvian society. They serve not only as a reminder of Latvia's struggle for independence but also as a celebration of its achievements as a sovereign nation. The observances foster a sense of national pride and unity, bringing together people from various backgrounds to honor their country's history and its heroes.

4. **Regional Celebrations:** Beyond Riga, cities like Daugavpils, Liepāja, and Ventspils host their unique festivities. These range from religious services, artisan markets, and concerts to laser shows, fireworks, and athletic events. These regional celebrations highlight the diverse ways in which Latvians honor their independence and cultural identity.

### **Cultural and Economic Renaissance Post-Independence**

- **Linguistic and Cultural Assertion:** After gaining political independence in 1990, Latvia faced the challenge of asserting its cultural identity, especially with a substantial Russian population. The Latvian government declared Latvian as the sole official language to prevent the marginalization of their native tongue. This measure was crucial for preserving the Latvian language and culture. However, it led to a divide, as the Russian-speaking population felt excluded from the new national narrative, clinging to their Soviet heritage.

- **Economic Shift and Societal Modernization:** In parallel with cultural changes, Latvia also underwent significant economic transformation. The shift away from reliance on Soviet-era industries, which were not tailored to local needs, led to an economic crisis in the 1990s. However, the country successfully transitioned to a market economy, attracting foreign investments and modernizing its infrastructure. By the early 2000s, Latvia had established itself as a modern European society, with new malls and office buildings replacing old Soviet structures, reflecting a significant shift in its cultural and economic landscape.

### **Latvia's Role in the International Community**

- **Restoration of Independence and International Integration:** After the restoration of full independence in August 1991, Latvia became a member of the United Nations in September 1991. The nation actively sought integration with Western organizations, joining NATO and the European Union, and became a signatory to numerous international agreements and organizations, such as the OECD, UNESCO,



and the International Criminal Court. Latvia's commitment to further cooperation and integration on the global stage exemplifies its aspiration for a robust international presence.

- **Strategic Alliances and Security Cooperation:** Latvia's strategic partnership with the United States, based on mutual commitments to democracy, freedom, and the rule of law, has been pivotal. The two nations have collaborated in rebuilding Latvia's institutions post-independence to ensure liberty and sovereignty. Latvia's NATO membership reinforces this alliance, contributing to collective security and hosting critical NATO infrastructures. The U.S. has provided substantial security assistance to Latvia, emphasizing their enduring military relationship.

- **Economic Relations and Energy Cooperation:** The economic relationship between the European Union and Latvia is dynamic, with treaties on investment, trade, and intellectual property protection. Latvia participates in the Three Seas Initiative<sup>5</sup>, focusing on energy security and clean energy deployment through the Partnership for Transatlantic Energy Cooperation. These relations signify Latvia's active role in shaping regional economic policies and practices.

- **Global Health and Pandemic Response:** Latvia and the European Union share concerns about global health challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Their collaborative efforts to combat the pandemic, restore global travel and trade, and strengthen global health security highlight Latvia's role in addressing international health crises.

- **Promoting Democracy and Human Rights:** Latvia works closely with the United States and other allies to promote democracy and human rights, both regionally and globally. This includes confronting challenges posed by transnational crime, corruption, and authoritarian regimes.

- **Cybersecurity and Technology Collaboration:** In the realm of technology and cybersecurity, Latvia has engaged in significant partnerships, including the joint declaration with the United States on 5G security. Regular consultations on cyber policy and critical infrastructure protection through international forums demonstrate Latvia's active involvement in addressing emerging global cyber threats.

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<sup>5</sup> **The Three Seas Initiative** is a regional cooperation platform in Central and Eastern Europe involving 12 EU member states aimed at enhancing infrastructure, energy, and economic connectivity in the region

- **Integration and Membership in International Organizations:**

Following its independence in 1991, Latvia has actively pursued integration with global and European institutions. It became a member of the United Nations and joined major international organizations, including NATO and the European Union. Latvia's involvement in these organizations demonstrates its commitment to international cooperation, security, and integration with Western entities.

- **Economic and Diplomatic Expansion:**

The allocation of significant resources to foreign policy and the operation of diplomatic missions highlights Latvia's commitment to maintaining a strong presence in the global arena. In addition to opening new embassies, such as in Australia in 2021, Latvia has focused on development cooperation, particularly with its priority regions in the EU Eastern Partnership and Central Asia. This approach aims to enhance Latvia's economic relationships and strengthen its role in global diplomacy.

- **Security and Defense Policy:**

Latvia's foreign policy has been significantly shaped by its security concerns, particularly regarding relations with Russia and challenges on the eastern border of the European Union and NATO. Latvia has actively participated in NATO meetings and discussions, emphasizing its role in addressing regional security issues. This involvement underlines Latvia's commitment to collective security and the stabilization of the region.

- **Active Participation in Regional and Global Challenges:**

Latvia has been involved in addressing various global challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate policy, and the Belarusian crisis. Its efforts in opposing the hybrid attack on the EU and NATO's eastern border, alongside Poland and Lithuania, and its focus on climate policy and digital transformation within the EU context, showcase Latvia's active participation in addressing contemporary international issues.

## Conclusion

In the heart of Latvia, as the Independence Day torches light up the streets and the rhythm of military parades resounds, one can feel the pulse of a nation reborn. It's a celebration not just of a date in history, but of the Latvian spirit—resilient, proud, and hopeful. From the struggles against past oppressions to the triumphs of cultural and economic renewal, Latvia's journey mirrors the undying human quest for freedom and identity. This day is more than a national holiday; it's a vivid reminder of Latvia's journey, a narrative of courage and unity, inspiring a future where hope shines as brightly as the flames in the hands of its people.

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