

Summary: Immigration in Latvia

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Latvia becomes more and more attractive to foreign citizens – both from the European Union and other countries – who choose to settle here on a temporary or permanent basis. Moreover, the increase is observed in almost all groups of immigrants – either foreigners who are related to Latvia through their families, studies, employment, investments or shelter. Immigrants come to Latvia, although Latvia has not yet defined a clear immigration policy and the concept of immigration policy is being drafted only now.¹

Development tendencies of the Ministry of Economics show that by 2030 the national economy could be twice as big as it is now, with the economy growing on average at a rate of 3-4% annually.² However, economic growth can be delayed by the lack of workforce due to the negative demographic trends – low birth rate and emigration, as the result of which the population size in 2030 could decrease by 6-10% (or 120-200 thousand people) in comparison with 2011. Moreover, the aging of the population would decrease the number of people in the working-age. Therefore, the labour market of Latvia could have approximately 200 thousand job vacancies until 2030 – part of them could be filled by local job seekers, whereas the other part could require attracting workforce from foreign countries implementing a selective labour immigration policy.³

As many other countries in the European Union and other parts of the world, Latvia hopes to attract highly skilled immigrants.⁴ However, comparing legislation and policy of 31 countries, Latvia shows the worst results regarding favourable environment for immigrants and their children.⁵ Therefore, in addition to the global competition for human resources (workforce and skills), the main challenges for Latvia in this respect are to find a balance between the duties and rights of

Voluntary immigrants choose moving to another country to improve their and their families' future perspectives. These can be people who find job abroad, possibilities to study or invest, as well as people who already have member of their family living in this country; it means that they immigrate for their families to live together. The reason why a person has moved to another country can change, for instance, a student can find a permanent job after graduation and become a labour migrant, or if he/she establishes a family in this country he/she may receive a permit to stay and live in there due to that reason. Also the person's plans may change – short-term immigration plans may lead to long-term solutions. People known as third country nationals – nationals of those countries outside of the European Union (EU) - are considered immigrants in the EU.

Involuntary immigrants are forced to emigrate from their countries to save their lives or keep their freedoms because their countries are facing internal conflicts, nature or other disasters, or they can be exposed to persecution for various reasons. The UN Convention 1951 states that a refugee is a person who lives outside his/her country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. A refugee has already acquired the protection status and a permission to reside in another country, whereas asylum seekers are people who strive to receive such status. Those who do not qualify for the status of a refugee or international protection after the assessment procedure may be sent back to their countries of origin.

immigrants, as well as create conditions for immigrants to have opportunities to learn Latvian. One of the considerations which may burden immigrants' daily life in Latvia is the rather negative public opinion on immigration.

The objective of this summary is to help knowledge-based decision making in the field of immigration policy by outlining global processes of immigration, immigration in Latvia and rights and opportunities of immigrants, thus also dispelling myths on immigration in Latvia.

Global context

Immigration is not a process to be evaluated unambiguously. On one hand, it can be evaluated as a positive phenomenon which helps solving demographic problems of the host country and contributes significantly to the development of its economic and cultural processes. On the other hand, immigrants are often perceived as a burden or even a threat to the host country by placing a social burden too heavy and competing with locals for jobs. Frequently, immigrants have to face problems related to discrimination – they are more exposed to unemployment risk, often work in jobs for which they are over-qualified, receive lower wages and suffer from the lack of qualitative health care. Moreover, part of people wishing to find better living conditions become victims of human trafficking or even risk their lives. According to the information from the International Organisation for Migration, at least 4500 people have died during the process of migration in 2013.⁶

Immigration trends continue to become more visible on the maps of Europe and the whole world making cross-border movement of people an essential factor in planning both national and international policy. According to the information of the United Nations Organisation (UN), approximately 232 million people or 3.2% of the total population of the world in 2013 lived in a country which was not their country of origin. Moreover, since 1990 the number of international migrants has increased by 50%. Only 15.7 million or 7% of the international migrants were refugees, which means that the majority were not forced but chose searching better life options and opportunities in another country.⁷

A big part of immigrants – approximately 136 million – live in the developed countries⁸, while 96 million immigrants live in the developing countries.⁹ European and Asian countries have become home countries for approximately two thirds of international migrants. In 2013, Europe hosted 72 million international migrants, whereas Asian countries – 71 million. The third place belongs to North American countries where 53 million immigrants lived in 2013. Moreover, the number of immigrants in North America has increased most rapidly since 1990 – approximately by 1.1 million immigrants annually. The United States of America hosted approximately one fifth (approximately 46 million) of all international immigrants in 2013. In total, half of all international immigrants lived only in 10 countries – the USA, which was already mentioned, and Russia, Germany, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Australia and Spain.¹⁰ Currently (2010 – 2013), the largest migration flows take place in what



Third country (not from the European Union) nationals in Latvia	How was it then? How is it now?	
	Number of temporary residence permits issued for the first time	
	2004 2 061	2013 6 609
Family reunion (a spouse, children or parents already live in Latvia, including if one of the parents has Latvian citizenship)	747	679
Employees (with monthly salary no lower than the average gross salary in the previous year: at the moment - 716 EUR)	480	762
Qualified workforce (a person with the higher education and work in the occupation corresponding to acquired education)	301	164
Investments 1. in real estate (at least 140 000 EUR in Riga and its surroundings or at least 71 000 EUR in any other place in Latvia) 2. in a company (at least 35 570 EUR investment in a company with at least 50 employees, paying at least 28 570 EUR taxes per year) 3. in a credit institution (not less than 285 888 EUR of investment in a subordinated capital)	0	3409
Studies	303	902
People with refugee or alternative status acquired due to reasonable threat of persecution for the person's race, religion, nationality or political affiliation in the person's home country	10	35

are known as migration corridors from Mexico to the USA, from Sudan to South Sudan, from the State of Palestine to Jordan, from Myanmar to Thailand, and from India to the United Arab Emirates.¹¹

The majority of people who are forced or choose to live in another country are in the working age (approximately 74% are between the ages of 20 and 64), while almost every tenth person is under the age of 20.¹² The largest communities living in other countries come from Asia and Latin America. For instance, in 2013, 19 million people from Asian countries lived in Europe and 16 million – in North America. The number of migrants of Latin American origin, in its turn, reached 26 million – mostly they live in North America, for instance, from 1990 to 2000 approximately 500 thousand Mexican nationals entered the USA each year.

Also the European Union (EU) countries are attractive destinations for several thousands of third country (non-EU) nationals. In 2004, there were 16.4 million third country nationals living in the EU, whereas in 2012 the number reached 21.2 million. The main countries of origin are Turkey, Morocco, Albania, China, Ukraine, Russia, India, Algeria, Ecuador and also the United States.¹³ Within the EU, the largest number of third country nationals live in Luxembourg (43.8% population), Cyprus (21%), and also Latvia (16.3%). However, the absolute majority of these persons in Latvia are Latvian non-citizens which are considered as third country nationals in accordance with the EU legal context - because they do not have the citizenship of the European Union or Latvia.

Data from 2006 – 2011 show that the Baltic Sea Region and Russia serve as a significant 'source of immigration' for Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.

Similarly to Latvia, also Estonia and Finland mostly host people from Ukraine and Russia.¹⁴

Although the last decades have seen a greater cooperation among the EU countries in this area, EU legislation does not provide for the immigration policy of the Member states – each country decides to whom and to how many people it grants the right to live in their country. Nevertheless, EU legislation stipulates common minimum standards regarding the entry requirements and rights for several groups of immigrants – students, researchers, seasonal workers and highly-skilled immigrants, as well as asylum seekers and refugees. For instance, EU legislation stipulates that only one spouse can benefit from the right to family reunification and receive residence permit (polygamy is not recognised). The status of a long-term resident of the EU – after 5 years of residence in the country and fulfilling the requirements¹⁵ – grants the immigrant the same rights as the local population has regarding employment, education and social rights.

Temporary residence permits are issued for a limited period of time (maximum 5 years). They ensure limited rights and limited access to public services. After this period of 5 years, if the person has resided in Latvia on a permanent basis, he/she may apply for the permanent residence permit fulfilling particular requirements, for instance, proving his/her knowledge of the Latvian language and regular income.

Permanent residence permit is issued for unlimited period of time. After living at least 5 years in Latvia with this residence permit, a person may apply for Latvian citizenship passing the naturalisation tests.

In order to raise benefits from immigration processes both for the societies hosting immigrants and for immigrants themselves, the EU pays a lot of attention to immigrant integration. The EU supports Member states, for instance, to help immigrants acquire local language skills and enhance the cooperation among local inhabitants and newcomers. From 2008 till 2015, approximately 13 million EUR were available for immigrant integration activities in Latvia. It is planned that a similar amount of funding will be available also for the next 7 years (25% out of the funding is co-funded from the Latvian state budget).

Immigration in Latvia: present

Latvia also becomes an increasingly attractive target country for immigrants – since 2004 the number of requests for residence permits has increased three times, almost in every group of immigrants. There is an increase in number of the nationals from the European Union and other countries who live in Latvia both with temporary and permanent residence permits. In 2014, there are 23 857 foreigners with temporary residence permits living in Latvia, whereas 48 724 people have permanent residence permits.¹⁶

The reasons why the nationals other countries choose to live in Latvia have changed over the last decade:

- Some years ago (in the pre-crisis period) the majority of residence permits were issued due to **family** reunification – people had spouses, parents or other relatives already living in Latvia (Latvian citizens and non-citizens, as well as citizens of other countries with valid residence permits).
- From 2008 to 2010 the most popular reason for immigration was **employment** (40-45% of all the issued residence permits). Most often immigrants are employed in industry, transport and logistics, as well as trade. Before the crisis many people also worked in the construction sector (36% of work permits in 2007 were issued in this sector, while in 2010 this rate was only 3%).
- Last year and now residence permits are mostly required regarding **investments** in Latvia. Since July 2010 investments in real estate, share capital or credit institution have served as the reason for issuing approximately 7000 permits.¹⁷ This opportunity is mainly used by citizens of Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.



It is likely that this possibility will soon be used by a smaller number of immigrants because the minimum value of real estate which allows requiring temporary residence permits will be doubled from September 2014 onwards: instead of 71 000 – 140 000 EUR currently, the value of a property will have to be at least 250 000 EUR in any place in Latvia. Moreover, requiring the permit for the first time, the person will have to pay 5% of the real estate value to the national budget.¹⁸

Comparing to 2004, the number of third country nationals who come to Latvia for **studies** have tripled. In total, 4475 foreign students study in Latvia in the academic year 2013/2014 which is approximately 5.5% of the total number of students. Among the non-EU countries, the largest number of students come from Russia (483 students), Ukraine (233), and Turkey (199).¹⁹

Also **asylum seekers** come to Latvia, although their number is rather small in comparison to the statistics of other countries. From 1998 till 2010, shelter was requested by 367 people, 29 of them received the status of a refugee whereas 45 people have received alternative status.²⁰

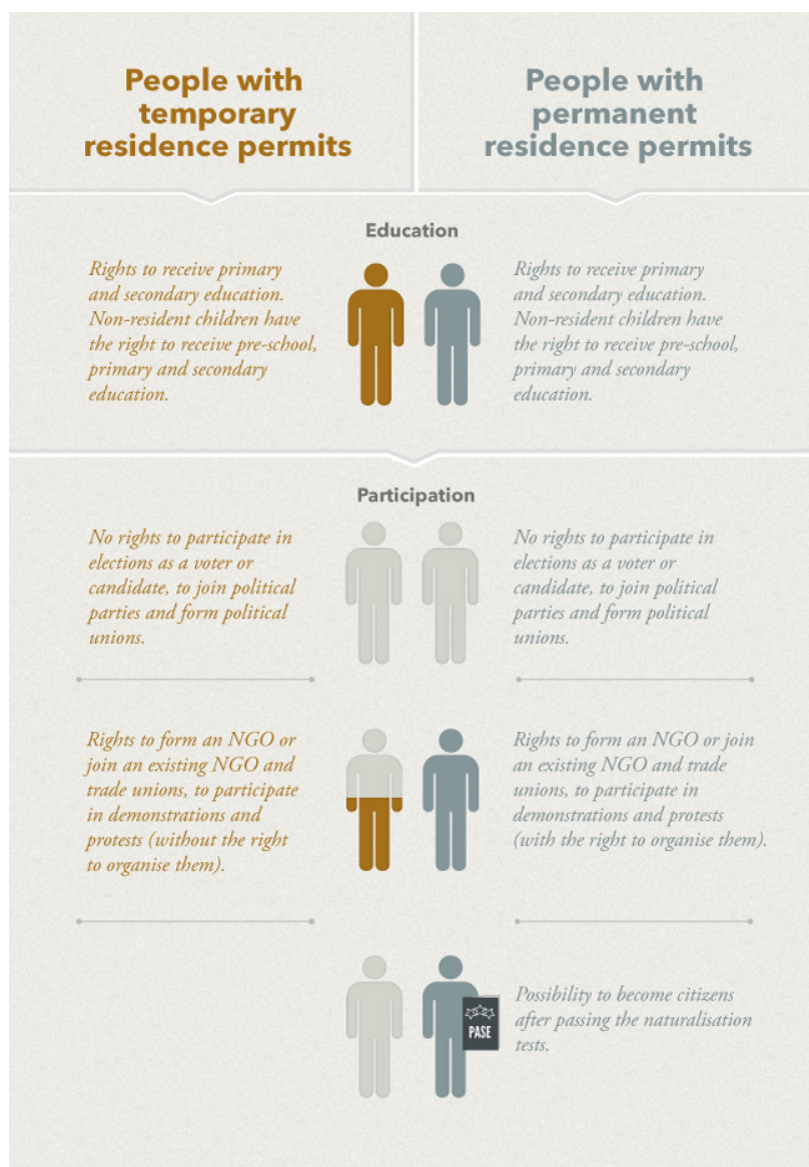
Duties, rights and opportunities for immigrants

In general, people with short-term or temporary residence permits have more

limited opportunities than those who have already acquired rights to live in Latvia for unlimited period of time. In some aspects, however, the differences are bigger than in others.

Unlimited **access to labour market** is granted for those immigrants who have come to Latvia due to family reunification, joining the spouse who is a citizen or non-citizen of Latvia or holds a permanent residence permit. Equally, any employer can employ highly-skilled migrants (for instance, scientists, sportsmen and artists), as well as foreign students (although they may not work more than 20 hours per week as their main

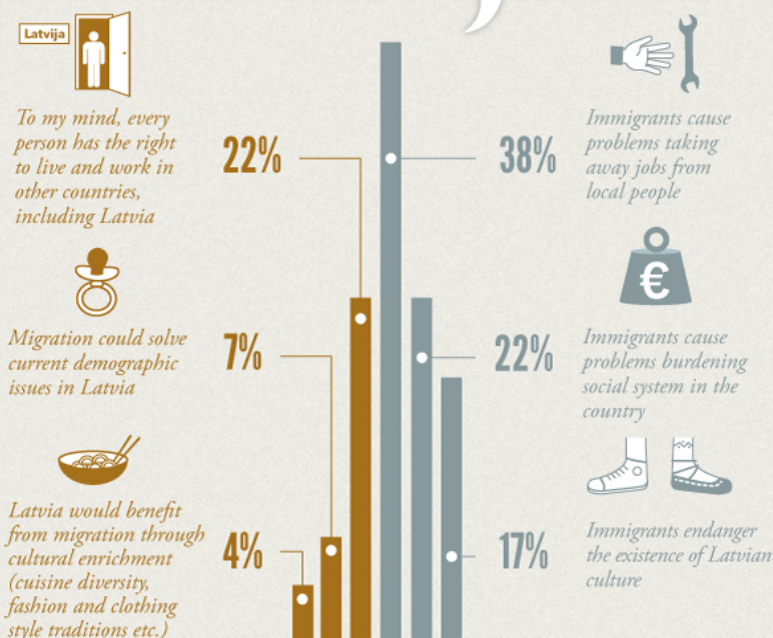
reason of residence in Latvia is studying). Those temporary residence permit holders who come to Latvia for employment reasons, in their turn, have limited access to labour market. They depend on the employer who invites the immigrant to work in Latvia. As his/her residence permit is attached to the particular employment agreement, the immigrant cannot change employers freely. In order to start a new job or even a new position at the same employer, a permission to employ a citizen from a foreign country has to be received. It is possible, if no Latvian citizen or non-citizen, as well as citizen of another EU country suitable for the job, applies for the vacancy within a month. Moreover, as the immigration policy is aimed at the protection of the local workforce, it is mandatory to grant a third country national a wage which is at least average gross wage in the previous year – at the moment it corresponds to 716 EUR a month (including taxes).²¹ As a result of these regulations, employers have no legal possibilities to attract workers from third countries in particular fields where the level of salaries is lower, for instance, in agriculture or fish processing. It is important to mention that possibilities to work in Latvia also depend on the knowledge of Latvian - because many professions require a particular level of command of Latvian stipulated by the legislation.



People with temporary residence permits do not have **rights to receive state-funded health care, legal and social assistance**, as well as unemployment benefit. If a third country national has come to Latvia on the basis of an employment agreement, the person has to pay taxes similarly to local inhabitants, however all expenses related to medical, legal and social assistance have to be covered by the immigrant himself/herself. Immigrants do not receive even state-funded emergency medical services therefore it is a mandatory requirement to have a health insurance card.²² Employees have the right to receive a number of benefits and allowances, for instance, illness benefit or compensation for work-related injury. Immigrants who have Latvian citizen or non-citizen spouses can also receive limited range of assistance, for instance, prenatal care and labour and delivery care. At the same time, people with permanent residence permits receive the same rights as Latvian non-citizens. Namely, they can receive health care services and unemployment benefit. Also the children of third country nationals are included in the system of social security and receive health care services similarly to Latvian citizens and non-citizens.

Public opinion

What is your attitude towards people from other countries who would like to live and work in Latvia?



Considering demographic problems and the expected lack of workforce, from which countries should we preferably attract immigrant workforce (%)?



In order to limit the number of people who need social assistance, the legislation of Latvia stipulates **minimum financial resources** needed for foreigners to acquire residence permit in Latvia. For labour migrants it is the already-mentioned amount of the minimum wage (at the moment – 716 EUR gross per month). If the immigrant is willing to engage in business, the amount has to be twice as big (at the moment – 1432 EUR a month). If the person comes to Latvia for family or study reasons, he/she will have to prove financial resources in the amount of at least the minimum wage (320 EUR).²³

Third country nationals who have valid residence permits in Latvia have the right to receive state **primary and secondary education** free of charge. Similarly to other children in Latvia, immigrant children have to attend preschool educational institutions from the age of 5 and they have to acquire primary education or continue schooling until 18 years of age. The third country national has to pay for the acquisition of higher education programme in accordance with the agreement concluded with the particular institution of higher education. It has to be noted that many immigrants find the possibility congenial to educate their children in minority or bilingual schools, for instance, in schools with Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian and Hebrew language of conduct in addition to the acquisition of the Latvian language.

Immigrants in Latvia have very poor **opportunities for participation** – they do not have right to vote or stand as candidates in elections (neither for national nor local governments) and they do not have rights to become members of political parties or form political unions. They can establish non-governmental

organisations (NGO) or join existing NGOs and trade unions, as well as participate in marches and protests, although not all of them have the right to organise such events. If the person resides in Latvia on permanent basis for at least 10 years, he/she may qualify for Latvian citizenship acquiring full opportunities for participation after passing naturalisation exams. However, for a part of third country nationals the choice to receive Latvian citizenship means resigning their own citizenship, because dual citizenship in Latvia is allowed only with a limited number of countries.²⁴

The publication is prepared within the project “Diverse Solutions for Public Education and Integration 2” which is implemented by the society “Shelter “Safe House”” together with PROVIDUS. The project is funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals. Sources of project funding – the Fund 75% and national budget resources 25%. This publication is prepared with the support of the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals. “The Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS” is responsible for the contents of this publication. Visuals by Māris Grīnvalds.



Information sources for the visualised data: the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, homepage DzivotLatvija.eu, (2011) public opinion survey „[DnB Nord Latvijas barometrs Nr.35](#)”; (2012) [Nacionālo ideju popularitāte sabiedrībā](#) [Popularity of national ideas in the society], Marketing and public opinion research centre SKDS research – survey for Latvian population, commissioned by the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists.

¹ The Action Plan of the current government foresees to develop the concept of Immigration policy until October, 2014 (Activity 124.1 of the Action Plan).

² (2013), [Informatīvais ziņojums par priekšlikumiem reemigrācijas atbalsta pasākumiem](#), [Report on recommendations for the support of return migration] Ministry of Economics.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Highly skilled immigrants in the USA receive resident permits – known also as ‘green cards’. Similar to these cards, the EU has created ‘blue cards’ or resident permits for highly skilled immigrants.

⁵ (2011), Migrant Integration Policy Index, Migration Policy Group, British Council.

⁶ International Organization for Migration (2013), [Migrants Deaths on World Borders](#).

⁷ According to [Un data](#), 175 million people were international migrants in 2000, and 154 million – in 1990.

⁸ The group of countries with a high level of economic development and life quality – the majority of countries in Europe, North America and East Asia.

⁹ According to the classification by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), these are all the countries which appear as recipients on the List of Aid Recipients, for instance, Afghanistan, Armenia, Georgia, Bangladesh, Haiti, Turkey, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Venezuela etc.

¹⁰ [UN data](#) about 2013.

¹¹ [International Migration Report](#) (2013), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Duszczek M., Matuszczyk K. (2014), [Migration in the 21st century from the perspective of CEE countries – an opportunity or a threat?](#), Central and Eastern Europe Development Institute, Warsaw, Poland.

¹⁴ 37.5% of residence permits issued in Estonia are received by Ukrainian citizens, 35% – by Russian citizens; in Finland – 12.7% and 26.7%, respectively. Source: Baltic Consulting (2013), [Expatriates in Latvia, Social networks and immigration related services for soft departure and soft landing](#).

¹⁵ In Latvia, the requirements are: passing the Latvian language test, regular income (at least minimal wage during the last year and taxes paid), as well as permanent residence in Latvia. More information is available on the website of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) [website](#).

¹⁶ OCMA [data](#).

¹⁷ OCMA [data](#).

¹⁸ [Amendments](#) to the Immigration Law which will come into force on September 1, 2014.

¹⁹ (2014) [Pārskats par Latvijas augstāko izglītību 2013.gadā](#) [Overview of higher education in Latvia in 2013], the Ministry of Education and Science.

²⁰ OCMA [data](#).

²¹ European Migration Network (2014), [Latvijas sociālās drošības sistēmas un veselības aprūpes pieejamība migrantiem \(politika un prakse\)](#) [Availability of social security system and health care for migrants (policy and practice)].

²² Exceptions are Ukrainian citizens and Russian citizens at retirement age.

²³ Cabinet of Ministers [regulation](#) on the minimum level of financial resources required for foreigners to obtain a residence permit.

²⁴ For the member states of the EU, European Free Trade Association, NATO, as well as citizens of Australia, Brazil and new Zealand, or in other cases with a special permit from the Cabinet of Ministers. Source: Amendments to the Citizenship Law, which came into force in October, 2013.