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The Politics of Latvia

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Introduction

Latvia, nestled on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, is a nation with a rich, complex history that has profoundly shaped its modern political landscape. Over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Latvia has experienced periods of independence, occupation, authoritarian rule, and the challenges of renewed sovereignty, all of which have left lasting marks on how politics is practiced and understood in the country today.

At the core of Latvia's political system is its Constitution—the Satversme—first adopted in 1922, which remains one of the oldest functioning constitutions in Europe. The Satversme outlines a democratic, parliamentary republic based on the separation of powers among legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Following decades of foreign domination and suppression of its independence, the restoration of the Satversme in 1991 symbolized not only Latvia's return to statehood but also its commitment to democratic governance and the rule of law. Yet, the country's post-Soviet journey has not been without obstacles, from navigating new political freedoms to confronting challenges such as corruption and political fragmentation.

Latvia's political system is defined by vibrant pluralism, the prevalence of coalition governments, and a proportional representation electoral framework that encourages multiple parties. The political spectrum encompasses a diverse array of ideologies, with historical memory and issues of identity—often centered on language and the relationship with Russia—playing crucial roles in political competition and coalition-building. Political parties and movements emerge, combine, and sometimes fade at a rapid pace, reflecting the evolving identities and priorities of Latvia's electorate.

Alongside formal institutions, Latvia's civic culture and civil society have grown stronger in the decades since independence. Citizens express their voices not only through periodic elections but also through referendums, activism, and engagement with non-governmental organizations. Despite periods of public disillusionment with politics and persistent challenges such as the influence of oligarchs or the complexities of minority integration, Latvia's democracy has shown resilience and an ongoing capacity for reform.

This book presents an accessible and comprehensive guide to Latvia's political system, tracing its historical roots, examining the workings of its major institutions, and exploring the forces and actors that shape political life. It situates Latvia's politics within both its national context and broader regional and international developments, such as membership in the European Union and NATO, as well as its role in responding to changing geopolitical realities.

Whether you are a student, researcher, policy professional, or simply an interested observer, "The Politics of Latvia: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Latvia" will provide the foundational knowledge and analytical context needed to understand Latvia's path, the complexities of its governance, and the dynamic nature of its democracy today.

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CHAPTER ONE: Latvia in Historical Perspective

To understand the political system of modern Latvia, one must first delve into the layers of history that have shaped its identity and institutions. The land that is now Latvia has a long and complex past, marked by the ebb and flow of various powers and the enduring presence of distinct Baltic and Finnic tribes. The story is not simply one of geography, but of the people who inhabited the forests and coasts, developing their unique cultures and languages over millennia.

Before the arrival of external forces, the territory was home to several Baltic tribes, including the Curonians, Semigallians, Selonians, and Latgalians, as well as the Finnic-speaking Livonians along the coastal areas. These tribes lived in distinct tribal realms, each with their own customs and rulers. They were farmers, fishermen, and traders, known particularly for their role in the ancient amber trade routes that connected the Baltic to the wider world. While they shared some linguistic and cultural similarities, they were largely autonomous, with loyalties tied to their specific tribal groups.

The late 12th and 13th centuries marked a significant turning point with the arrival of German traders, missionaries, and crusaders. This era, part of the Northern Crusades, saw the establishment of German influence and the introduction of Christianity to the region. A pivotal moment was the founding of Riga in 1201 by Bishop Albert. Riga quickly grew into a vital port city and later became a prominent member of the Hanseatic League, a powerful commercial confederation of merchant guilds and market towns in Northern Europe.

The German crusaders, notably the Livonian Brothers of the Sword (later incorporated into the Teutonic Knights as the Livonian Order), gradually subdued the local tribes. By the end of the 13th century, much of the territory of present-day Latvia and Estonia was consolidated under the control of the Livonian Order and various bishoprics, forming a loose entity known as the Livonian Confederation or Terra Mariana. This period established a feudal system where a German-speaking landowning class held sway over the local population, who largely became enserfed peasants. Despite this foreign domination, the languages, folklore, and traditions of the Baltic tribes and Livonians persisted, forming a resilient foundation for a future Latvian identity.

The Livonian Confederation, however, was not a unified state and was plagued by internal conflicts among its constituent parts, as well as external pressures from Литва and Russia. The 16th century brought further turmoil with the Livonian War (1558-1583), a protracted conflict involving Russia, Denmark, Sweden, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth vying for control of the strategically important region.

The Livonian War led to the dissolution of the Livonian Order in 1561. Its territories were partitioned among the competing powers. The southern parts of present-day Latvia, Courland and Semigallia, became the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia, a vassal state of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and later the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The northern part of Livonia, including Riga, came under Polish-Lithuanian rule initially, but much of this area, including Riga, was later conquered by Sweden during the Polish-Swedish Wars in the early 17th century. Eastern Latvia, Latgale, remained under the direct rule of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Swedish rule in Livonia (Swedish Livonia) from 1629 to 1721 brought some notable changes, including efforts to reduce the power of the German nobility and implement administrative reforms. Riga became the second largest city in the Swedish Empire. The Swedish era is sometimes remembered favorably for these reforms, including the establishment of schools and a focus on education, which contributed to the development of an educated Latvian population.

The 18th century saw the rise of the Russian Empire as the dominant power in the Baltic region. Through the Great Northern War (1700-1721), Russia conquered Swedish Livonia, including Riga. By the end of the century, through partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the remaining territories of Latvia, including Courland and Latgale, were absorbed into the Russian Empire.

Under Russian rule, the Baltic provinces (Livonia, Courland, and later, parts of Latgale) retained a degree of autonomy, largely due to the continued influence of the Baltic German nobility who held significant administrative and landowning power. However, the majority Latvian population remained primarily a peasant class, subject to serfdom, which was only abolished in the early 19th century. Even after emancipation, access to land remained a challenge for many Latvian peasants.

The 19th century was a crucial period for the formation of a modern Latvian national identity. This era is known as the First National Awakening (roughly 1850s-1880s). Driven by educated Latvians, known as the Young Latvians, this movement focused on promoting the Latvian language, folklore, culture, and traditions, pushing back against the long-standing dominance of the Baltic Germans and the pressures of Russification. They established Latvian-language newspapers, gathered folk songs (dainas), and advocated for greater cultural and eventually political rights within the Russian Empire.

The early 20th century brought further upheaval. The 1905 Revolution in the Russian Empire saw significant unrest in the Baltic provinces, with demands for greater autonomy and social justice. While suppressed, it demonstrated a growing political consciousness among the Latvian population. World War I had a devastating impact on the territory of Latvia, which became a battleground between Russian and German

forces. Large areas were devastated, and hundreds of thousands of Latvians became refugees.

The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the end of World War I in 1918 created a power vacuum and a window of opportunity for Latvian independence. On November 18, 1918, the People's Council of Latvia proclaimed the independent Republic of Latvia in Riga. However, this declaration was followed by a period of intense fighting known as the Latvian War of Independence (1918-1920), as the new state had to defend itself against forces seeking to control its territory, including Soviet Russia and German Freikorps. This struggle was complex, involving multiple factions and external interventions.

Despite the odds, Latvian forces, with some external support, were ultimately successful in securing control of their territory. The war officially ended with the signing of the Peace Treaty with Soviet Russia on August 11, 1920, in which Russia recognized Latvia's independence "for all time". This hard-won independence marked the culmination of centuries of historical development and the persistent efforts of the Latvian people to assert their right to self-determination.

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