

The Saeima of the Republic of Latvia

Latvia is an independent democratic republic, and the sovereign power of the State of Latvia is vested in the people of Latvia.

The Saeima is composed of **100 representatives of the people – members of parliament (MPs)**. The Constitution sets forth the main functions of the Saeima, and the Rules of Procedure drafted by the Saeima sets forth its internal rules and procedures.

The Saeima is elected for a term of four years in general, equal and direct elections conducted by secret ballot and based on proportional representation. All citizens of Latvia who enjoy full rights of citizenship and who on election day have attained 18 years of age are entitled to vote.

Any citizen of Latvia who enjoys full rights of citizenship and who is more than 21 years of age on election day may be elected to the Saeima. A person elected to the Saeima acquires the mandate of an MP upon giving the oath of office at a Saeima sitting.

The work of the Saeima is managed by the Presidium elected from among the MPs. The Presidium consists of five MPs – the Speaker of the Saeima, two Deputy Speakers, a Secretary and a Deputy Secretary. The Saeima also approves its standing committees.

At least five MPs belonging to the same candidate list may form a parliamentary group. If an MP leaves his or her parliamentary group, he or she retains the mandate of an MP and is then considered an unaffiliated member of parliament. Parliamentary groups may form political blocs. MPs who are not affiliated with any parliamentary group may join these blocs.

The Council of Parliamentary Groups is formed in order to determine and coordinate the activities and strategies of parliamentary groups and political blocs within the Saeima and its standing committees, as well as to resolve issues which are not covered by the Rules of Procedure. This Council is composed of the Saeima Presidium and one MP from each parliamentary group and political bloc. At least three members of parliament may form a group of MPs for promoting cooperation with parliaments of other countries or for expressing some other interests related to their work in the Saeima.

The work of the Saeima is organised in sessions. There are three regular sessions in a year: autumn, winter, and spring sessions; between these regular sessions, extraordinary sessions may be convened. Plenary sittings of the Saeima are usually held once a week on Thursdays. Plenary sittings

of the Saeima and answers to MPs' questions are broadcast live on the national radio station and on the Web site of the Saeima. In accordance with the Rules of Procedure of the Saeima, the Saeima may hold a closed sitting if at least two-thirds of the MPs vote to do so; however, this has never happened so far.

The working language of the Saeima is Latvian.

The Saeima has a total of about 400 employees. Organisational units of the Saeima Chancellery, the Legal Bureau, the Public Relations Department, and the Interparliamentary Relations Bureau provide technical assistance to MPs in their work.



Legislation

The Saeima has several functions, but the most important one is the adoption of laws. Draft laws may be submitted by the President of Latvia, the Cabinet of Ministers, Saeima standing committees, five or more MPs or not less than one-tenth of the electorate. The Saeima also has the right to amend the Constitution. The most lively and thorough debates concerning draft laws take place in the Saeima standing committees.

Adopting the national budget

The Saeima decides on the revenues and expenditures of the national budget annually before the start of the fiscal year. The government submits a draft budget to the Saeima, and a vote for the national budget is actually a vote of confidence in the government; conversely, a vote against the budget is tantamount to a vote of no confidence. Consideration of the draft budget law and related issues usually results in the lengthiest debates of the Saeima sittings.

At the end of each fiscal year, the Cabinet of Ministers submits the budget execution report to the Saeima for approval.

Parliamentary supervision

The Saeima oversees the everyday work of the government; the government as a whole and each minister in particular are politically responsible to the Saeima.

Once a year at a Saeima sitting, the Prime Minister reports on the government's performance and its planned future activities. The Ombudsman also reports annually at a Saeima sitting on the work of the Ombudsman's Office.

The Saeima also holds sittings devoted to answering questions submitted by MPs. Usually opposition MPs address questions to the Prime Minister, members of the Cabinet, or the Governor of the Bank of Latvia about issues within the competence of these officials.



If MPs are dissatisfied with the work of a line ministry, they may submit an interpellation to the government. If the Saeima approves of this interpellation, it may also decide to hold a vote of no confidence in the relevant minister or in the entire Cabinet of Ministers. The Saeima standing committees also have the right to request information necessary for their work and explanations from specific ministries, institutions subordinated to them, and local governments.

Parliamentary inquiry committees have the right, in cooperation with experts, to audit government and local government agencies and private companies, provided that these agencies and companies directly or indirectly receive state subsidies, loans, government contracts or participate in the privatisation of government or local government property. Parliamentary inquiry committees also have the right to invite and question private persons.

Appointment of officials

The Saeima elects the President of Latvia by secret ballot with a majority of the votes of not less than 51 members of parliament.

Interesting facts

- *Saeima* has been the name of the parliament of the Republic of Latvia since 1922. The Latvian etymological dictionary defines the word *saeima* as “gathering, assembly”, with the root derived from the word *iet* (“to go” in Latvian). Juris Alunāns created the neologism *saims*, which originally meant “national council, state council”, but subsequently the term evolved into *saeima* with the broader meaning of “assembly, meeting, conference”.
- On 17 and 18 April 1920, the people of Latvia elected the Constitutional Assembly, which drafted the Constitution, and continued to adopt laws for the independent state, such as the law on land reform and the Saeima election law.
- The main building of the Saeima is located on Jēkaba iela 11 in Riga. Three other buildings – located on Jēkaba iela 10/12, Jēkaba iela 16, and Torņa iela 3/5 opposite the Saeima building – are used for the work of the Saeima committees and parliamentary groups. None of all these buildings was built specifically for housing the parliament, and only in the course of time they were adapted for the work of the Saeima.
- The longest Saeima sitting – that of 11 December 2008 – lasted for 19 hours 36 minutes until 4:36 the next morning. Then a break was announced until 18 December 2008, when the sitting continued for another 8 hours 40 minutes. Thus the total length of this sitting was 28 hours 16 minutes.

The government may commence its duties after it has received Saeima's vote of confidence. The President of Latvia nominates the Prime Minister. The Saeima takes a vote of confidence in the newly formed government after the nominated Prime Minister has presented the composition of the Cabinet and its platform to the Saeima. If the Saeima expresses no confidence in the Prime Minister, the entire Cabinet resigns. If there is an expression of no confidence in a particular minister, then only the minister in question resigns.

The Saeima also elects, approves, appoints, approves the resignation, or dismisses other Latvia's officials, such as the Prosecutor General, the Director of the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau, the Governor of the Bank of Latvia, members of the National Radio and Television Council, the Director of the Constitution Protection Bureau, judges, the Ombudsman, and the Auditor General.

Ratification of international agreements

In accordance with Article 68 of the Constitution, all international agreements which pertain to matters that may be decided by the legislative process require ratification by the Saeima.

International cooperation

Along with their work in the Saeima sittings, standing committees, and parliamentary groups, MPs also meet foreign officials and delegations. The Saeima is a member of international parliamentary organisations and actively cooperates with parliaments of other countries.