

The Republic of Latvia, proclaimed on 18 November 1918, had lost its independence in the Second World War. The Soviet occupation continued after the end of the war, and the Latvian people were subjected to Soviet ideology, repressions, and Russification. However, the people’s dream of freedom and their own country remained alive.

In the second half of the 1980s, as soon as the liberalisation of Soviet power and *perestroika* began, Latvian society started on the road to restoring its independence. This path is also known as the Third Awakening or the Singing Revolution.

During *perestroika*, Soviet authorities allowed for more freedom to express opinions that differed from the official ideological course of the Communist Party. New social organisations were formed, which were not subordinated to the Communist Party. People in Latvia made extensive use of these opportunities, engaging in a struggle against the perversions and consequences of the Soviet system, which threatened the existence of the Latvian language, culture, and environment. The Communist Party leadership’s attempt to rebuild the Soviet Union opened the way for the oppressed peoples to break out of the "prison of peoples".

THE LATVIAN CULTURE FOUNDATION

The Foundation, headed by the poet Imants Ziedonis, played an important role in awakening national culture and consciousness. It was actively involved in the campaign to preserve the banks of the Daugava River, advocating the preservation of the cultural and natural environment.

Became a pillar in the formation of the Popular Front of Latvia



1990: Chairman of the Latvian Culture Foundation and Member of the Supreme Council Imants Ziedonis. Photo: Boriss Kolesņikovs Saeima photo collection

THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION CLUB

A striking example of the club's activities is the campaign against the construction of the metro in Riga. Had these plans come to fruition, a large workforce would have been imported in Latvia, and Latvians would have become a minority in their own country. The club also organised widespread events to protest against the construction of the Daugavpils hydroelectric power plant and a nuclear power plant near Liepāja, as well as the operation of the Sloka pulp mill, which polluted the Baltic Sea.

Actively organised anti-Soviet mass events



27 April 1988. Protest rally against the construction of the Riga metro, organised by the Environmental Protection Club in Arcadia Park. Latvian National Museum of History collection



7–8 October 1989. Second Congress of the Popular Front of Latvia. A new programme is adopted, setting out the Popular Front's political course towards the full restoration of the independence of the Republic of Latvia. Latvian National Archives collection

THE POPULAR FRONT OF LATVIA (LTF)

The Popular Front of Latvia initially advocated the democratisation and liberalisation of power within the framework of the reforms proposed by Gorbachev. However, in October 1989, the Popular Front decided to move towards the full restoration of Latvia's independence through parliamentary means. Led by Dainis Īvāns, journalist and leader of the National Awakening movement, the LTF not only engaged in the political process, but also organised the society to fight for the country's independence.

Became the driving force behind the restoration of national independence through parliamentary means

Photo: Valters Ivanovs

Founded 10.07. 1986.

HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY GROUP “HELSINKI–86”

Already in 1987, members of this group dared to organise actions to expose the crimes of the Soviet regime. The laying of flowers to commemorate the victims of Soviet-organised deportations, the public condemnation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the call to celebrate the proclamation of Latvia on 18 November were acts of great courage. The "Rebirth and Renewal" movement, started by Lutheran clergymen, worked in close cooperation with the so-called Helsinki-86.

Photo: Uldis Pāže



14 June 1988. March to the Cemetery of the Brethren in Riga following a public rally at the House of Political Education (now the Congress Hall). Konstantīns Pupurs, member of the group "Helsinki-86", carries the red-white-red flag through Riga for the first time. Saeima photo collection

Shed light on the crimes of the Soviet regime against the Latvian people

Founded 10.07. 1988.

LATVIAN NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT (LNNK)

The LNNK aimed to stop migration from other Soviet republics because it was destroying Latvia's cultural environment and threatening the preservation of Latvian traditions. The LNNK organised rallies to condemn the crimes of the Soviet regime and clearly put forward the demand for national independence.

Photo: Leons Balodis



7 October 1988. At the People's Manifestation "For a Lawful State" at the Great Open-Air Stage in Mežaparks, the crowd is addressed by representatives of the Popular Front of Latvia, the Latvian National Independence Movement, other movements, and public figures. The people openly and loudly voice their demand for Latvia's self-determination and greater autonomy. Latvian National Museum of History collection

Was the first to bring the idea of an actual restoration of national independence to the forefront

Anti-Soviet demonstrations in Latvia began in 1987 with the “Helsinki-86” movement commemorating the crimes of the Soviet regime. **Dissatisfaction with life in the Soviet Union and the desire for change became evident.** The people succeeded in stopping the progress of several projects initiated by the occupying power. But the turning point on the road to independence came when doubts about the foundations of Soviet power were raised within the power structures themselves and the general public also dared to make increasing demands.

19.04.
1988.

“A NIGHTMARE”

Anti-Soviet activist Gunārs Astra was first arrested in 1961 and sentenced to 15 years in prison for meeting with U.S. diplomats, corresponding with Latvians living abroad, and criticising Russification. After his release, he intensified his resistance, including the reproduction and distribution of literature banned in the Soviet Union. He was arrested again in 1983. His final words at that trial became one of the most important and courageous public speeches of the Soviet era. In 1988, Astra was released early, but died shortly afterwards under mysterious circumstances, sparking public suspicion that he had been poisoned by the KGB.



January 1988. Member of the resistance movement Gunārs Astra shortly before his release
Latvian National Archives collection

"I believe that this time will pass like a nightmare. It gives me the strength to stand here and breathe."

Several thousand people attended the funeral of dissident Gunārs Astra on 19 April 1988, despite the countermeasures taken by the authorities. His grave was backfilled by hand.

THE BALTIC WAY

Around two million people joined hands to form a 670-kilometre-long human chain linking Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius. The goal was to remind the world of the illegal Soviet occupation of the Baltic States and the peoples' determination to break free. The Baltic Way became a global symbol of non-violent resistance and inspired similar movements across the world.



Photographs submitted to the Latvian National Museum of History project "Album of the Century"

1.–2.06.
1988.

“VIOLENT OCCUPATION ”



8–9 October 1988. Founding congress of the Popular Front of Latvia. Speech by journalist and professor at the Art Academy of Latvia Mavriks Vulfsons
Latvian National Museum of History collection

At a plenum of creative unions, TV commentator and Communist Party history lecturer Mavriks Vulfsons publicly revealed the criminal secret protocols of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, which divided Europe into spheres of influence between the USSR and Nazi Germany. For the first time, the establishment of Soviet rule in Latvia was publicly described as a violent occupation. This marked a crucial turning point, sparking widespread debate about the Communist Party's criminal policies, the illegitimate foundations of the Latvian SSR, and the restoration of the Republic of Latvia.

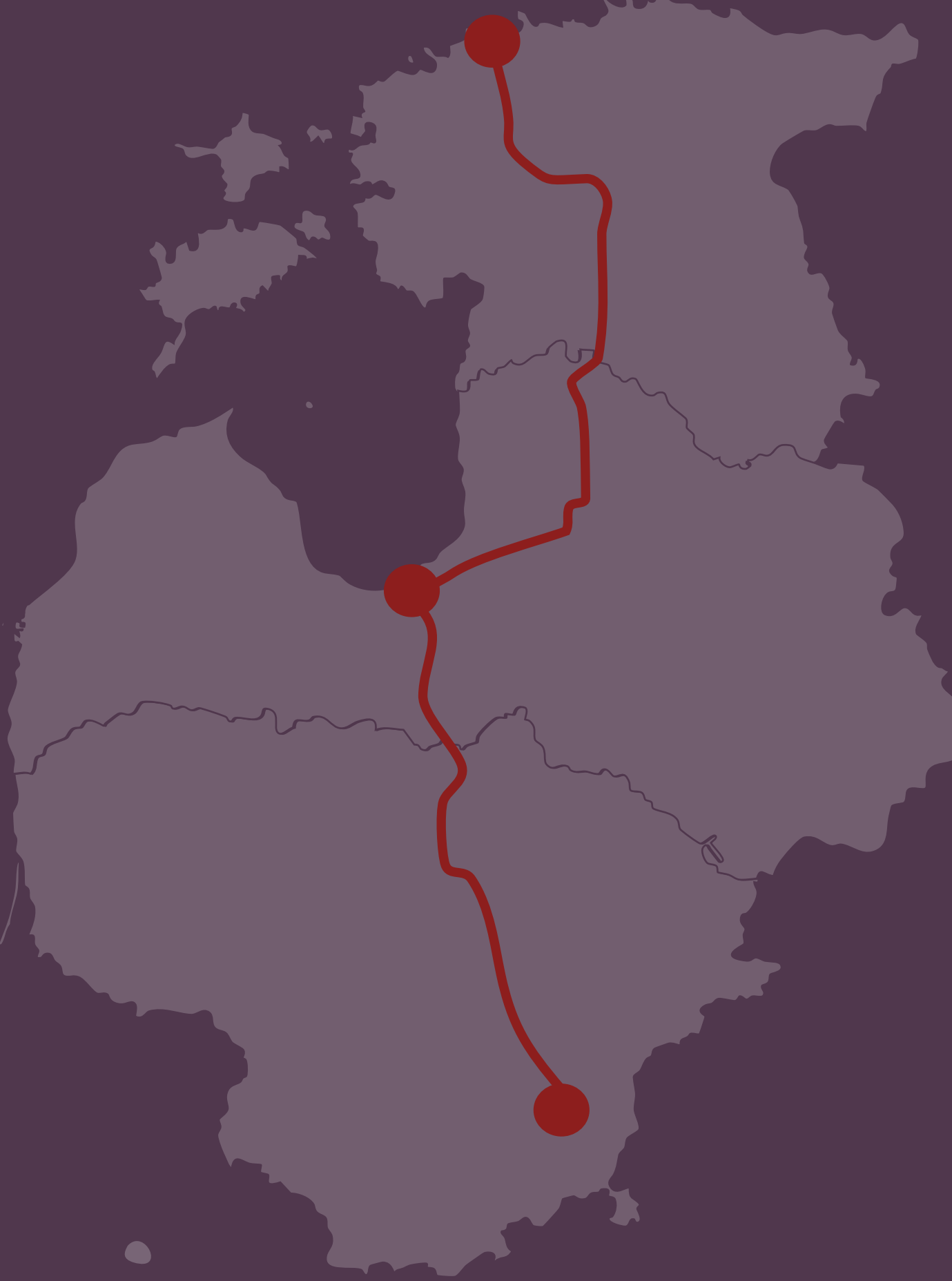
"The establishment of Soviet power in Latvia was decided in Article 1 of the secret protocol annexed to the Treaty of Non-Aggression between the USSR and Hitler's Germany on 23 August 1939. [...] From a legal standpoint, the breach of international norms is irrefutable. One can only describe it as a violent occupation of Latvia."

23.08.
1989.



Photo: Udis Briedis

23 August 1989. Participants of the "Baltic Way" demonstration on October Bridge (now Stone Bridge) in Riga
Latvian National Museum of History collection



A GLOBALLY
UNPRECEDENTED ACT
OF PEACEFUL
RESISTANCE

Photograph by Agrita Ozola, submitted to the Latvian National Museum of History project "Album of the Century"



The principle of legal continuity of the Republic of Latvia during the occupation (1940-1990) meant that the state continued to exist de jure. This continuity was recognised by more than 50 Western countries. **Latvia maintained diplomatic representation in the West throughout the occupation.** The policy of non-recognition was based on the declaration by U.S. Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles on 23 July 1940, which condemned the annexation of the Baltic States. While the West maintained this position, no concrete steps were taken toward restoring Latvia's independence until the end of the Awakening.

EXTRAORDINARY
POWERS

Before the occupation, Kārlis Zariņš, Latvia's envoy to Great Britain, was granted extraordinary powers to defend Latvia's interests abroad if the Cabinet of Ministers lost contact due to wartime conditions. London became the centre of Latvian foreign policy during the occupation, and Zariņš remained in office until his death. During this time, he submitted notes to the British Foreign Office condemning the crimes of totalitarian regimes during the Second World War and denouncing the occupation of Latvia. He also appointed embassy trustees and cooperated with Latvian exile organisations. After his death, Arnolds Spekke (1963-1970), Chargé d'Affaires and Head of the Latvian Embassy in Washington, and later Anatols Dinbergs (1970-1991), led Latvia's diplomatic and consular service in the West.

Kārlis Zariņš
(1879–1963)

Photographer unknown



Kārlis Zariņš, plenipotentiary representative of the government of the Republic of Latvia and head of the foreign service.
Ministry of Foreign Affairs collection



LATVIAN
DIPLOMATIC CORPS

Latvian diplomats abroad defied the occupying power and managed to maintain part of their diplomatic missions during the post-war period. Throughout the occupation, Latvia retained diplomatic representation in the USA, France, and Great Britain, while missions in other countries ceased operations in 1940 or shortly thereafter. The diplomatic corps informed the international community about the real situation in Latvia and the illegality of the occupation. Latvian diplomats also focused on cultural efforts – organising annual 18 November celebrations and other events to preserve Latvian culture and remind the world of the de jure existence of the Latvian state.

Photo: Lūiis Pīze



▲ 15 November 1991. Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs Jānis Jūrkāns welcomes long-serving Latvian diplomat and Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia to the United States Anatols Dinbergs (on the left), returning to his homeland after 54 years in exile
Saeima photo collection

Photo: Lūiis Pīze



◀ 14 September 1991. United States Secretary of State James Baker hands over the red-white-red flag to Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia Anatolijs Gorbunovs. The flag had been kept at the United States Department of State throughout the Soviet occupation
Saeima photo collection



ROLE OF EXILED LATVIANS

Latvians living in Western countries played an important role in the struggle for independence. They actively worked to highlight Soviet crimes and pressed Western governments to support Baltic independence. The World Association of Free Latvians, the American Latvian Association, and the European Latvian Association coordinated major information campaigns. The Baltic question had to remain on the international agenda, and it was essential to ensure that the USA and other democratic nations continued not to recognise Soviet rule over Latvia.

Photo: Laimons Nīdole



29 July 1985. The Baltic Freedom and Peace Ship in the port of Stockholm
Collection of the association "Latvians Abroad" – Museum and Research



Three Baltic women holding a sign "Freedom for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania" at the Statue of Liberty in New York, the United States
Latvian National Archives collection

Photo: Čaitiza Blinkins



Elections in the Soviet Union were neither free nor democratic. There was no genuine choice – voters could only select candidates from the sole permitted party, the Communist Party. In the mid-1980s, the so-called *perestroika* reforms began. Though not aimed at creating a democratic system, they did allow people, for the first time, to express their views without fear of punishment.

The first signs of democratisation appeared during the 1987 local Soviet elections, when competition was allowed – more candidates than seats. By 1989, both the elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies and local Soviets featured candidates with differing political views. In 1990, shortly before the elections to the republican Supreme Soviets, the provision on the Communist Party’s “leading role” was removed from the USSR Constitution, ending its formal monopoly on power.

Latvia’s social elite saw in this new context an opportunity to gain influence and achieve peaceful, legal, and parliamentary change on behalf of the Latvian people.

ELECTIONS TO THE CONGRESS OF PEOPLE’S DEPUTIES OF THE USSR

26.03.
1989.



12–24 December 1989. Second Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR in Moscow. Latvian delegates during a session break. From the left: Chairman of the Popular Front of Latvia Dainis Ivaņs, senior lecturer at the Department of Social Sciences of the Art Academy of Latvia Mārvīks Vulfsons, First Secretary of the Madona District Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia Jānis Vanags, executive secretary of the journal "Daugava" Viktors Avotiņš. Latvian National Archives collection

Baltic representation in Moscow

This was the first election in the Soviet Union with visible signs of democracy. For the first time, multiple candidates competed in each district, and campaigning took place – something most Soviet citizens had never experienced. For the Latvian Popular Front, it was a key moment to consolidate political influence. In these elections, LTF-supported candidates won 40 of the 52 seats allocated to Latvia. On 24 December 1989, under pressure from Baltic deputies, the Congress did what had once seemed unthinkable: it condemned and declared null and void the secret protocols of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

LOCAL SOVIET (MUNICIPAL) ELECTIONS

10.12.
1989.



10 December 1989. Voters at polling station No. 56 in Riga participating in the elections of the local People's Deputies Soviets of the Latvian SSR. Latvian National Archives collection

The second important step towards gaining political power

In October 1989, the restoration of Latvia's independence became the LTF's clearly stated goal. Achieving it required a majority in elected institutions – a possibility made real by electoral liberalisation. In the 10 December 1989 local Soviet elections, LTF candidates gained broad public support across Latvia, winning around 70% of the seats.

ELECTIONS TO THE SUPREME SOVIET OF THE LATVIAN SSR

18.03.
1990.



17 March 1990. Campaign ahead of the elections to the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR. Latvian National Museum of History collection

Let's vote for freedom!

Ahead of these elections, the LTF declared the restoration of Latvian independence as its central objective. Achieving this required a strategic campaign. The LTF joined forces with other independence movements – LNNK, the Environmental Protection Club – and with Communist Party members who supported reform. Although LTF candidates could compete alongside Communist candidates, the elections were still not fully democratic. Soviet troops remained stationed in Latvia, and under the electoral laws imposed by the occupation regime, Soviet army personnel and their family members were allowed to vote. Nearly 1.6 million citizens – 81.2% of eligible voters – participated in the election. The LTF won 131 of the 201 seats, becoming the dominant political force shaping the future of the Supreme Soviet.

ATTEMPT TO CREATE A PARALLEL STATE STRUCTURE

In 1990, the Citizens’ Movement of the Republic of Latvia was formed. At its first conference, it decided to establish a Citizens’ Committee and convene a Citizens’ Congress, as an alternative path to state restoration. After the LTF succeeded in restoring independence via a parliamentary decision, the Citizens’ Congress remained outside the official political process.

30 April – 1 May 1990. Congress of Citizens of the Republic of Latvia at the Latvian Philharmonic Hall. Latvian National Archives collection

Photographer unknown

03. 1990.

The outcome of the Supreme Soviet elections enabled Latvia to restore independence by peaceful, parliamentary means.

The first step was the adoption of the Declaration on the Restoration of Independence as the legal and political foundation of the state. The second step involved taking over state institutions and establishing democratic governance. This required creating new administrative structures, enacting political and institutional reforms, and developing an independent foreign policy to ensure Latvia's stability and its integration into the international community.

AUTHORS OF THE DECLARATION



The main ideas of the Declaration on the Restoration of Independence were formulated on 22 March in a small gathering at the apartment of deputy Rolands Rikards, where Egils Levits, Vilnis Eglājs, Valdis Birkavs, and Romāns Apsītis met.

The draft of the Declaration was prepared by Egils Levits, a Latvian lawyer and political scientist who had returned from Germany, in consultation with newly elected LTF deputies and legal experts Tālvavs Jundzis and Aivars Endziņš.

The text was discussed, amended, and expanded both within the LTF Working Group on State Affairs and among LTF politicians elected to the Supreme Soviet. In this way, the Declaration became the collective work of the entire LTF faction.

"MINIMUM" AND "MAXIMUM" VERSIONS

Two versions of the draft declaration were developed: the “minimum” (calling for limited independence) and the “maximum” (declaring full independence). The choice depended, among other factors, on the actions of Lithuania and Estonia and the USSR’s response.

Lithuania adopted its Declaration of Independence on 11 March, immediately restoring sovereignty and suspending the USSR Constitution. In response, the USSR imposed a harsh economic blockade, closed borders, and cut off supplies, including energy and medicine. The Soviet army occupied several public buildings in Vilnius.

Estonia adopted a more cautious approach on 30 March – restoring its statehood but introducing a “transition period” until constitutional institutions were re-established.

Latvia chose a moderated version of the “maximum” option, later adding a provision on a transitional period.

CONTENTS OF THE DECLARATION

The purpose of the Declaration was to legally formalise the restoration of the Republic of Latvia's independence by assessing the circumstances of its incorporation into the USSR. A key aim was to demonstrate that the Republic of Latvia had continued to exist *de jure* and that its Constitution remained legally in force.

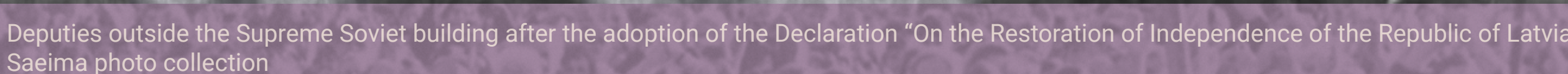
The Declaration introduced a transitional period to end after the convening of the 5th Saeima. In practice, the period concluded immediately after the August 1991 coup with the adoption of the Constitutional Law “On the State Status of the Republic of Latvia” on 21 August. An important provision confirmed that Articles 1, 2, 3, and 6 of the 1922 Constitution were still in force, as these articles define the constitutional and legal identity of the Latvian state and its political system. The Declaration also set out the basis for future relations with the USSR, to be guided by the Peace Treaty of 11 August 1920 between Latvia and Soviet Russia, which recognised Latvia’s independence in



Levits played a major role in drafting the Declaration until he **was arrested at the airport by Soviet authorities and deported from the USSR.**

4.05. 1990.

TEARS OF JOY WERE
SHED. **FREEDOM WAS**
IN THE AIR.



Rally on 11 November Embankment following the adoption of the Declaration
"On the Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia"
Latvian National Museum of History collection
Photo: Anda Krauze

The time between 4 May 1990 and 21 August 1991 can be described as a period of dual rule, during which the administrative structures of the USSR continued to operate alongside the newly established authorities of the Republic of Latvia. **The USSR, under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, did not recognise Latvia's independence** and remained firmly committed to preserving the USSR's existing territorial integrity. In contrast, Russia, led by Boris Yeltsin, supported the Baltic States' aspirations for independence. Despite its declared independence, Latvia still hosted Soviet military forces, while the government of the Republic of Latvia had no military institutions of its own. **At the same time, Western countries were slow to recognise the full restoration of Latvia's independence.** These circumstances created not only a tangible situation of dual rule but also a broader climate of uncertainty.

3.03.
1991.

PEOPLE'S POLL ON LATVIA'S INDEPENDENCE

A clear message from the people: Latvia turns away from the USSR

Several factors influenced the decision to organise this public poll, including similar referendums held in neighbouring Lithuania and Estonia. It also aimed to persuade Western countries that Gorbachev's claims – suggesting only a small group of separatists were active – did not reflect the true situation.

The poll results demonstrated that not only ethnic Latvians, who made up just 52% of the population, but also a significant number of non-Latvians, supported the goal of independence. Voter turnout reached nearly 88%, with almost three-quarters in favour of breaking away from the USSR.

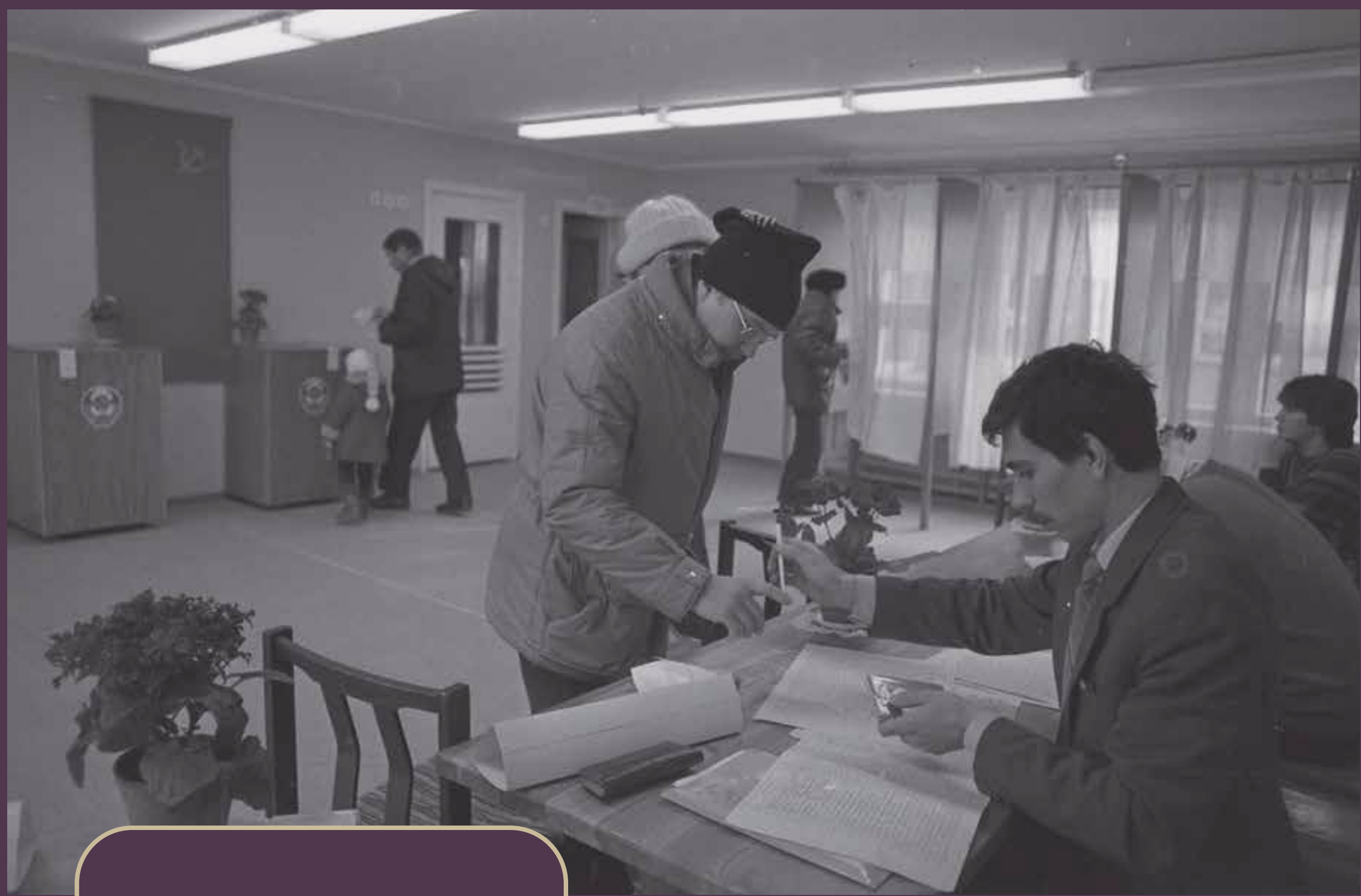


Photo: Boriss Kojepļikovs

17.03.
1991.

17 March 1991. All-Union referendum on the preservation of the USSR
Latvian National Archives collection

DO YOU SUPPORT THE
ESTABLISHMENT OF A DEMOCRATIC
AND SOVEREIGN REPUBLIC OF
LATVIA?



in favour
73,7%



against
24,7%

FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

On 4 May 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia convened an extraordinary session to mark the first anniversary of the Declaration of the Restoration of Independence. A total of 150 deputies gathered to reflect on the events of the past year and assess what had been accomplished so far.

4.05.
1991.

Supreme Council deputies who voted for the Declaration of Independence, one year after 4 May 1990 when the decisive vote was adopted
Saeima photo collection

Photo: Uldis Pāže



REFERENDUM ON THE PRESERVATION OF THE USSR

The referendum that wasn't there

This referendum, initiated by the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, aimed to prevent the possible disintegration of the Soviet Union following a series of political and economic upheavals. It was boycotted not only by the Baltic States but also by Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova.

The Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia called on the public to abstain from participating in the referendum, arguing that the Declaration on the Restoration of Independence had already been adopted and that the Latvian people had clearly expressed their position in the national poll held on 3 March. Nevertheless, some polling stations were set up in Riga and other cities with the involvement of the Communist Party and the USSR military. Only 23% of the population participated in this referendum. The results were never officially announced.

While the overwhelming majority of Latvia’s population supported the idea of independence, a portion – mainly Soviet citizens who had settled in Latvia during the occupation – opposed it. During the Awakening, pro-Soviet movements loyal to the occupying power emerged to counter independence efforts. It was a tense and volatile period that also claimed lives.

SOVIET
RETALIATION

The USSR strikes back
15.05.1990. – 21.08.1991.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev declared the independence declarations adopted by the Baltic republics to be illegal. On 15 May, Soviet troops attempted to storm the Supreme Council building but were dispersed. In the autumn and winter, the Soviet army escalated its show of force: armoured vehicles patrolled the streets of Riga, and military helicopters flew low over residential areas. To destabilise the situation, explosions were staged near politically significant monuments. On 2 January, the OMON special militia unit seized the Press House to bring media supporting independence under Soviet control. On 7 January, the Soviet Minister of Defence issued an order to deploy airborne troops to the Baltic region.



15 May 1990. Rally by Interfront supporters opposing the 4 May adoption of Declaration "On the Restoration of the Independence of the Republic of Latvia"
Saeima photo collection

INTERFRONT

Fighting against Latvian independence

The International Front of the Working People of the Latvian SSR – known as the Interfront – was established on 7 January 1989 as a reaction against Gorbachev’s reforms and the rise of the Latvian Popular Front. It strongly advocated for Latvia’s continued integration within the USSR. The Interfront’s supporters included many industrial workers who had arrived in Latvia after the occupation, as well as Soviet administrative personnel and army servicemen. The organisation firmly opposed the halting of migration and the designation of Latvian as the state language. The term "Interfront" is often used more broadly to refer to all forces that resisted the restoration of Latvia’s independence and supported the preservation of the USSR, including the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the All-Latvian Public Salvation Committee, the United Council of Labour Collectives, veterans’ organisations, OMON, and segments of the Soviet army that interfered in Latvia’s political processes.



10 January 1991. Unauthorised rally of the International Front of the Working People of the Latvian SSR (Interfront) outside the building of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia, demanding the resignation of the government of Ivars Godmanis
Saeima photo collection



The Barricades in Riga. Participants at the Barricades near the Supreme Council building
Saeima photo collection

13.–26.
01.1991.

BARRICADES

Popular resistance and solidarity

Lithuania was the first of the Baltic States to experience violent Soviet repression. The tragic events of 13 January at the Vilnius TV tower, where 14 people lost their lives, sent shockwaves through Latvia. Half a million people gathered for a mass rally on the Daugava embankment in Riga. People began constructing barricades to defend strategically important sites – Latvian Radio, the television centre, and the buildings of the Supreme Council and the Council of Ministers – using heavy machinery, concrete blocks, and other available materials. The number of barricade participants is estimated at up to 50,000. Though the Soviet army was not deployed openly in Riga, the threat of bloodshed remained. Tensions peaked when OMON attacked the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia, killing five people. In total, nine defenders of independence lost their lives during the Barricades and the August Putsch, and more than 300 were injured.



The Barricades in Riga
Saeima photo collection



The Barricades in Riga
Saeima photo collection

Casualty of the Barricades and
the August Putsch

Roberts Mūrnieks 16.01.1991.
Shot near the Vecmīlgrāvis Bridge

Sergejs Konoņenko 20.01.1991.
Shot in the park between the Ministry of the Interior and Bastejkalns

Vladimirs Gomanovičs 20.01.1991.
Shot inside the Ministry of the Interior

Andris Slapiņš 20.01.1991.
Shot near Bastejkalns

Edijs Riekstiņš 20.01.1991.
Shot outside the Ministry of the Interior

Gvido Zvaigzne 20.01.1991. (died 05.02.1991.)
Fatally wounded near Bastejkalns

Ilgvars Grieziņš 21.01.1991.
Died in an accident near the Supreme Council building

Raimonds Salmiņš 19.08.1991.
Shot outside the Riga City Department of Internal Affairs

Staņislavs Skroderis 19.08.1991. (died 20.08.1991.)
Fatally wounded in an accident on the Island Bridge

From 18 to 22 August 1991, the so-called August Putsch took place in Moscow – a failed attempt by conservative communists to seize state power. It posed a serious threat to all the groundwork laid for the restoration of Latvia’s independence. In response, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia decided to immediately end the transitional period and fully restore state independence. **This was followed by the international recognition of the Latvian state.**

Photo: Uldis Pāže



OMON special task militia unit fighters of the Riga City Department of Internal Affairs on the balcony of the Latvian Radio building
Saeima photo collection

Photo: Uldis Pāže



Armoured vehicle on the Suspension Bridge
Saeima photo collection

Photo: Uldis Pāže



Rally outside the Arsenāls Art Museum following the adoption of the Constitutional Law "On the Statehood of the Republic of Latvia". Addresses by Chairman of the Supreme Council Anatolijs Gorbunovs and Romualds Razuks
Saeima photo collection



Photo: Uldis Pāže

During the August Putsch near the Supreme Council building
Saeima photo collection

THE CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

As the coup unfolded in Moscow, Soviet forces in Riga occupied the radio and television buildings, along with other key strategic sites. In response, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia convened to adopt the Constitutional Law “On the Statehood of the Republic of Latvia.” At the time of the vote, OMON armoured vehicles had already entered Riga’s Old Town, and the city’s access roads were blocked by Soviet military hardware. When the Constitutional Law was passed, news of the coup’s failure in Moscow had not yet reached Latvia.

The adoption of this law formally ended the transitional period foreseen in the 4 May Declaration and marked the complete de facto restoration of Latvia’s independence.

Photo: Uldis Pāže



2 September 1991. Chairman of the Supreme Council Anatolijs Gorbunovs following a telephone conversation with U.S. President George Bush, who recognised the restoration of Latvia’s independence in response to the adoption of the Constitutional Law “On the Statehood of the Republic of Latvia” on 21 August 1991
Saeima photo collection

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Latvia’s renewed *de jure* recognition

Following the full re-establishment of independence, Latvia began receiving international recognition. The first country to officially recognise Latvia was Iceland. On 2 September, the United States and other countries that had never recognised the occupation of Latvia re-established diplomatic relations. On 6 September, even the USSR formally recognised Latvia’s independence. The events of August accelerated Latvia’s return to the global political stage. The first major international organisation Latvia joined after regaining its independence was the United Nations.

Photo: Uldis Pāže



5 June 1993. First session of the 5th Saeima
Saeima photo collection

5.–6.06.
1993.

ELECTIONS TO THE 5TH SAEIMA

Sixty years between the Saeima elections in the Republic of Latvia

The elections to the 5th Saeima were symbolically and constitutionally significant, reaffirming the continuity of Latvia’s parliamentary tradition. Nearly 90% of eligible voters participated. The newly elected parliament convened for its first session on 6 July 1993.

WITHDRAWAL OF SOVIET TROOPS

At 18:00 on 31 August 1994, the last aircraft of the Russian Federation's armed forces departed from Riga

During the occupation, Latvia had been transformed into a base for Soviet military forces. After the dissolution of the USSR, the Soviet army came under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation, which agreed to begin withdrawal negotiations. It was established that all former Soviet troops would leave Latvia by 31 August 1994, though the Skrunda radar station – vital to Russia’s military interests – would remain operational for a few more years. The withdrawal of occupation forces marked the final step in the full consolidation of Latvia’s independence.

BY THE END OF
1991, LATVIA HAD
BEEN RECOGNISED
BY 93 COUNTRIES.

During the August Putsch near the Supreme Council building
Saeima photo collection

Photo: Uldis Pāže

In the years immediately following independence, Latvia faced immense challenges. The country had to transition to a market economy, implement legal and political reforms, and foster social integration. A democratic and liberal model of governance was introduced, and diplomatic relations were rapidly re-established. Latvia soon identified its strategic goal: to reintegrate into the international community and join the European Union and NATO.

All three Baltic States insisted that the independence and continuity of the states proclaimed in 1918 must be restored following the collapse of the USSR. This principle was rooted in living memory – shaped by the injustice of Soviet crimes and occupation. The same pursuit of justice guided essential reforms, including the restoration of citizenship and property rights to those who had been dispossessed by the Soviet regime.



Dainis Ivaņs at the Council of the European Union with the first Latvian diplomatic passport
Latvian National Museum of History collection

RESTORATION OF CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS

Defining citizenship in the Republic of Latvia

Restoring independence also meant restoring the right of the Latvian people to determine their own future. During the Soviet occupation, Latvia experienced mass, unlawful migration that altered its demographic structure. After regaining independence, the legal status of these individuals became a topical issue. Citizenship rights were restored to the pre-war citizens of the Republic of Latvia and their descendants. Others could apply for citizenship through a naturalisation process.

RESTORATION OF PROPERTY RIGHTS

Restoring legal ownership

A clear legal mechanism was necessary to prevent chaos and disputes between former and current property holders. Property confiscated without compensation during the Soviet era was returned to former owners or their heirs.

The next phase was privatisation – the transfer of state-owned enterprises and Soviet-era buildings into private hands.

NEARLY 67% OF VOTERS SUPPORTED ACCESSION TO THE EU

2004.

JOINING THE EUROPEAN UNION AND NATO

Return to the Western world

Latvia's accession to the European Union and NATO was a deliberate and strategic choice focused on national security and democratic development. EU membership created a foundation for economic growth, cultural exchange, and active participation in global affairs. NATO membership brought a new level of security and enabled military cooperation with other member states, under the umbrella of collective defence. Accession to both organisations accelerated the implementation of modern Western democratic standards. In the current geopolitical context – where Russia has openly violated international agreements, launched wars, and threatened the sovereignty of neighbouring states – Latvia's membership in European and transatlantic alliances remains more vital than ever.



20 September 2003. President of Latvia Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga at the referendum on Latvia's membership in the European Union



2 April 2004. NATO flag-raising ceremony at Riga Castle



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