REPORT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM IN LATVIA

REFERENCE YEAR 2023



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Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs
Republic of Latvia

EMN European Migration Network LATVIA

Pursuant to Council Decision 2008/381/EC of 14 May 2008, the European Migration Network was established; its objective is to meet the information needs of institutions of the European Union and its Member States by providing up-to-date, objective, reliable, and comparable information on migration and asylum, with a view to supporting policymaking in these areas in the European Union. The European Migration Network also serves to provide the general public with information on these subjects. The Network is composed of the European Commission and the contact points designated by the Member States. Each contact point establishes a national migration network.

The contact point of each state prepares studies, whose topics have been set in the respective annual program of activities. The topics of studies are related to the area of migration of third-country nationals.

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1.

SUMMARY

Legal migration

In 2023, 10,220[1] first temporary residence permits were issued, 16.26% more than in 2022. In addition, 17,167 first temporary residence permits were issued to Ukrainian civilians who have received temporary protection in Latvia.

Amendments to the Immigration Law of 22 September 2022[2] stipulate that permanent residence permits of citizens of the Russian Federation who were Latvian citizens or Latvian non-citizens before acquiring the citizenship of the Russian Federation and have received permanent residence permits in accordance with the Immigration Law[3] will become invalid on 1 September 2023. On 20 April 2023, amendments to the Immigration Law[4] entered into force, allowing citizens of the Russian Federation who had failed the official language test by 1 September 2023 to retake it by 30 November 2023. The amendments also extend the time limit for examining applications for the status of permanent resident of the European Union to allow the responsible authorities to make informed decisions.

International protection and asylum

The number of asylum seekers has tripled – in 2023 there were 1,624[5] asylum seekers (in 2022 – 546).

Temporary protection and other measures in response to persons fleeing the war in Ukraine

On 8 December 2022, amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians[6] were adopted, which provide that as of 1 January 2023, a temporary residence permit for two years will be issued to Ukrainian civilians who apply for a temporary protection status in the Republic of Latvia and a document certifying this status. Long-term visas and temporary residence permits issued to Ukrainian civilians who have received temporary protection status in the Republic of Latvia until 31 December 2022 will be valid until 4 March 2024, regardless of the validity period indicated in these documents.

Unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups

The number of unaccompanied minors entering Latvia has increased – 17 unaccompanied minors entered Latvia in 2023, of whom 15 applied for asylum.

1 Data source: OCMA.

2 Law "Amendments to the Immigration Law". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 185A, 23.09.2022. - [entered into force on 24.09.2022]

3 Section 24(1)(8).

4 Law "Amendments to the Immigration Law". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 115, 15.06.2022. - [entered into force on 29.06.2022]

5 Data source: OCMA.

6 Law on Amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians. - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 240A, 12.12.2022. - [entered into force on 13.12.2022]

Integration

In 2023, immigrants from third countries could learn the Latvian language, get to know life in Latvia, attend integration courses and receive help to find a job and support from a social mentor. State and non-governmental organisations provided integration and Latvian language courses for asylum seekers and third-country nationals, including Ukrainian civilians. As of 2 January 2023, the Society Integration Foundation launched a new service for foreigners, the Integration and Inclusion Agency.

Citizenship and naturalisation

In 2023, 595 persons were admitted to Latvian citizenship through naturalisation.[7] The majority of people who received Latvian citizenship (73.7%) were non-citizens of Latvia. The number of third-country nationals who received Latvian citizenship through naturalisation has decreased to 154 in 2023 (171 in 2022).[8]

Border control, visas and Schengen management

On 22 June 2023, the Amendments to the State Border Guard Law[9] were adopted, which supplement the tasks, rights and duties of the State Border Guard, allowing to prevent irregular entry of persons and illegal movement of goods across the state border at an unintended place and time.

The State Border Guard participated in joint operations organised by Frontex[10], which provided support to both EU Member States and third countries.

Irregular migration

On 5 October 2023, the law "Amendments to the Criminal Law"[11] was adopted, which provides that the penalty for irregular movement of a person across a national border will be imprisonment for up to three years or probation supervision, or a fine.

Trafficking in human beings

In criminal proceedings for organising trafficking in human beings, 10 persons have been classified as suspects and five persons have been convicted. 10 third-country nationals have been recognised as victims of trafficking in human beings.

Return and readmission

In 2023, 44 persons were removed and 1,984 returned voluntarily to their country of residence.

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7 Data source: OCMA.

8 Data source: OCMA.

9 Law "Amendments to the State Border Guard Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 125, 30.06.2023. - [entered into force on 01.07.2023]

10 European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

11 Law "Amendments to the Criminal Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 197, 11.10.2023. - [entered into force on 20.10.2023]

2.

INTRODUCTION

The Annual Report on Migration and Asylum in Latvia (hereinafter referred to as the Report) provides information on the most significant changes in migration and asylum policy and legislation in Latvia in the period from 1 January to 31 December 2023 and at the beginning of 2024. The Report includes information from migration policy makers and implementers, as well as published research and media analysis.

The Report is based on a specification developed by the European Commission and National Contact Points of the European Migration Network (EMN), which allows the collection of uniform and comparable information on EU Member States and EMN Observer Countries[12]. The Synthesis Report on the migration and asylum in 2024 in the EU and EMN Observer Countries will be available on the website of the EMN Latvian Contact Point, www.emn.lv.

The information necessary for the preparation of the Report was obtained from the websites of the Ministry of the Interior, the State Border Guard, the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Health, the IOM Riga Office, the Society Integration Foundation, and the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (hereinafter referred to as the OCMA), as well as from the websites of institutions and organisations.

To reflect the prevailing views in society and to explore the debates in the political environment, the authors drew on articles, opinions and assessments published on various news and public policy websites, as well as information available on the websites of other public institutions. All sources and references used in the Report are listed in the list of sources and references used.

The Report uses data compiled by national data providers and Eurostat - The Statistical Office of the European Union. Data has been coordinated with migration and asylum experts. All terms used in this paper correspond to the definitions included in the EMN Glossary of Asylum and Migration Terms[13].

12 Norway, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Montenegro, Armenia, Serbia

13 Available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary_en.

3.

OVERVIEW OF CHANGES IN ASYLUM AND MIGRATION POLICY

General changes in the field of migration

On 15 September 2023, the *Saeima* expressed its confidence in the Cabinet of Ministers established by Evika Siliņa[14].

In the confirmed government of Evika Siliņa, Andris Sprūds is Minister of Defence, Krišjānis Kariņš is Minister of Foreign Affairs, Viktors Valainis is Minister of Economy, Rihards Kozlovskis is Minister of the Interior, and Anda Čakša continues as Minister of Education and Science. The Ministry of Climate and Energy is headed by Kaspars Melnis, the Minister of Culture is Agnese Logina, and the Minister of Welfare is Uldis Augulis. Kaspars Briškens is the Minister of Transport, Inese Lībiņa-Egnere continues to head the Ministry of Justice, Hossam Abu Meri is the Minister of Health, Inga Bērziņa is the Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, and Armands Krauze is the Minister of Agriculture.

In its declaration[15], the Government recognises that Latvia's Euro-Atlantic foreign policy course, external and internal security are common priorities that it is committed to pursuing by ensuring a national defence budget of 3% of GDP by 2027 and funding for public order and security of 2.5% of GDP by 2026. Among the specific actions outlined in the Government's declaration is the completion of the fence on the border with Belarus and Russia by the end of 2023.

On 16 January 2024, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the Government Action Plan[16] for the implementation of the Declaration on the planned actions of the Cabinet of Ministers chaired by Evika Siliņa. The Government Action Plan also confirms a number of priorities set for the sector of interior affairs by Minister of the Interior Rihards Kozlovskis: strengthening the capacity of security institutions, personnel – faster salary increases for those working in the interior sector, bringing them in line with the National Armed Forces (NAF); improvement of material and technical support; construction of the Eastern border, including equipping it with smart technologies.

Migration processes and their management in 2023 continued to be significantly affected by developments abroad, both in relation to the Russian-led war in Ukraine and in Latvia in relation to the situation on the Latvian-Belarusian border.

In 2023, the precarious situation and instrumentalisation of migrants at the Latvian-Belarusian border continued. Most of the migrants were from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. The Belarusian authorities deliberately did not obstruct border crossings in order to weaken the European Union's border security and the capacity of its asylum system. In this context, on 5 October 2023, the *Saeima* adopted amendments to the Criminal Law[17] that were deemed urgent and which strengthened criminal liability for the irregular movement of a person across the state border. The amendments to the Law exclude community service as an alternative punishment to imprisonment because, as noted in the annotation to the draft law, this type of punishment is insufficient to deter persons from committing such a criminal offence.[18]

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14 The *Saeima* expresses its confidence in the government of Evika Siliņa. - Available at: https://www.saeima.lv/lv/aktualitates/saeimas-zinas/32557-saeima-izsaka-uzticibu-evikas-silinas-izveidotajai-valdibai?phrase=E.%20Sili%C5%86as%20vald%C4%ABba.

15 Declaration on the intended activities of the Cabinet of Ministers chaired by Evika Siliņa. - Available at: https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS14/saeimalivs_lmp.nsf/0/CB5AB81D3E00EC0CC2258A2B00236D72?OpenDocument.

16 Cabinet Order No. 55 of 20 January 2024 "On the Government Action Plan for the Implementation of the Declaration on the Planned Actions of the Cabinet of Ministers Headed by Evika Siliņa" - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 16, 23.01.2024. - [entered into force on 20.01.2024]

17 Law "Amendments to the Criminal Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 197, 11.10.2023. - [entered into force on 20.10.2023]

18 Criminalisation of the irregular movement of people across national borders is strengthened. - Available at: https://www.saeima.lv/lv/aktualitates/saeimas-zinas/32653-pastiprina-kriminalatbildibu-par-cilveku-nelikumigu-parvietosanu-pari-valsts-robezai

4.

LEGAL MIGRATION

The total number of temporary residence permits issued for the first time in 2023 increased by 16.26% compared to the previous year, with 10,220[19] (8,790 in 2022) temporary residence permits issued. In addition, 17,167[20] first-time temporary residence permits were issued to Ukrainian civilians who have received temporary protection in Latvia.

Latvia has an official language policy that requires all its citizens to be able to use Latvian at an appropriate level to ensure effective communication and integration into society. This rule was introduced after the restoration of independence in 1991 and is part of Latvia's official language policy, which is based on the country's official language, Latvian, as well as on the right to a national language for minority languages.

To obtain citizenship or a permanent residence permit in Latvia, foreign nationals must pass an official language exam to prove their knowledge and skills in Latvian. This requirement is linked to Latvia's official language policy and efforts to promote the use of the official language in society. This policy reflects Latvia's efforts to ensure social cohesion and integration by promoting the acquisition of the official language throughout the population.

On 5 April 2023, the *Saeima* approved amendments to the Immigration Law[21] that were deemed urgent in order to enable the responsible authorities to make informed decisions and to ensure that Russian citizens who wish to continue their stay in Latvia have time to submit the necessary documents to apply for a status of a long-term resident of the European Union. The amendments provide that:

- A Russian citizen who was a Latvian citizen or Latvian non-citizen before acquiring Russian citizenship has a permanent residence permit in Latvia valid until 1 September 2023.
- If persons want to continue living in Latvia, they must submit proof of having passed the official language proficiency test and an application for a status of a long-term resident of the European Union by 1 September 2023.
- The amendments to the Immigration Law stipulate that Russian citizens who have not submitted the required documents to the OCMA will have a permanent residence permit valid until 1 September 2023.
- For Russian citizens who have taken the language proficiency test at least once by 1 September 2023 and have been set to retake the official language proficiency test by 30 November 2023, the permanent residence permit is valid until 31 December 2023.
- For Russian nationals who have submitted the necessary documents, the permanent residence permit is valid until the date of entry into force of the final decision.
- A Russian citizen's application for a status of a long-term resident of the European Union will have to be examined by the OCMA within one year from the date of receipt.
- For Russian nationals covered by the amendments, the pension granted to the person is also sufficient to claim a status of a long-term resident of the European Union.

The amendments to the Immigration Law were necessary because, given the application process and the potentially large number of applications in a short period of time (approximately 25,000 persons), a situation may arise where a person has fulfilled the requirements of the Immigration Law but his/her

19 Data source: OCMA. Initial data on temporary residence permits collected by Eurostat – to be adjusted at a later date.

20 Data source: OCMA.

21 Law "Amendments to the Immigration Law". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 115, 15.06.2022. - [entered into force on 29.06.2022]

permanent residence right is not valid before the application for a status of a long-term resident of the European Union is processed, and the person loses the health, education, employment and similar rights attached to the permanent residence right.[22]

On 16 June 2023, amendments to the Immigration Law were approved[23], which suspend the granting of permanent residence permits to persons who have a Latvian or Livonian (Liv) as one of their relatives in the direct line and to family members of such persons who have been granted the status of a repatriate family member[24], establishing the right of these categories of persons to obtain temporary residence permits for five years[25]. The purpose of the amendments is to reduce the threat to the internal security of the Republic of Latvia by restricting the flow of persons to the Republic of Latvia whose entry does not comply with the basic idea contained in the preamble of the Repatriation Law[26] – to facilitate the return to their ethnic homeland of compatriots who have emigrated from Latvia due to genocide, war or threat of assimilation.

The above amendments to the Immigration Law[27] also provide for an unlimited right to employment for third-country nationals who have been granted a temporary residence permit by the Minister of the Interior. The amendments were made to ensure equal treatment of all third-country nationals whose residence in the Republic of Latvia is based on international law or humanitarian grounds, the law also grants an unlimited right to employment to third-country nationals who are granted a temporary residence permit by the Minister of the Interior in accordance with the Immigration Law[28].

On 7 February 2023, amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 676 of 30 August 2011 "Visa Regulations"[29] were approved, which were necessary to clarify the documents to be submitted by persons applying for a long-term visa in connection with the performance of remote work for an employee registered abroad. In addition to the above, the legislation provides for clarification of the visa application storage period, the possibility to submit visa applications to the OCMA electronically or by post, as well as the inclusion of remarks on visa stickers as required by EU legislation. The amendments were aimed at streamlining the procedures and costs related to the storage of visa applications, reducing the administrative burden for persons by providing the possibility to submit visa applications to the OCMA electronically or by post, as well as clarifying the notes to be included in visa stickers in line with the regulation laid down in the EU legislation.

22 More time is given to process residence permits for Russian nationals. Available at: https://lvportals.lv/skaidrojumi/350673-dod-vairak-laika-uzturesanas-atlauju-krievijas-pilsoniem-izskatisanai-2023.

23 Law "Amendments to the Immigration Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 116, 16.06.2023. - [entered into force on 01.07.2023]

24 Persons referred to in Section 23(1) and Section 23.1(2) and (3) of the Immigration Law.

25 Annotation to the draft law on amendments to the Immigration Law. - Available at: https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS14/SaeimaLIVS14.nsf/0/293CA048DC703C5EC22589A4002A1216?OpenDocument.

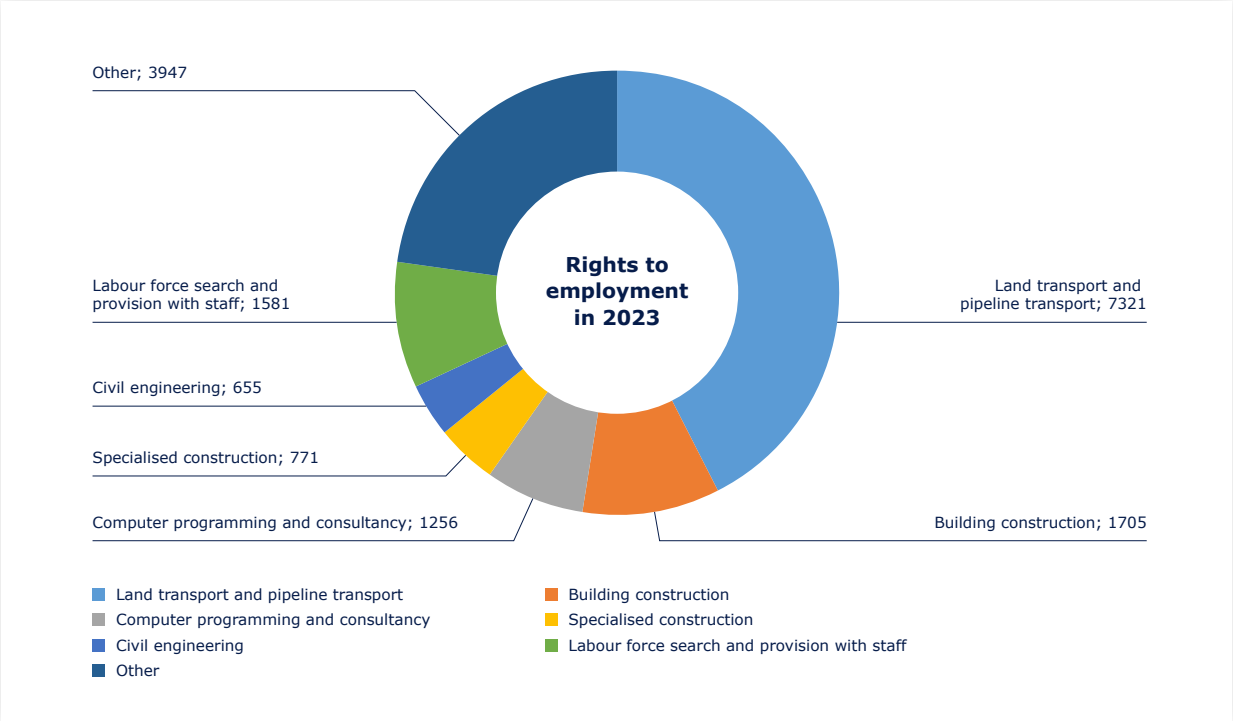
26 Repatriation Law. - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 155, 10.10.1995. - [entered into force on 24.10.1995] The law will expire on 1 July 2028.

27 Law "Amendments to the Immigration Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 116, 16.06.2023. - [entered into force on 01.07.2023]

28 Section 23(3)(3) of the Immigration Law.

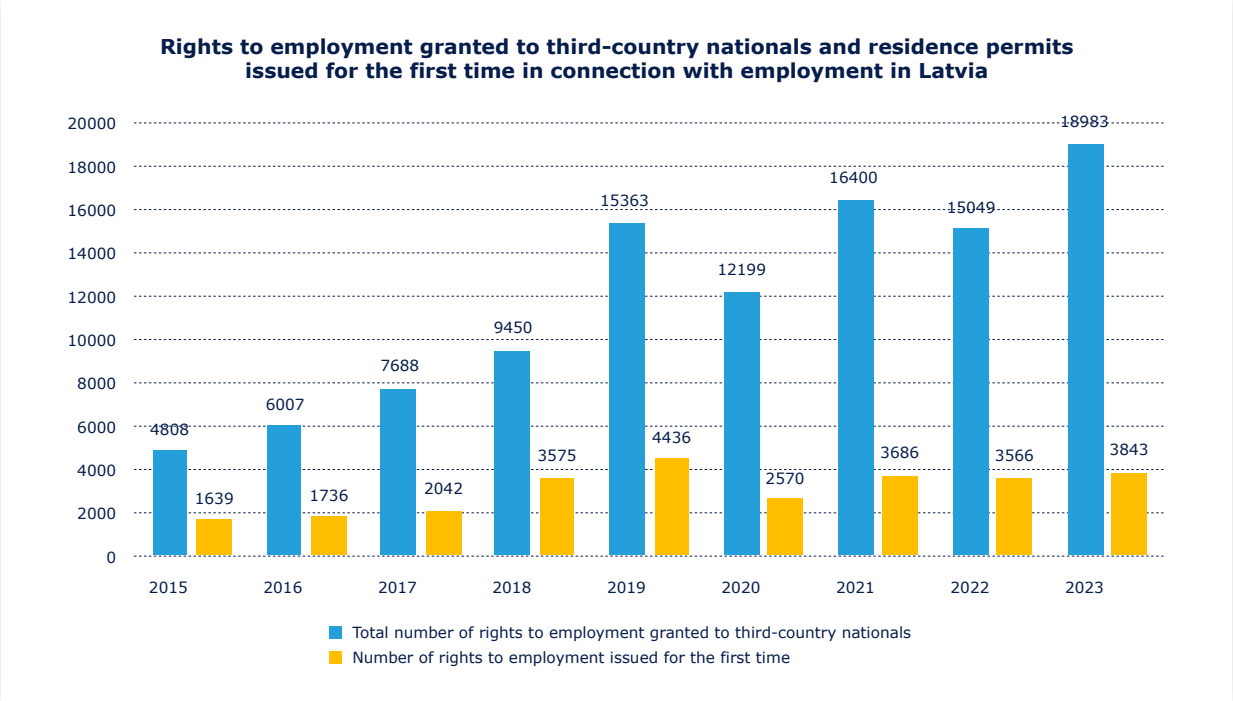
29 Cabinet Regulation of 7 February 2023 No. 58 "Amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 676 of 30 August 2011 "Visa Regulations"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 81, 26.04.2023. - [entered into force on 27.04.2023]

Economic migration



The total number of employment rights granted to third-country nationals in 2023 (both based on visa (7,682) and based on a temporary residence permit) increased by 26,14% (15 049 in 2022; 18,983 in 2023). The majority of third-country nationals work in land transport and pipeline transport (7,321), labour force search and provision with staff (1,581), building construction (1,705), computer programming and consultancy (1,256), specialised construction (771), civil engineering (655). In 2023, the highest number of rights to employment was granted to nationals of Uzbekistan (4,687), Belarus (3,725) and Ukraine (2,751).[30]

30 Data source: OCMA.



The number of first residence permits issued to third-country nationals for employment purposes has increased: 3,566 in 2022 and 3,843 in 2023.

On 16 June 2023, amendments to the Immigration Law were approved[31], implementing Directive (EU) 2021/1883 of the European Parliament and of the Council[32], giving EU Blue Card holders more rights in relation to employment and mobility in the EU. The amendments also provide for compensation for seasonal workers in cases where the employer has ceased economic activity and the visa issued to the seasonal worker has been cancelled for this reason. The amendments to the Immigration Law also give third-country seasonal workers the right to change employer without leaving the country in order to apply for a new visa, provided that the period of stay does not exceed 12 months. The purpose of the amendments was to transpose the provisions of Directive (EU) No. 2014/36 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the conditions of entry and stay of third-country nationals for the purposes of employment as seasonal workers[33] into national legislation.

On 19 December 2023, Cabinet Regulation No. 801 "Amendment to Cabinet Regulation No. 552 of 21 June 2010 "Procedures for Approval of Invitations and Drawing up of Written Requests""[34] was adopted, which eases the requirements for economic operators who plan to employ third-country workers in Latvia in professions that are not regulated in Latvia. The amendments provide for a waiver of the requirement

31 Law "Amendments to the Immigration Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 116, 16.06.2023. - [entered into force on 01.07.2023]

32 Directive (EU) 2021/1883 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2021 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purpose of highly qualified employment, and repealing Council Directive 2009/50/EC. – Official Journal L 382, 28.10.2021.

33 Directive (EU) No. 2014/36 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the conditions of entry and stay of third-country nationals for the purposes of employment as seasonal workers. – Official Journal L 94, 28.3.2014.

34 Cabinet Regulation of 19 December 2023 No. 801 "Amendment to Cabinet Regulation No. 552 of 21 June 2010 "Procedure for Approval of Invitations and Drawing up of Written Requests"". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 247, 21.12.2023. - [entered into force on 22.12.2023]

to submit a copy of the document certifying education/experience if the third-country national is to be employed in a profession that is not regulated in Latvia, with the obligation for the inviting person to submit self-certification that the third-country national has undergone a job interview on the necessary competence of the third-country national to perform the work envisaged or, failing that, a commitment to undertake his/her training. The amendment was agreed at the Human Capital Development Council on 9 August 2023 and endorsed by the Thematic Committee on Growth, Competitiveness and Productivity on 10 August 2023.[35]

On 16 January 2024, Cabinet Regulation No. 40 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 676 of 30 August 2011 "Visa Regulations"[36] was adopted to ensure the transposition of the requirements of the European Union laws and regulations[37] into the national laws and regulations of the Republic of Latvia. The amendment requires the issuing authority, when issuing a visa to a seasonal worker, to inform him or her in writing of his or her rights and obligations and of the complaints procedure. The written information to be provided to the person shall be prepared by the OCMA in cooperation with the Ministry of Welfare, including the conditions to be observed in the field of entry and residence, as well as indicating the person's right to apply to state institutions to lodge complaints about violations of labour law. This obligation is fulfilled by the information on the visa application procedure and the documents to be attached to it, which is available in several languages in the case of seasonal workers, on the websites of the OCMA[38] and the diplomatic and consular representations of the Republic of Latvia.[39]

On 30 January 2024, Cabinet Regulation No 74 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 225 of 25 April 2017 "Regulations Regarding the Amount of Financial Means Necessary for a Foreigner and the Determination of the Existence of Financial Means"" was adopted,[40] In order to reduce the negative impact of labour shortages on economic growth in all sectors of the economy, it is necessary to ease the requirements regarding the amount of financial means required for foreigners who receive the right to employment in all sectors of the economy. The amendments to the Regulation stipulate that in all sectors of the economy, the minimum amount of financial means for third-country workers shall be at the level of the average wage in the sector or the minimum wage established by a sectoral general agreement concluded in accordance with Section 18(4) of the Labour Law[41].[42]

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35 Annotation to the draft legislation "Amendment to the Cabinet Regulation of 21 June 2010 No. 552 "Procedure for Approval of Invitations and Drawing up of Written Requests"". - Available at: https://tapportals.mk.gov.lv/annotation/421c4317-3b77-4015-8700-f3a139887631.

36 Cabinet Regulation No. 40 of 16 January 2024 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 676 of 30 August 2011 "Visa Regulations"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 13, 18.01.2024. - [entered into force on 19.01.2024]

37 Article 11 of Directive 2014/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the conditions of entry and stay of third-country nationals for the purposes of employment as seasonal workers requires that when a visa is issued to a seasonal worker, he or she be informed in writing of the rights and obligations arising from the above Directive and of the procedure for lodging a complaint.

38 Information on the rights and obligations of seasonal workers. - Available at: https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/vizas-ielugumi-un-uzaicinajumi.

39 Annotation to the draft legislation "Amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 676 of 30 August 2011 "Visa Regulations"". - Available at: https://tapportals.mk.gov.lv/annotation/d1b93deb-77e4-441e-be6a-b3620f2e1ef9.

40 Cabinet Regulation No. 74 of 30 January 2024 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 225 of 25 April 2017 "Regulations Regarding the Amount of Financial Means Necessary for a Foreigner and the Determination of the Existence of Financial Means"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 27, 07.02.2024. - [entered into force on 08.02.2024]

41 If the employers, employers' group, employers' organisation or association of employers' organisations, including employers who have joined an already concluded collective agreement in a sector or territory in which, according to the Central Statistical Office, more than 50 per cent of the employees are employed or the turnover of their goods or services is more than 50 per cent of the turnover of goods or services in the sector, are parties to the general agreement, the general agreement shall be binding on all employers in the sector and shall apply to all employees employed by those employers. In respect of the said employers and employees, the general agreement shall enter into force no earlier than three months from the date of its publication in the official gazette Latvijas Vēstnesis and shall not provide for a later date of entry into force. The general agreement shall be published in the official gazette Latvijas Vēstnesis on the basis of a joint application by the parties.

42 Annotation to the Draft Legislation "Amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 225 of 25 April 2017 "Regulations Regarding the Amount of Financial Means Necessary for a Foreigner and Determination of the Existence of Financial Means"". - Available at: https://tapportals.mk.gov.lv/annotation/463b6a0e-76b7-41e5-a3fe-aa1aebabd2f6.

On 5 March 2024, Cabinet Regulation No. 143 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 552 of 21 June 2010 "Procedures for Approval of Invitations and Drawing up of Written Requests"[43] was adopted, the purpose of which is to ensure the transposition of the requirements of the European Union laws and regulations[44] into the national laws and regulations of the Republic of Latvia. The amendments provide that when inviting a seasonal worker, the employer shall provide a declaration that the seasonal worker's place of residence will comply with the laws and regulations laying down requirements for living quarters.[45]

To attract the specialists of information technology (IT) to fill in the skills gap, the Baltic States have launched a pilot cooperation project with Nigeria, Kenya and Armenia, supported by the European Union. The authors of the idea hope that the influx of highly educated specialists will help Baltic companies, especially start-ups, to grow faster. Talented Nigerians, Kenyans and Armenians will be able to demonstrate their professional skills. The project is called "Digital Explorers 2". In the previous round, only Lithuanian companies and Nigerian specialists participated. Over the next two and a half years, 85 professionals from Nigeria, Kenya and Armenia will be able to find jobs in Baltic IT companies and start-ups.[46]

43 Cabinet Regulation No. 143 of 5 March 2024 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 552 of 21 June 2010 "Procedures for Approval of Invitations and Drawing up of Written Requests"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 48, 07.03.2024. - [entered into force on 08.03.2024]

44 Directive 2014/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the conditions of entry and stay of third-country nationals for the purposes of employment as seasonal workers. – Official Journal L 94, 28.3.2014.

45 Annotation to the draft legislation "Amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 552 of 21 June 2010 "Procedures for Approval of Invitations and Drawing up of Written Requests"". - Available at: https://tapportals.mk.gov.lv/annotation/a7f0c30e-71da-4156-a1dd-a25d87b755e7.

46 Baltic companies will look for IT professionals in Nigeria, Kenya and Armenia. - Available at: https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/ekonomika/28.11.2023-baltijas-uznemumi-mekles-it-specialistus-nigerija-kenija-un-armenija.a533215/.

5.

STUDIES AND DISCUSSIONS ON MIGRATION

On 22 September 2022, the *Saeima* ruled that permanent residence permits for citizens of the Russian Federation who have received them in accordance with Section 24(1)(8) of the Immigration Law[47] are valid until 1 September 2023. Paragraph 58 of the Transitional Provisions of the Immigration Law stipulates that Russian citizens residing in Latvia who were previously Latvian citizens or non-citizens, as well as other third-country nationals, must prove their knowledge of the official language in order to obtain a permanent residence permit.

During the course of the year 2023, there have been several discussions and articles in the public space about the above-mentioned amendments to the Immigration Law and the activities of Russian citizens in relation to residence rights in Latvia. During 2023, Russian nationals subject to the amendments to the Immigration Law had to pass official language proficiency tests. The Ministry of the Interior informed that the first phase of the national language proficiency test, which was set to end on 1 September 2023 has ended; and it was found that some of those who had taken the official language proficiency test had not been able to pass it at least at the minimum required level of proficiency. Of those who took the official language proficiency test in April and May, around 49% failed, and in July and August – around 80% of applicants failed.[48]

Upon the application of several natural persons, the Constitutional Court examined the joint case "On Compliance of Paragraph 58 of Transitional Provisions of the Immigration Law and Section 5 of the Law of 22 September 2022 "Amendments to the Immigration Law"; insofar it excludes Paragraph 8 of Section 24(1) of the Immigration Law, with Article 1, the first sentence of Article 91 and Article 96 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, as well as Article 4 of Protocol 4 to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms" (Case No. 2023-04-0106[49]).[50] On 15 February 2024, the Constitutional Court handed down a judgement in the case on permanent residence permits for citizens of the Russian Federation, holding that Paragraph 58 of the Transitional Provisions of the Immigration Law, in its current wording, complies with the Constitution. The Court concluded that in essence the contested provision, when viewed systemically in conjunction with other legal provisions, provides citizens of the Russian Federation with a real possibility to acquire a new legal basis to continue to reside in the territory of Latvia, provided that the persons themselves are motivated to take the necessary actions. This ensures that they can continue to maintain the social links they have already established.

At the beginning of March 2024, the first return decisions have been issued by the OCMA for Russian citizens who have not complied with the requirements of the amended Immigration Law and have not submitted any documents to apply for a residence permit to live in Latvia.

A total of 1,016 Russian citizens were asked to explain why they had not complied with the requirements of the amendments to the Immigration Law and submitted documents to apply for a residence permit to reside in the country, as well as to provide information on the planned date of departure if these Russian citizens no longer had grounds to apply for a residence permit.[51]

In 2023, the debate on the labour force shortage in the Latvian economy continued, as confirmed by the Minister of Finance: "*Latvia is facing a labour force shortage and it is high time to address this issue in the*

47 Law "Amendments to the Immigration Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 185A, 23.09.2022.- [entered into force on 24.09.2022]

48 Most Russian citizens have not passed the Latvian language test. - Available at: https://leta.lv/home/important/6630593D-FA67-43C5-AFA8-47DB735B0A5B/.

49 Judgement on behalf of the Republic of Latvia. - Riga, 15 February 2024, Case No. 2023-04-0106. - Available at: https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/web/viewer.html?file=https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023-04-0106_Spriedums.pdf#search=.

50 The requirement for Russian citizens living here to have a basic knowledge of the official language is in line with the Constitution. - Available at: https://lvportals.lv/tiesas/360360-prasiba-apliecinat-valsts-valodas-pamatzinasanas-seit-dzivojosajiem-krievijas-pilsoniem-atbilst-satversmei-2024

51 The first three departure orders have been issued by the OCMA for Russian nationals who have not obtained new residence permits. - Available at: https://www.diena.lv/raksts/latvija/zinas/pmlp-izdevusi-pirmos-tris-izbrauksanas-rikojumus-krievijas-pilsoniem-kuri-nav-ieguvusi-jaunas-uzturesanas-atlaujas-14314340.

political debate. Latvia needs to open its doors wider to workers from other countries and focus on "smart" immigration. Latvia has an ageing population, with the number of people in employment falling by 2,000-4,000 every year. Currently, the situation on the Latvian labour market is somewhat stabilised by the arrival of Ukrainian civilians in Latvia."[52]

In the context of the various discussions, the first meeting of the Human Capital Development Council was organised in the summer of 2023, where the Minister of Economy Ilze Indriksone, the Minister of Welfare Evika Siliņa, the Minister of Education and Science Anda Čakša and representatives of the relevant ministries discussed the proposals made by business organisations to make it easier to attract labour force from third countries. Representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior and OCMA were also invited to the meeting to discuss the problematic issues of attracting foreign labour force and potential solutions to facilitate certain administrative procedures.

The Ministry of Economy has discussed with cooperation institutions and social partners the problematic issues of attracting foreign labour force and potential solutions to facilitate certain administrative procedures. The representatives of business organisations mentioned the following as the most important barriers to attracting labour force from third countries:

- the amount of pay needed to employ a foreigner – at least the national average wage;
- requirement to provide evidence of the foreigner's education/professional experience, also if the employment is in a non-regulated profession;
- the requirement to wait 10 working days after registering a vacancy with the State Employment Agency;
- queues and lengthy paperwork process at embassies and the requirement to appear in person;
- queues in the branches of the OCMA;
- requirement to renew a foreigner's eID card once a year, even if their residence permit is valid for 5 years;
- the unpredictable deadline for receiving replies from national security authorities for nationals of countries subject to additional checks.[53]

By the beginning of 2024, several Cabinet Regulations were amended to address some of the obstacles mentioned at the first meeting of the Human Capital Development Council: on 19 December 2023, Cabinet Regulation No. 801[54] was adopted and on 30 January 2024, Cabinet Regulation No. 74[55] was adopted, which provide that it is not necessary to submit documents certifying education/experience if the third-country national intends to be employed in professions that are not regulated in Latvia, as well as stipulating that the third-country national receives the average salary set in the sector.

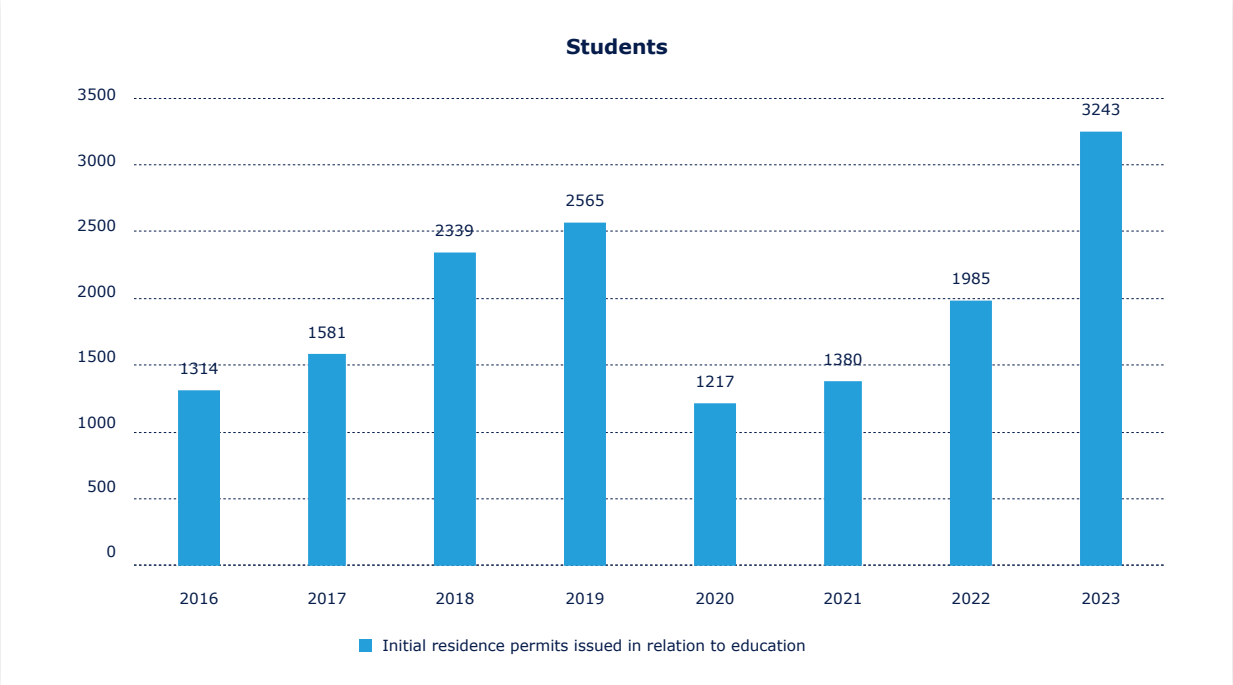
52 Minister: It is high time to tackle the labour force shortage; focus on "smart" immigration. - Available at: https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/ekonomika/27.04.2023-ministrs-ir-pedejais-bridis-risinat-darbaspeka-trukuma-problemu-jakoncentrejas-uz-gudru-imigraciju.a506509/.

53 The Human Capital Development Council discusses the challenges of attracting foreign labour force. - Available at: https://www.em.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/cilvekkapitala-attistibas-padome-parruna-arvalstu-darbaspeka-piesaistes-problemjautajumus.

54 Cabinet Regulation of 19 December 2023 No. 801 "Amendment to Cabinet Regulation No. 552 of 21 June 2010 "Procedure for Approval of Invitations and Drawing up of Written Requests"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 247, 21.12.2023. - [entered into force on 22.12.2023]

55 Cabinet Regulation No. 74 of 30 January 2024 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 225 of 25 April 2017 "Regulations Regarding the Amount of Financial Means Necessary for a Foreigner and the Determination of the Existence of Financial Means"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 27, 07.02.2024. - [entered into force on 08.02.2024]

Students and scientists



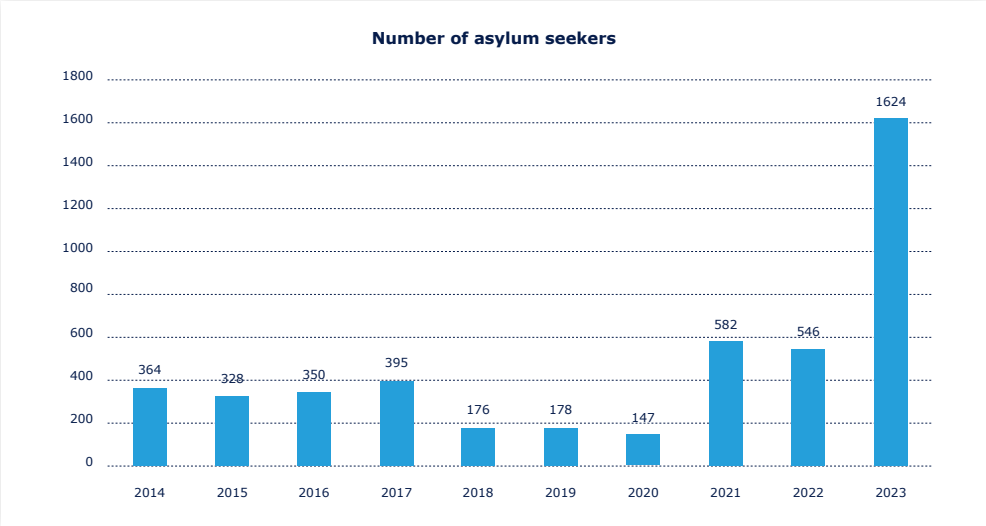
In 2023, 3,243 first residence permits were issued in relation to education (1,985 permits in 2022), an increase compared to the previous year.

Family reunification

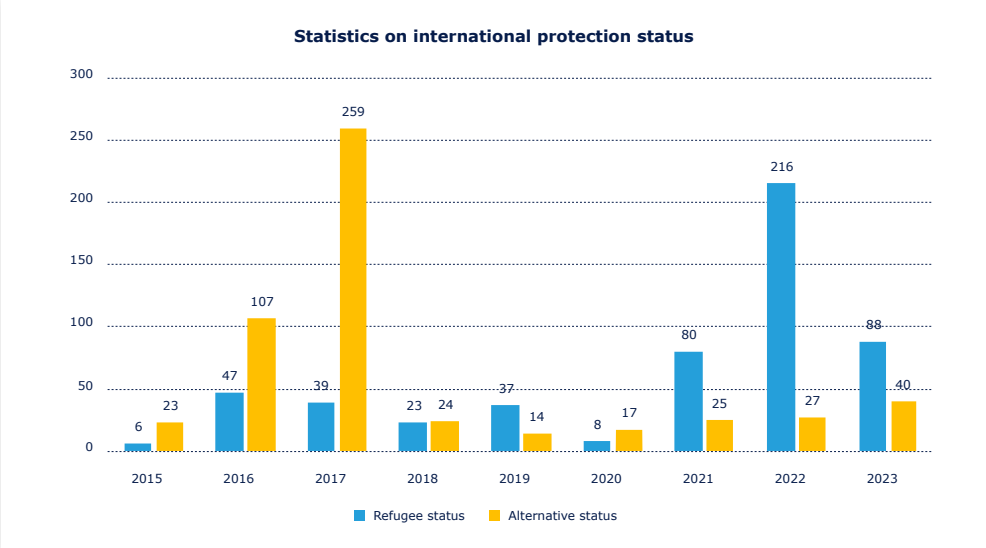
The number of first residence permits issued to third-country nationals in the context of family reunification has slightly increased to 2,242 in 2023 (2,199 in 2022).

6.

INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION



Compared to 2022, the number of asylum seekers in 2023 has increased 3 times to 1,624 (546 in 2022) and the predominant countries of origin of asylum seekers have changed – the largest number of asylum seekers came from Syria – 348 (15 in 2022), Afghanistan – 307 (111 in 2022), Iran – 206 (58 in 2022), India – 167 (9 in 2022) and Iraq – 65 (52 in 2022).[56]



128 persons received international protection in Latvia in 2023. Refugee status has been granted to 88 persons, and alternative status to 40.

110 asylum seekers have been transferred to Latvia under the Dublin Mechanism in 2023.

56 Data source: OCMA.

Measures to implement the Common European Asylum System

In order to ensure a more efficient asylum procedure, taking into account the countries of origin of asylum seekers, such as India, Pakistan and others, accelerated examination of asylum applications is more frequently applied. The application of the accelerated examination of asylum applications is used due to the high number of asylum seekers experienced in 2023, which has increased 3-fold compared to 2022, while the administrative capacity has remained at its current level[57].

In cases where the information in the asylum seeker's file shows that it is not contrary to the respect of the procedural rights of the asylum seeker, the personal interview shall be conducted remotely.[58] The provision of remote personal interview facilitates the examination of asylum applications within the deadlines set by the Asylum Law and makes efficient use of administrative and financial resources.

In the context of the Dublin procedure, work has started to ensure that responses to *take back* and *take charge* requests can be signed electronically by delegating this task to a specific responsible person in the Asylum Division of the OCMA.[59]

Accommodation of applicants for international protection

In the middle of 2023, a new accommodation centre for asylum seekers, Liepna, was opened in *Liepna* rural territory, *Alūksne* municipality. The Asylum Seekers Accommodation Centre in Liepna can accommodate up to 252 asylum seekers. The Asylum Seekers Accommodation Centre Liepna is operated by the OCMA. The changing geopolitical circumstances, as well as the hybrid war waged by Belarus, make it necessary for the OCMA to accommodate a larger number of asylum seekers.

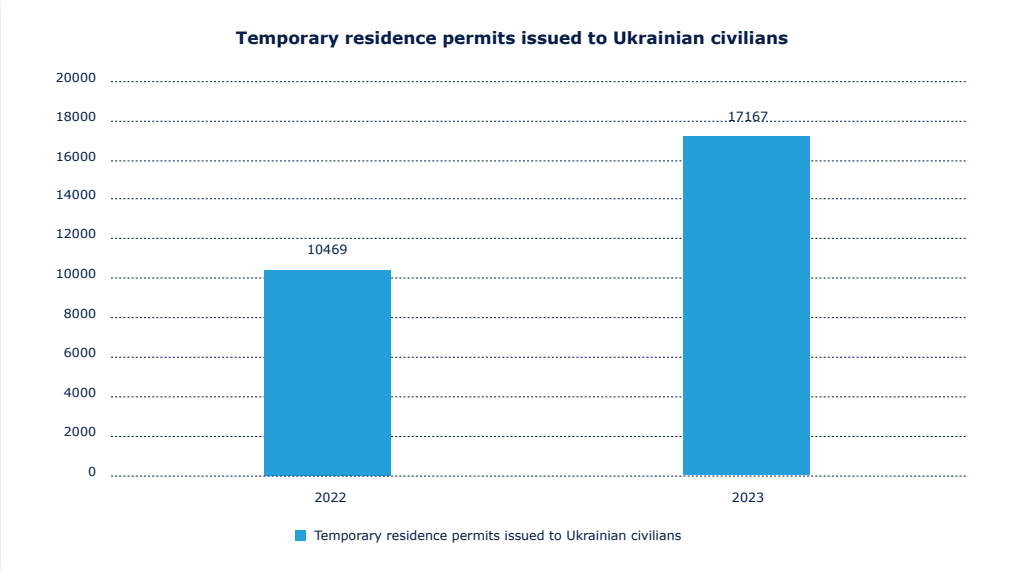
57 there has been no increase in the number of staff involved in asylum procedures.

58 Source: Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs

59 Source: Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs

7.

TEMPORARY PROTECTION AND OTHER MEASURES IN RESPONSE TO PERSONS FLEEING THE WAR IN UKRAINE



On 19 December 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the Action Plan for Assitance to Ukrainian Civilians in the Republic of Latvia for 2024[60], which sets out the measures to be implemented and resources to be committed by state institutions, local governments, non-governmental organisations and business entities to ensure coordinated action to provide support to Ukrainian civilians – both those already residing in the Republic of Latvia and those Ukrainian civilians who, fleeing the war, will still arrive in the Republic of Latvia in 2024.

A number of measures have been taken in support of Ukrainian civilians in 2023:

1) Legal amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians:

On 8 December 2022, amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians[61] were adopted, which provide that as of 1 January 2023, a temporary residence permit for two years will be issued to Ukrainian civilians who apply for temporary protection status in the Republic of Latvia and have a document certifying this status. Long-term visas and temporary residence permits issued to Ukrainian civilians who have received temporary protection status in the Republic of Latvia until 31 December 2022 will be valid until 4 March 2024, regardless of the validity period indicated in these documents.

The documents will continue to be valid in the territory of the Republic of Latvia, but the Ukrainian civilian will have to apply for a new temporary residence permit in the following cases:

- the person needs to travel outside the territory of the Republic of Latvia;
- the visa or residence permit issued to the person has been lost or has become invalid because it has been damaged or the details on it have changed;
- the person has previously been issued with a visa but needs a residence permit to use the electronic signature facility.

60 Law on Amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians. - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 240A, 12.12.2022. - [entered into force on 13.12.2022]

61 Law on Amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians. - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 240A, 12.12.2022. - [entered into force on 13.12.2022]

On 23 November 2023, amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians[62] were approved, extending until 4 March 2025 the validity of visas and residence permits issued to Ukrainian civilians. The amendments to the law reduce the administrative formalities and administrative burden related to the granting of temporary protection status.

2) Scholarships and educational assistance to Ukrainian civilians:

On 28 February 2023, Cabinet Regulation No. 78 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 68 of 24 January 2012 "Procedures for Granting Scholarships to Foreigners"" [63] was adopted to continue providing assistance to Ukrainian civilians until 31 December 2023 under the framework of the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians, with a scholarship fund of up to EUR 688,000. The amendments also facilitate the process of administering scholarships for Ukrainian civilians. From now on, the State Education Development Agency will conclude a study or research scholarship disbursement agreement with the respective educational or scientific institution, with the study or research scholarship being paid to a Ukrainian civilian on a monthly basis for the current month.[64]

In 2023, a number of amendments were adopted to the Cabinet Regulation No. 488 of 26 July 2016 "Procedures by which Minor Asylum Seeker shall be Provided with Opportunities for Acquiring Education"[65], which specifies that support and funding should continue to be provided to a learner who is registered in the National Education Information System.[66],[67]

On 2 May 2023, amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 752 of 29 November 2022 "Regulations on the Content and Procedure of Professional Qualification Examinations"[68] were adopted, stipulating that an examinee who meets the status of a Ukrainian civilian as defined in the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians may be provided with a support measure in the examination timetable with an extension of the examination time and the possibility to use a dictionary, in agreement with the National Centre for Education Content or the Latvian National Cultural Centre. The purpose of the amendments was to provide assistance to Ukrainian civilians in the conduct of the professional qualification examination.

In 2023, the National Centre for Education, in cooperation with local authorities, implemented two support programmes for Ukrainian children and young people: "Support for camps for Ukrainian and Latvian children

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62 Law "Amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 231, 29.11.2023. - [entered into force on 30.11.2023]

63 Cabinet Regulation No. 78 of 28 February 2023 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 68 of 24 January 2012 "Procedures for Granting Scholarships to Foreigners"". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 44, 02.03.2023. - [entered into force on 03.03.2023]

64 This year, EUR 688,000 are available to support students and researchers from Ukraine. - Available at: https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/studejosajiem-un-petniekiem-no-ukrainas-sogad-pieejams-atbalsts-688-000-eiro-apmera.a498571/

65 Cabinet Regulation of 28 February 2023 No. 93 "Amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 488 of 26 July 2016 "Procedures by which Minor Asylum Seeker shall be Provided with Opportunities for Acquiring Education"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 44, 02.03.2023.- [entered into force on 03.03.2023]

66 for teachers' salaries and the purchase of teaching materials, as well as 50 % (EUR 12.50) support for the implementation of the individual education plan and teachers' remuneration for the implementation of the individual education plan, amounting to EUR 257 per month,
- EUR 50 per school year to provide teaching materials,
- EUR 15 per month for the payment of the scholarship.

for the implementation of the secondary vocational education programme, per civilian per month of EUR 76.08 , and in the thematic area of education "Arts" – EUR 108.32.

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68 Cabinet Regulation of 2 May 2023 "Amendment to Regulation No 212 "Cabinet Regulation of 29 November 2022 No. 752 of 2022 "Regulations on the Content and Procedure of Professional Qualification Examinations"". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 85, 03.05.2023. - [entered into force on 04.05.2023]

and youth" and "Non-formal education activities, including Latvian language learning, for Ukrainian children and youth".[69] The aim of the programmes was to promote the psycho-emotional well-being and socialisation of Ukrainian children; to strengthen the ethnic identity and community of Ukrainian children with the Ukrainian community living in Latvia; to provide opportunities for successful integration and inclusion into the Latvian education system and cultural environment; to support the learning of the Latvian language.

The Ministry of Education and Science, in cooperation with local authorities, has provided pre-school and general basic and secondary education to 3,740 pupils with the status of "Ukrainian civilian" by December 2023. A total of 182 students with the status of "Ukrainian civilian" were provided with the opportunity to receive vocational training by December 2023.

3) Support for employment and career development:

As of March 2022, Ukrainian civilians who have entered employment in Latvia can receive a one-off employment start-up allowance of EUR 500 from the State Employment Agency and, as of October 2022, a one-off self-employment start-up allowance of EUR 500.[70] From 2023, both allowances was increased to EUR 620[71]. From 1 January 2024, the amount of both the one-off employment allowance and the one-off self-employment allowance has been increased to EUR 700[72].

On 10 November 2023, at the invitation of the association "*Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem*" (I Want to Help Refugees), the Customer Service Unit of the State Labour Inspectorate hosted an online information event on employment for Ukrainian civilians. At the end of May/beginning of June 2023, in cooperation with the Ministry of Welfare, the State Labour Inspectorate, the Ministry of the Interior, and the OCMA an information material for third-country nationals was prepared. The website of the State Labour Inspectorate also contains information for Ukrainian civilians on employment requirements in Latvia in Ukrainian. In the period from 1 January to 18 December 2023, 3,617 Ukrainian civilians received the employment start-up allowance and 237 received the self-employment start-up allowance.

Latvian employers are still actively offering jobs to Ukrainian civilians. From the beginning of 2023 until the end of December, 533 employers registered 4,920 vacancies for Ukrainian civilians in various occupations: unskilled worker (445 jobs), cook (314 jobs), cleaner (290 jobs), seasonal agricultural worker (226 jobs), peat extraction worker (178 jobs) and other occupations (3,467 jobs).

In 2023, a total of 8,647 Ukrainian civilians (5,726 women and 2,921 men) received assistance from the State Employment Agency; 3,487 Ukrainian civilians obtained the status of unemployed and 24 obtained the status of job-seekers. 1,943 Ukrainian civilians – unemployed and job-seekers – who received assistance from the State Employment Agency have found a job in 2023.

In 2023, 1,552 Ukrainian civilians were involved in active employment and prevention activities. The most often used activities for Ukrainian civilians were non-formal education (485 participants), learning Latvian (411), career counselling (758), learning English (60) and other active employment activities.

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69 Source: Ministry of Education and Science.

70 Law on Assistance to Ukrainian civilians. - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 45A, 04.03.2022. - [entered into force on 05.03.2022]

71 Cabinet Regulation No. 788 of 13 December 2022 "Amendment to Cabinet Regulation No. 656 of 24 November 2015 "Regulations on the Amount of the Minimum Monthly Salary within Normal Working Hours and Calculation of the Minimum Hourly Tariff Rate"" - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 243, 15.12.2022. - [entered into force on 01.01.2023]

72 Cabinet Regulation No. 65 of 14 November 2023 "Amendment to Cabinet Regulation No. 656 of 24 November 2015 "Regulations on the Amount of the Minimum Monthly Salary within Normal Working Hours and Calculation of the Minimum Hourly Tariff Rate"". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 223, 16.11.2023. - [entered into force on 01.01.2024]

4) Support for Latvian language training for Ukrainian civilians:

The Latvian Language Agency also provides methodological support to Latvian school teachers in their work with newly-arrived children from Ukraine and other countries: 12-hour courses for 9 groups; 18 methodological workshops; 10 consultations for school teams and regular individual consultations. In order to better implement the LLA programme "Latvian Language Acquisition Programme for Newcomers (70-hour programme for grades 1-12; A0-A1)"; additional learning materials have been developed: In 2023, a workbook for grades 1-3 was published, which corresponds to the Latvian language proficiency level A0, or for beginners. Z. Dambe. Pirmais solis. *Latviešu valoda jauniebraucējiem*.

In response to the high demand for Latvian language training among Ukrainian civilians, the Government decided to allocate EUR 4 million for Latvian language courses. On 18 April 2023, the Government decided to reallocate funds not exceeding EUR 4,029,836 to implement the Cabinet Order "On the Plan of Measures for the Provision of Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians in the Republic of Latvia 2023" – to provide Latvian language training to Ukrainian civilians.[73] The Government's reallocation of funds is intended for the organisation of Latvian language courses until 31 December 2023, which will enable Latvian language training for approximately 5,300 Ukrainian civilians.

From spring 2022 to the end of 2023, the Society Integration Foundation implemented the programme "Latvian Language Training for Ukrainian Civilians". During two years, 9,556 people attended the language courses. In 2022, a total of 3,507 persons attended the training, while from spring 2023 to 15 December, 6,049 people took up the opportunity. Free Latvian language tuition was provided in all regions of Latvia, both in person and remotely, as well as in a hybrid mode.[74]

For the second successive year, the Latvian Language Agency with the financial support of the Ministry of Education and Science has been organising Latvian language courses for teachers from Ukraine: In the first half of 2023, courses for A2/B1 language proficiency were held, and in the second half of the year, courses for B1/B2 language proficiency were held. In 2023, 17 teachers attended the course.[75]

Within the framework of the European Social Fund project "Support for the Development of Individual Competences of Learners" assistance was provided to Ukrainian children and young people to learn Latvian in learning groups in grades 1-12. During the study year 2022/2023, funding was received by 43 comprehensive schools in Latvia attended by Ukrainian civilians. From March 2022 to 31 May 2023, National Centre for Education of the Republic of Latvia created a database to collect data on Ukrainian civilians with pedagogical qualifications who had expressed a wish to work in schools in Latvia. 384 applications had been received by 31 May 2023. During the study year 2022/2023, the project covered the salaries of 39 teaching assistants/second teachers (teachers from Ukraine) working in 27 schools. The role of a teaching assistant/second teacher is to help Ukrainian pupils learn, explain and provide other support in understanding and learning different subjects.

5) Social and psychological support:

On 25 April 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers issued Order No. 230 "Amendment to the Cabinet Order No. 966 of 21 December 2022 "On the Plan of Measures for the Provision of Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians in the Republic of Latvia 2023"[76], adding a new measure "Provision of Psychological Assistance Course for

73 Cabinet Order No. 224 of 18 April 2023 "On Reallocation of an Appropriation". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 77, 20.04.2023. - [entered into force on 18.04.2023]

74 Over a two-year period, the Society Integration Foundation has provided extensive support to Ukrainian civilians in Latvia. - Available at: https://www.sif.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/divu-gadu-perioda-sabiedribas-integracijas-fonds-sniedzis-plasu-atbalstu-ukrainas-civiliedzivotajiem-latvija.

75 Source: Ministry of Education and Science.

76 Cabinet Order No. 230 of 25 April 2023 "Amendment to Cabinet Order No. 966 of 21 December 2022"On the Plan of Measures for the Provision of Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians in the Republic of Latvia 2023"". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 82, 27.04.2023. - [entered into force on 25.04.2023]

Ukrainian State Border Guard Service Officers". It is planned that 100 officers could benefit from it by 22 December 2023.

In 2023, the National Centre for Education, in cooperation with local authorities, implemented two support programmes for Ukrainian children and young people: "Support for camps for Ukrainian and Latvian children and youth" and "Non-formal education activities, including Latvian language learning, for Ukrainian children and youth".[77]

On the basis of the Cabinet Order No. 296 of 23 May 2023[78], it was planned to involve ~ 8,000 Ukrainian and Latvian children in day and overnight camps to support the organisation of day and overnight camps for Ukrainian civilian minors, with a budget of EUR 1,800,000.

The camps were organised with the aim to support the socialisation and psycho-emotional well-being of Ukrainian children and young people, as well as the Latvian language practice and skills development, communicating and cooperating with each other and with Latvian children and young people in various creative and educational activities in cultural education, environmental education, technical creativity, sports, healthy lifestyle and safety issues.

In 2023, 96 camps (65 day camps and 31 overnight camps) have been organised, with a total of 2,862 participants, of whom 1,342 (151 of whom are not registered in Latvian educational institutions) are Ukrainian children and young people. Funding used: EUR 831,062.

On the basis of the Cabinet Order No. 232 of 25 April 2023[79], support in the amount of EUR 1,050,000 was planned to provide non-formal education activities for Ukrainian children, including Latvian language learning, with EUR 297 per child.

Objective:

- promoting the psycho-emotional well-being and socialisation of Ukrainian children,
- to strengthen the ethnic identity of Ukrainian children and their communion with the Ukrainian community living in Latvia,
- provide opportunities for successful integration and inclusion into the Latvian education system and cultural environment,
- support Latvian language learning.

During the implementation of the assistance programme, local governments in cooperation with service providers ensured the participation of Ukrainian children in various cultural and sports events, visiting cultural places and institutions, participating in creative activities and at the same time practising and strengthening their Latvian language skills.

77 Source: Ministry of Education and Science.

78 Cabinet Order No. 296 of 23 May 2023 "On Reallocation of an Appropriation from Budget Department "74. Funding to be reallocated in the process of implementation of the annual state budget" of the programme 17.00.00 "Funding for the implementation of the measures provided for in the Law on the Assistance to Ukrainian civilians." to the budget of the Ministry of Education and Science". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 100, 25.05.2023. - [entered into force on 23.05.2023]

79 Cabinet Order No. 232 of 25 April 2023 "On Reallocation of an Appropriation from Budget Department "74. Funding to be reallocated in the process of implementation of the annual state budget" of the programme 17.00.00 "Funding for the implementation of the measures provided for in the Law on the Assistance to Ukrainian civilians." to the budget of the Ministry of Education and Science". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 82, 27.04.2023. - [entered into force on 25.04.2023]

According to reports from the local government, 1,257 Ukrainian children and young people aged 5-18 participated in the programme between June and December. Children aged 7-15 years participated the most (~64% of the total number). Funding used: EUR 236,790.

During the first semester of the study year 2023/2024 (from August to November), the ESF project "Support for the Development of Individual Competences of Learners" planned to support 6,179 pupils (2,178 of them from Ukraine) in learning Latvian and switching to the official language. The amount of allocated funding is EUR 532,225.62. Assistance was provided in two areas: the provision of teaching assistants/ second teachers and the organisation of adaptation camps.

Adaptation camps are a support measure that provided an opportunity for learners, including Ukrainian children, with insufficient Latvian language skills to acquire language skills through formal and non-formal education elements during the last two weeks of August and/or during the students' autumn break in a school environment. The training was organised as a day camp, with language lessons during the first part of the day and non-formal education activities during the second part of the day, with optimal scheduling according to the age of the learners.

In August 2023, the support measure "Adaptation Camp (LAT)" was implemented in 13 educational institutions in 9 municipalities, and in October 2023 – in 13 educational institutions in 7 municipalities, with the participation of pupils from Ukraine. Funding is provided for catering services and teachers' salaries. Total funding allocated for the adaptation camps in August and the autumn school holidays: EUR 32,745 for catering costs and EUR 8,519.1 for staff costs.

The Government has provided funding of EUR 780,000 until December 31 of 2024 to support non-formal education activities for Ukrainian civilian children and young people, to help them learn Latvian, to reduce psycho-emotional tensions caused by the war, and to help them integrate more successfully into the Latvian education system and cultural environment. This is foreseen in the Order on the reallocation of appropriations prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science[80], which was approved by the Government on 12 March 2024. The planned support is particularly needed for those Ukrainian children, teenagers and young people who study remotely in Ukrainian educational institutions and have limited communication with their peers in Latvia, as well as for those pupils who study in both Latvian and Ukrainian educational institutions at the same time and feel overwhelmed.[81]

The Cabinet meeting on 26 March 2024 endorsed the Ministry of Culture's proposal to allocate EUR 4,443,120 to the Society Integration Foundation as a result of the budget reallocation[82], to provide cultural orientation courses and inclusion activities for Ukrainian civilians residing in Latvia. The reallocation of funds is in line with the Action Plan for Assistance to Ukraine's Civilians 2024, approved by the Government last December.

As last year, the Society Integration Foundation will announce an open call for proposals for the provision of free cultural orientation courses and inclusion activities, with the aim of selecting eligible applications, the implementation of which will make a significant contribution to ensuring that Ukrainian civilians have access to courses and activities in all regions of Latvia, as close as possible to their places of residence.

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80 Cabinet Order No. 175 of 12 March 2024 "On Reallocation of an Appropriation from Department "74. Funding to be reallocated in the process of implementation of the annual state budget" of the programme 17.00.00 "Funding for the implementation of the measures provided for in the Law on the Assistance to Ukrainian civilians". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 52, 13.03.2024. - [entered into force on 12.03.2024]

81 Non-formal education and Latvian language learning opportunities provided for Ukrainian children and young people in Latvia. - Available at: https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/ukrainas-berniem-un-jauniesiem-latvija-nodrosina-neformalas-izglitibas-un-latviesu-valodas-macibu-iespejas

82 Cabinet Order No. 217 of 28 March 2024 "On Reallocation of an Appropriation from Department "74. Funding to be reallocated in the process of implementation of the annual state budget" of the programme 17.00.00 "Funding for the implementation of the measures provided for in the Law on the Assistance to Ukrainian civilians" to the budget of the Society Integration Foundation". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 64, 02.04.2024. - [entered into force on 28.03.2024]

EMN national report for study: Application of the Temporary Protection Directive: challenges and best practice in 2023

The National Report for the European Migration Network (EMN) study "Application of the Temporary Protection Directive: challenges and best practice" provides an overview of the main changes in legislation, challenges and examples of solutions, as well as best practice in the legal, education, employment, health and social welfare areas for the period from 1 January 2023 to 1 July 2024 in Latvia.

8.

MINORS AND OTHER VULNERABLE GROUPS

In 2023, 17[83] unaccompanied minors were found in Latvia and 15 of them applied for asylum in Latvia.

On 8 March 2023, the Amendments to the Law on Protection of Children's Rights[84] were adopted, making it compulsory for guardians to follow a state-funded training programme to enhance guardians' skills and knowledge in caring for children and to help them better understand the child. Also, taking into account that young people are not always ready to start an independent life when they reach the age of majority, the law provides for specifying the conditions under which a child in out-of-family care should continue to stay in out-of-family care after reaching the age of majority, so that children would feel safer and more confident about their future when they reach the age of majority.[85]

On 20 April 2023, amendments to the Law on Protection of Children's Rights[86] were approved, strengthening the inter-institutional model of the "Child's House" and clarifying the requirements for obtaining the status of a host family. The "Child's House" is set up as a mechanism to support a child who has been abused and his or her non-violent relatives. Its aim is to provide inter-institutional support to victims, as well as to ensure that criminal proceedings are carried out in one place.

On 24 October 2023, Cabinet Regulation No. 608 "Procedures for the Implementation of the Inter-institutional Cooperation Programme "Child's House""[87] was approved, the purpose of which is to establish the procedures for the implementation of the inter-institutional cooperation programme "Child's House", the provision of services and inter-institutional cooperation procedures, as well as the scope and procedures for the processing of personal data.

On 21 March 2023, the "Plan for the Prevention of Child Delinquency and the Protection of Children against Criminal Offences 2023-2024", developed by the Ministry of the Interior, was approved[88], designating the Ministry of the Interior as the responsible institution for implementing the Plan and coordinating the implementation of the tasks. The aim of the Plan is to identify short-term measures to contribute to reducing child crime by reducing the risk factors associated with children's delinquent behaviour and to improve children's safety by protecting them from risks to their health and life.

83 Source: OCMA and SBG.

84 Law "Amendments to the Law on Protection of Children's Rights". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 57A, 21.03.2023. - [entered into force on 01.04.2023]

85 Annotation to the draft legislation "Amendments to the Law on Protection of Children's Rights". - Available at: https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS14/SaeimaLIVS14.nsf/0/1E3751E3F02AD6AFC225894A002D0E2E?OpenDocument.

86 Law on Amendments to the Law on Protection of Children's Rights. - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 84A, 02.05.2023. - [entered into force on 16.05.2023]

87 Cabinet Regulation No. 608 of 24 October 2023 "Procedures for the Implementation of the Inter-institutional Cooperation Programme "Child's House"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 211, 31.10.2023. - [entered into force on 01.11.2023]

88 Cabinet Order No. 156 of 22 March 2023 "Plan for the Prevention of Child Delinquency and the Protection of Children against Criminal Offences 2023-2024". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 60, 24.03.2023. - [entered into force on 22.03.2023]

9.

INTEGRATION

Integration policy in Latvia is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, the Ministry of the Interior, the Society Integration Foundation and non-governmental organisations are also involved in the implementation of this policy.

By Order No. 2.5-1-96 of the Ministry of Culture of 25 May 2023 "On the Establishment of a Working Group for the Drafting of the Development Plan for a Cohesive and Civic Active Society 2024-2027", an inter-institutional working group in cooperation with institutions and organisations[89] ensured the drafting of the Plan and made proposals for the measures of the Plan.

Think-tank PROVIDUS, in cooperation with newcomer organisations and local governments participating in the MILE (*Migrant Integration through Locally- Designed Experiences*) project, prepared a policy analysis summarising local experiences and recent research on the inclusion of newcomers in policy-making. The publications[90] can serve as guides for policy-makers, NGOs, integration experts, practitioners and researchers interested in promoting the inclusion and political participation of newcomers at local, national or EU level. Providing sustainable solutions as well as policy recommendations, drawing on existing best practice and initiatives, the publications address the role and importance of not only local authorities but also newcomer organisations, the benefits of stakeholder cooperation and the impact of EU funding.

Promoting integration for socio-economic participation

Practical measures for the integration of third-country nationals in 2023 were implemented by the Society Integration Foundation and non-governmental organisations with funding from the AMIF.

As of 2 January 2023, the Society Integration Foundation launched a new service for foreigners, the Integration and Inclusion Agency. The aim of the Integration and Inclusion Agency is to provide information support and services to third-country nationals and beneficiaries of international protection in one place, which are necessary for the successful socio-economic integration of persons moving to Latvia.

From the beginning of 2023 until January 2024, a total of 4,140 individual consultations were provided to the Integration and Inclusion Agency's clients and 319 translation services were provided to clients. Individual consultations have been offered to third-country nationals from Ukraine, India, Russia, Belarus, Morocco and other countries. The most frequent consultation topics are related to obtaining information on residence permits and citizenship, family reunification, employment opportunities and access to Latvian language courses.

89 The members of the working group included representatives of the State Chancellery, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Welfare, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Economics, State Employment Agency, Society Integration Foundation, State Limited Liability Company "Latvijas Vēstnesis", Representatives of the National Centre for Education, the Latvian Union of Local Governments, the National Council for Electronic Media, the Youth International Programme Agency, the Latvian Language Agency, the State Education Quality Service, the Council for Electronic Media, the Civic Alliance of Latvia and the Public Policy Centre PROVIDUS.

90 Policy analysis on the inclusion of newcomers in the decision-making process and the role of local authorities. - Available at: https://providus.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MILE-Policy-Brief-1.pdf; Policy analysis on the inclusion of newcomers in the decision-making process and the role of newcomers' organisations. - Available at: https://providus.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MILE-Policy-Brief-2.pdf; Policy analysis on resource mobilisation for political inclusion of newcomers. - Available at: https://providus.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MILE-Policy-Brief-3.pdf; Policy analysis on access to political participation structures for newcomers. - Available at: https://providus.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MILE-Policy-Brief-4.pdf; Policy analysis on the inclusion of newcomers in diversity-related decision-making. - Available at: https://providus.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MILE-Policy-Brief-5.pdf.

In the beginning of 2023, the Integration and Inclusion Agency started working in Riga and in less than a year, 3 regional branches have been opened: in Liepāja, Jelgava, and Daugavpils. Another regional branch in Valmiera will soon open. The Agency offers the widest range of information and practical support according to the needs and problems of the target group through face-to-face and online consultations. The Integration and Inclusion Agency provides information in Latvian, Russian and English, with an interpreter if the client uses another language. In situations that require the involvement of other professionals (immigration to Latvia, unemployment, barriers to public services, etc.), a change agent is brought in to work individually with the client on a long-term basis.

In addition to individual counselling, the Agency provides translation services, legal assistance, and will soon offer psychological and psychotherapeutic counselling. All the services needed by the target group are available in one place at the Integration and Inclusion Agency.[91]

As of 2023, Latvian language training and cultural orientation courses will no longer be provided separately for beneficiaries of international protection. They are available to third-country nationals and beneficiaries of international protection together.

From 1 February 2022 until 30 November 2023, the Caritas Latvija Foundation provided the services of a social worker and a social mentor to asylum seekers and persons who have been granted refugee or alternative status in Latvia. This service was provided within the framework of the European Social Fund project "Promoting Diversity" implemented by the Society Integration Foundation. In the first 11 months of 2023, 616 persons received assistance. From 1 September 2023, Caritas Latvia also provided services at the Liepna Asylum Seekers Centre in Alūksne Municipality. During the three-month period from September 1 to November 30, 66 persons received social services in Liepna.[92]

As of December 2023, the Integration and Inclusion Agency of the Society Integration Foundation provides support to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection by a social worker and a social mentor. The Integration and Inclusion Agency has launched the project "Support of a social worker and a social mentor for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection" with funding from the European Social Fund (ESF+). The aim of the project is to provide social worker and social mentor support services to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. The aim of the social support service is to promote the realisation of the fundamental rights of the target group, access to public and private services by developing an individual socio-economic inclusion plan for the client, based on the client's needs, individual problem situation, including self-determination of the client in achieving the goals set in the plan. Within the social support services, the target group will receive practical assistance and support in everyday life situations, primarily in the accommodation centres for asylum seekers "Mucenieki" and "Liepna". The service will also be available outside the accommodation centres for asylum seekers, if the person is not living there or if the legal basis for staying there (refugee or alternative status) has ceased to exist. Depending on the situation, the social worker and social mentor service can be provided by making visits to the client's home and/or to state or local authorities.[93]

In 2023, with the support of the AMIF, free Latvian language courses and Latvian conversation clubs at various levels were provided to the target group of the Foundation. 407 third-country nationals have

91 In its first year of operation, the Integration and Inclusion Agency provided more than 4,000 individual consultations. - Available at: https://www.sif.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/vienas-pieturas-agenturas-pirmaja-darbibas-gada-sniegtas-vairak-neka-4000-individualas-konsultacijas.

92 Report on the provision of the service of social workers and social mentors (social service) for the period from 1 February 2022 to 30 November 2023. - Available at: https://www.sif.gov.lv/lv/media/5985/download?attachment.

93 The Integration and Inclusion Agency will now provide support of a social worker and a social mentor to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. - Available at: https://www.sif.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/vienas-pieturas-agentura-turpmak-nodrosinas-sociala-darbinieka-un-sociala-mentora-atbalstu-patveruma-mekletajiem-un-starptautiskas-aizsardzibas-sanemejiem.

started training in 26 groups of Latvian language courses within the framework of four approved projects. The target group was provided with four Latvian language clubs.

The Latvian Language Agency is implementing the project "Latvian language learning to facilitate the inclusion of third-country nationals in the labour market 4" (European Union Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund programming period 2021-2027; project implementation period - 01.08.2023–31.07.2026). Its aim is to provide modern and varied Latvian language learning for third-country nationals for further education, everyday communication and labour market needs. The project organises Latvian language courses at all levels for at least 500 third-country nationals. Language courses are organised not only in Riga, but also in the regions (on request). At the end of the course, 330 people will be given the opportunity to take a free official language assessment. In 2023, 156 third-country nationals in 9 groups in Latvia are studying the language.

Integration into the labour market

In 2023, 74 persons with refugee or alternative status were registered (granted the status of unemployed or job-seeker) with the State Employment Agency. 12 persons with refugee or alternative (subsidiary) status received career counselling and 17 persons were involved in active employment and prevention measures: training on online course platforms (3 programmes to 1 person), paid temporary community service (1), distance learning Google programmes (1), competitiveness measures (2), e-career self-exploration (2). 11 persons have been involved in official language courses and two have received support to start a business or self-employment.

During 2023, the State Employment Agency continued to provide face-to-face and remote consultations via e-mails, telephone and remote video-conferencing, and organised one "Labour Market in Latvia" orientation session.

41 persons with refugee or alternative status were placed in employment in 2023.

Due to the opening of a new asylum seekers' accommodation centre in Liepna, Alūksne Municipality, in 2023, two employees of the Customer Service Centre of the Balvi branch of the State Employment Agency in Alūksne have been trained to work with persons with refugee or alternative status.

In November 2020, the Association "Shelter "Safe Houese"" launched the Erasmus+ project "HERE – Social Economy of Proximity"[94], which ended in 2023. The project targeted vulnerable groups – young people, women, seniors, migrants, refugees, etc. The project has been implemented in 6 regions, 3 countries (Spain, Italy, and Latvia). Regions vary in size, location (suburban or rural regions) and population. The project has developed an Entrepreneurship Handbook, a MOOC online learning programme and a Business Incubator to provide more than 30 applicants with professional support to implement and launch their business ideas.

94 HERE – SOCIAL ECONOMY OF PROXIMITY. - Available at: https://www.patverums-dm.lv/lv/here---social-economy-of-proXimity.

Basic services

On 3 March 2022, the Amendments to the Law on State Social Benefits[95] were adopted, with Transitional Paragraph 36 entering into force on 1 July 2023. The purpose of the amendments was to establish the right to all state social benefits in the same way as for every person permanently residing in Latvia, persons and their family members who reside and live in Latvia on the basis of a temporary residence permit issued to them and who have been granted an alternative status in Latvia.

On 24 January 2023, the Cabinet adopted Regulation No. 31 "Procedures for Exempting Learners from the Established State Examinations"[96], which establishes the procedure for exempting a learner who is an asylum seeker, refugee or a beneficiary of an alternative status from the state examinations by a decision of the Minister of Education and Science based on an application by the learner or his/her legal representative for exemption from the state examinations due to health or other justifiable reasons.

On 8 March 2023, Amendments to the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance[97] were adopted, which set the threshold for the guaranteed minimum income (hereinafter referred to as GMI), the income threshold for a poor and low-income household, specify the criteria for assessing the material situation of a household, set the coefficients for the sum of the thresholds for the guaranteed minimum income for calculating the amount of housing allowance for different types of households, set the state co-financing for local governments to ensure the payment of housing allowance. The amendments were drafted on the basis of the judgement of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia of 25 June 2020 in Case No. 2019-24-03 "On Compliance of Paragraph 2 of the Cabinet Regulation of No. 913 of 18 December 2012 "Regulation on Guaranteed Minimum Income Level" with Article 1 and Article 109 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia".[98]

Non-discrimination

On 13 April 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the Plan to Reduce Racism and Anti-Semitism 2023[99], for the implementation of which the Ministry of Culture has been designated as the coordinating institution, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Welfare, Ministry of Justice and the Society Integration Foundation as co-responsible institutions. The Plan aims to contribute to the reduction of racism and anti-Semitism by implementing the measures set out in the Plan in accordance with the recommendations contained in the European Commission's communications and taking into account the resources available in the country.

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95 Law on State Social Benefits paragraph 36 of the Transitional Provisions. - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 52, 15.03.2022. - [entered into force on 29.03.2022]

96 Cabinet Regulation of 24 January 2023 No. 31 "Procedures for Exempting Learners from the Established State Examinations". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 19, 26.01.2023. - [entered into force on 27.01.2023]

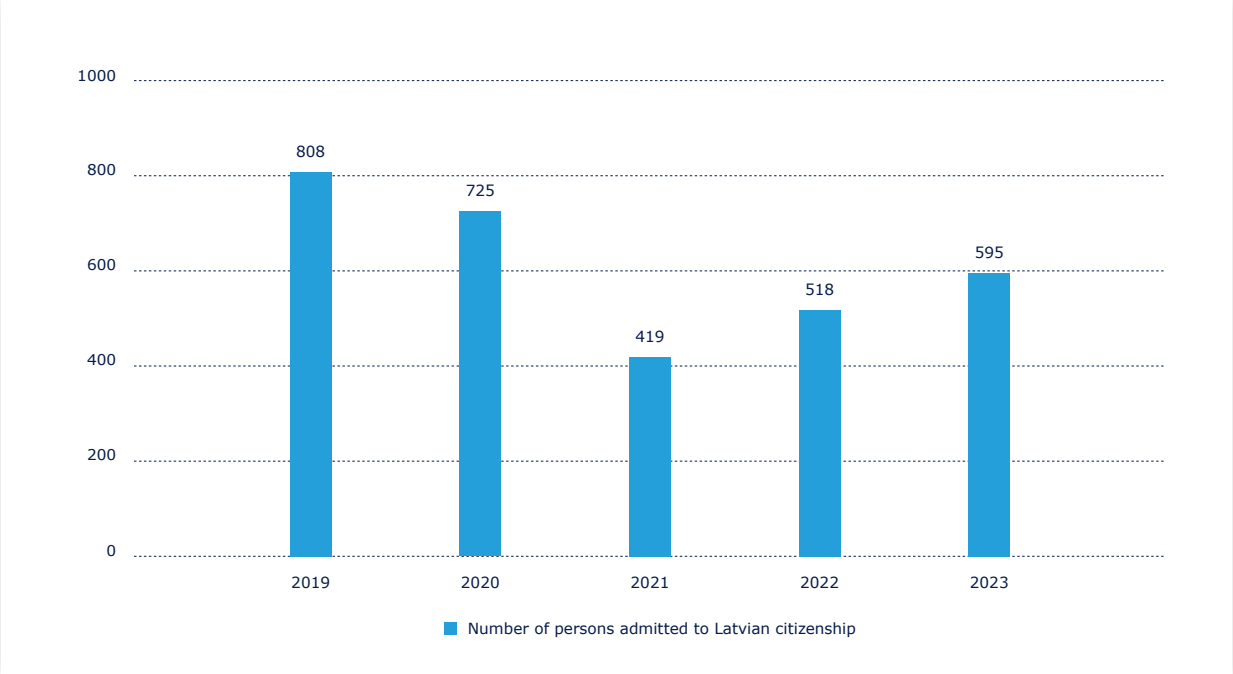
97 Law "Amendments to the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 57A, 21.03.2023. - [entered into force on 01.06.2023]

98 25 June 2020, Judgement of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia in Case No. 2019-24-03 "On Compliance of Paragraph 2 of the Cabinet Regulation of No. 913 of 18 December 2012 "Regulation on Guaranteed Minimum Income Level" with Article 1 and Article 109 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia". - Available at: https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/cases/?case-filter-years=&case-filterstatus=&case-filter-types=&case-filter-result=&searchtext=2019-24-03

99 Cabinet Order No. 209 of 13 April 2023 "Plan to Reduce Racism and Anti-Semitism 2023". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 74, 17.04.2023. - [entered into force on 13.04.2023]

10.

CITIZENSHIP AND NATURALISATION



Compared to 2022, the number of persons admitted to Latvian citizenship under the naturalisation procedure has increased to 595 (518 in 2022).[100] As in 2022, the largest share of persons who have acquired citizenship is made up of Latvian non-citizens – 73.7%. Among those who have acquired Latvian citizenship, 154 are third-country nationals.

On 7 March 2023, Cabinet Regulation No. 98 "Regulations on the Information System for Acquisition and Loss of Citizenship"[101] was adopted, which determines the scope of information to be included in the Information System for Acquisition and Loss of Citizenship (hereinafter referred to as the System), the procedure for inclusion and deletion of information and the storage periods, as well as the institutions to be granted access to the information included in the Information System and the extent to which such access shall be granted. The System is a national information system that includes information on persons in respect of whom a decision is made on the acquisition or loss of Latvian citizenship, as well as accumulates information on the process of acquiring or losing Latvian citizenship.

As the System was technically outdated and it was necessary to regulate its operation in a legal act, within the framework of the AMIF 2014-2020 Project No. PMLP/PMIF/2018/3 "Improvement and Development of Naturalisation and Related Processes", the OCMA developed a new Information System on Acquisition and Loss of Citizenship and prepared the necessary legal framework for its operation[102].

100 Data source: OCMA.

101 Cabinet Regulation No. 98 of 7 March 2023 "Regulations on the Information System for Acquisition and Loss of Citizenship". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 49, 09.03.2023. - [entered into force on 01.04.2023]

102 Annotation to the draft legislation on the "Regulations on the Information System for Acquisition and Loss of Citizenship". – Available at: https://tapportals.mk.gov.lv/annotation/2f311324-2d77-47ef-a19e-c01b825929c5.

11.

BORDER CONTROL, VISAS, AND SCHENGEN MANAGEMENT

Management of external borders

On 2 March 2023, Amendments to the Law on Construction of the External Land Border Infrastructure[103] were adopted, which provide for a rapid and efficient process of construction of the technical means of border surveillance – presence detection systems and surveillance equipment and related infrastructure necessary for the protection of the external land border, delegating the construction to the State Joint Stock Company "Latvia State Radio and Television Center". In order to ensure the inviolability of the state border, the inviolability of the state border and its infrastructure objects at the border, to prevent threats to the territory of the Republic of Latvia such as hybrid warfare, as well as to ensure the ability to respond in real time to criminal offences related to irregular crossing of the state border, as well as other threats, the issue of strengthening the security of the state border is a priority.[104]

On 22 June 2023, Amendments to the Law on the State Border of the Republic of Latvia were approved[105], the aim of which is to establish a special border surveillance regime in case of a disproportionately high number of cases of irregular or attempted crossing of the state border, to increase the powers of the National Armed Forces and the State Border Guard.

On 22 June 2023, the Amendments to the State Border Guard Law[106] were adopted, the purpose of which is to supplement the tasks, rights and duties of the State Border Guard, allowing to prevent irregular entry of persons and illegal movement of goods across the state border at an unintended place and time. A disproportionate increase in irregular migration is a current trend in the Republic of Latvia, and it is therefore essential that the Law on the State Border Guard clearly establishes the right of the State Border Guard to prevent irregular entry into the country as soon as possible.[107]

On 23 November 2023, the Amendments to the State Border Law of the Republic of Latvia"[108] were adopted, which establish the right of officials to search vehicles on reasonable suspicion, to apprehend a person who has irregularly crossed the state border or a person who has illegally moved persons across the state border or a person who has provided an opportunity for a person to stay irregularly in Latvia. The amendments to the law provide for the right of the officials of the National Armed Forces to carry out the above control measures during the enhanced border security regime.

On 10 August 2023, Cabinet Order No. 514 "On the Announcement of a Reinforced Regime for the Operation of the Border Surveillance System"[109] was adopted, aiming to introduce a special regime in view of the increasing number of irregular crossings and attempted crossings.

On 19 September 2023, Cabinet Order No. 611 "Amendments to Cabinet Order No. 514 of 10 August 2023 "On the Announcement of a Reinforced Regime for the Operation of the Border Surveillance System"" was

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103 Law "Amendments to the Law on Construction of the External Land Border Infrastructure". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 47, 07.03.2023. - [entered into force on 08.03.2023]

104 Annotation to the draft law "Amendments to the Law on Construction of the External Land Border Infrastructure". - Available at: https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS14/SaeimaLIVS14.nsf/0/CFEA8DAF1FADB62AC2258950005 14D98?OpenDocument

105 Law "Amendments to the Law on the State Border of the Republic of Latvia". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 125, 30.06.2023. - [entered into force on 14.07.2023]

106 Law "Amendments to the State Border Guard Law". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No. 125, 30.06.2023. - [entered into force on 01.07.2023]

107 Annotation to the draft legislation "Amendments to the Law on the State Border Guard". - Available at: https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS14/SaeimaLIVS14.nsf/0/4028A0343BB17FEBC22589BB0039A2FA?OpenDocument.

108 Law "Amendments to the Law on the State Border of the Republic of Latvia". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 231, 29.11.2023. - [entered into force on 30.11.2023]

109 Cabinet Order of 10 August 2023 No. 514 "On the Announcement of a Reinforced Regime for the Operation of the Border Surveillance System". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 154, 11.08.2023. - [entered into force on 10.08.2023]

adopted[110], which provides for the closure of the Silene border crossing point as of 19 September 2023. The Order was adopted on the basis of the large number of irregular crossings and attempts to cross the state border between the Republic of Latvia and the Republic of Belarus, as well as the need to redeploy resources (within six days State Border Guard officials prevented 894 attempts to illegally cross the state border between the Republic of Latvia and the Republic of Belarus).

At the road border crossing points (Vientuļi, Grebņeva, Terehova, Pāternieki and Silene), technologies for checking the border crossing points were developed and approved between the authorities (State Border Guard, Customs Board of the State Revenue Service and the Food and Veterinary Service), establishing a new cooperation model between the authorities, thus avoiding duplication of checks, such as opening vehicle compartments and technological niches several times.

As of 13 September 2023, the procedure for taking a decision on refusal to cross the state border of the Republic of Latvia with a vehicle was introduced in the Republic of Latvia for passenger vehicles registered in the Russian Federation, regardless of the nationality of the driver of the vehicle. The requirements of Council Regulation (EU) No. 833/2014 of 31 July 2014 shall be controlled by State Border Guard officials at border crossing points where there are no officials of the Customs Board of the State Revenue Service, given that the Customs Board of the State Revenue Service is the responsible authority for control of sanctions. The restrictions were introduced on the basis of a clarification on the movement of goods and personal effects published by the European Commission on 8 September 2023, which bans the import of personal vehicles.

On 13 October 2023, Cabinet Order No. 674 "On Suspension of Operation of Border Crossing Points at the State Border between the Republic of Latvia and the Russian Federation" was approved[111], which provides for suspension of operation of the Pededze and Vientuļi border crossing points at the state border between Latvia and Russia as of 16 October 2023. The Order was adopted in order to prevent risks to public order and state security, taking into account the fact that the Russian Federation decided to establish only two border crossing points through which Ukrainian nationals will have the right to enter the Russian Federation from third countries as of 16 October 2023 – through Sheremetyevo International Airport and the Vientuļi border crossing point on the state border between the Republic of Latvia and the Russian Federation. Thus, there are only two road border crossing points on the Latvian-Russian border – Terehova and Grebņeva.

On 17 May 2023, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the State Border Guard of the Republic of Latvia and the Police Department of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania with the aim to strengthen bilateral cooperation by developing new areas of cooperation.

In response to the hybrid threat at the external borders of the European Union, on 19 September 2023 an Agreement on Cross-Border Cooperation between the State Border Guard of the Republic of Latvia and the Police and Border Guard Board of the Republic of Estonia was signed. On 4 October 2023, Agreement on Cross-Border Cooperation between the State Border Guard of the Republic of Latvia and the State Border Guard of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania was signed.

On 15 September 2023, the State Border Guard and the management of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the Nordic and Baltic Countries (hereinafter referred to as UNHCR) held a meeting, within the framework of which an agreement on regular monitoring visits to the border between the Republic of Latvia and the Republic of Belarus was concluded.[112]

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110 Cabinet Order of 19 September 2023 No. 611 "Amendments to Cabinet Order No. 514 of 10 August 2023 "On the Announcement of a Reinforced Regime for the Operation of the Border Surveillance System"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 181A, 19.09.2023. - [entered into force on 19.09.2023.]

111 Cabinet Order of 13 October 2023 No. 674 "On Suspension of Operation of Border Crossing Points at the State Border between the Republic of Latvia and the Russian Federation". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 199B, 13.10.2023. - [entered into force on 13.10.2023]

112 The National Border Guard and UNHCR agree on regular monitoring visits. - Available at: https://www.rs.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/valsts-robezsardze-

Taking into account that the security threat posed by the Russian Federation continues, on 4 March 2024 the Cabinet Order[113] was announced and entered into force, extending the previously established restrictions on the entry of citizens of the Russian Federation into the Republic of Latvia.

The Order[114] stipulates that from 19 September 2022 until 4 March 2025, the State Border Guard shall allow only the following Russian citizens to enter the territory of Latvia by crossing the external border of Latvia:

- Holders of a residence permit of Latvia, the EU, a member state of the European Economic Area (EEA) or the Swiss Confederation;
- Holders of a long-stay visa from a Schengen member state;
- Citizens who have been issued a visa in accordance with Regulation No. 810/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 establishing a Community Code on Visas and who are:
- Family members of Latvian nationals (spouses, parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren and dependants);
- Family members of nationals of an EU Member State, EEA Member State or Swiss Confederation;
- Employees of transport and passenger service providers, freight or technical crew arriving in or departing from Latvia in the course of their work;
- Seafarers who need to get to or from their place of work on board a ship;
- Persons whose entry is for humanitarian reasons;
- Employees of Russian diplomatic and consular missions and their family members accredited or posted to Latvia;
- Russian diplomatic couriers or ad hoc diplomatic couriers who present an official document stating their status and the number of diplomatic postal parcels;
- Citizens travelling to the Russian Embassy in Latvia on a short-term mission to provide technical support;
- Employees of diplomatic and consular missions of Russia who transit through the territory of Latvia to perform official functions and their family members, as well as citizens who transit through the territory of Latvia on a short-term mission to provide technical support to the Russian Embassy in the host country;
- Citizens who are holders of a Facilitated Transit Document (FTD) or Facilitated Rail Transit Document (FRTD) and who are travelling from Russia to the Kaliningrad region of Russia and back.

On 12 March 2024, the Cabinet of Ministers re-announced a reinforced border surveillance regime for a period of six months[115], starting on 13 March and ending on 12 September 2024. The reinforced border

un-unhcr-vienojas-par-regularam-noverosanas-vizitem.

113 Cabinet Order No. 153 of 4 March 2024 "Amendment to the Cabinet Order No. 599 of 9 September 2022 "On the Entry of Citizens of the Russian Federation into the Republic of Latvia"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 45A, 04.03.2024. - [entered into force on 04.03.2024]

114 Cabinet Order No. 599 of 9 September 2022 "On the Entry of Citizens of the Russian Federation into the Republic of Latvia". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 175B, 09.09.2022. - [entered into force on 09.09.2022.]

115 Cabinet Order No. 184 of 12 March 2024 "On Declaring a Reinforced Operating Regime of the Border Surveillance System". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 51A, 12.03.2024. - [entered into force on 12.03.2024]

surveillance system will be in place in Ludza Municipality, Krāslava Municipality, Augšdaugava Municipality, Kaunata Rural Territory in Rēzekne Municipality and Daugavpils. The Order was issued to ensure the inviolability of the state border and the prevention of threats to the state, as well as in view of the number and increasing trend of attempts to irregularly cross the Latvian-Belarusian state border. The SBG already provide continuous protection of the eastern border. However, in view of the increasing number of irregular border crossing attempts, the State Police and the National Armed Forces have been instructed to provide the necessary support to the State Border Guard in order to prevent irregular border crossing.[116]

Cooperation with third countries in the field of border control

Due to the geopolitical situation in the region, the State Border Guard has decided to extend the field of activity of the Liaison Officer in Georgia, so that from 2024 the Liaison Officer will be responsible for Georgia and Azerbaijan.

In accordance with the decision of the meeting of the Chiefs of the Border Guard Authorities of Latvia and Moldova in 2022, the process of elaboration of a new protocol on bilateral cooperation between the State Border Guard of the Republic of Latvia and the General Inspectorate of the Border Police of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Moldova has started. The protocol is currently being coordinated.

Schengen governance

On 7 March 2023, the enhanced Schengen Information System was launched, a first major step towards interoperability of the European Union's large-scale information systems for security, border and migration management. The improved system will help strengthen the fight against serious crime and terrorism, ensuring a high level of security in the EU, and help manage migration.

New categories of alerts can be entered in the Schengen Information System in the future:

- Alerts issued for the purpose of investigative checks (obtaining information on persons or objects related to them for the purpose of prosecuting offences and preventing threats to public or national security);
- Alerts for unknown suspects or wanted persons;
- Preventive alerts for children at risk of parental abduction and for vulnerable children who should be prevented from travelling for their own safety (e.g. if the travel would result in a risk of forced marriage, trafficking or gender-based violence);
- Return alerts (alert for return decisions issued to third-country nationals who stay irregularly in Member States).[117]

116 The Government re-announces a reinforced operating regime for the border surveillance system as of March 13 this year. - Available at: https://www.iem.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/valdiba-atkartoti-izsludina-pastiprinatu-robezapsardzibas-sistemas-darbibas-rezimu-no-sa-gada-13-marta.

117 The Schengen Information System for the prevention and detection of serious crime and terrorism is substantially improved. - Available at: https://www.rs.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/butiski-pilnveido-sengenas-informacijas-sistemu-smagu-noziegumu-un-terorisma-noversanai-un-atklasanai.

Latvia underwent the regular Schengen evaluation in 2023. Schengen evaluation expert visits to Latvia took place in the field of external border management (02-06.10.2023), police cooperation (09-13.10.2023), data protection (09-13.10.2023), return (16-20.10.2023), SIS/SIRENE (16-20.10.2023) and visa policy (6. - 10. 11.2023) in the Embassy of Latvia in Ankara, Turkey.

The Schengen evaluation experts' assessment of the findings of the visit will be available in early 2024 as part of the overall assessment of Latvia's compliance with the Schengen acquis.

From 13 to 22 June 2023, an official of the Schengen Section of the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs participated in Schengen evaluation missions in Kazakhstan (Almaty) and Armenia (Yerevan). During the visits, the work of the Lithuanian Consulate General in Almaty and the Lithuanian Embassy in Yerevan and their compliance with the Schengen acquis were assessed.

Three State Border Guard officials participated as experts in the regular Schengen evaluation visits to Lithuania and Estonia. One State Border Guard official participated in the Schengen reassessment visit to Belgium.

Border management and visa policy

In 2023, the total number of visas issued has halved to 33,602 (61,527 in 2022), with a slight increase in the number of long-stay visas issued. Of the visas issued, 18,687 were Schengen visas and 14,915 were long-stay (D) visas.[118]

Table 8-1. Total number of visas issued by type, 2022-2023[119]

	2022	2023
Schengen visas	47 908	18 687
Long-stay (D) visas	13 619	14 915
Total	61 527	33 602

Infrastructure at airports and aerodromes is being prepared for the entry/exit system – border control booths have been adapted. The installation of biometric equipment (a facial image camera and four fingerprint scanners) is expected to be completed in the second half of 2024.

The State Border Guard continues its work on the development of the new generation of the State Border Guard Electronic System (REIS II), which will also include the development of the Entry/Exit System and ETIAS requirements. The provisional deadline for the implementation of the Entry/Exit System is currently autumn 2024.

118 Data source: OCMA.

119 Data source: OCMA.

On 8 June 2023, the Amendments to the Law on the Operation of the Schengen Information System[120] were adopted, which aim to implement the requirements of Article 32(1)(c), (d), (e) of EU Regulation 2018/1862 [121] [122] (3), (4), which require additional alerts on additional groups of people to be entered in the SIS.

In 2017, the Japanese parties suggested entering into an agreement on the work and holiday scheme; and as a result, on 31 January 2023, the Law on the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of Japan on the Work and Holiday Scheme[123] was adopted, which provides for facilitated long-stay visas for young people aged 18 to 30 travelling for the purpose of a holiday. The aim of the law is to foster closer cooperation between the two countries and to give their citizens, especially young people, more opportunities to appreciate each other's culture and general way of life when travelling to the other country.[124]

On 21 March 2023, amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 725 of 3 August 2010 "Regulations Regarding the Territorial Competence of Diplomatic and Consular Missions of the Republic of Latvia for Requesting Visas"[125] were adopted. Pakistani citizens apply for a long-stay visa at the Embassy of Latvia in the United Arab Emirates, Bhutanese citizens apply for a long-stay visa at the Embassy of Latvia in the Republic of India. The aim of the amendments is to facilitate the possibility for citizens of Pakistan and Bhutan to apply for visas by changing the territorial competence of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the United Arab Emirates and the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in India to accept visa applications. The amendments were necessary due to restrictions on the entry of Pakistani citizens into Uzbekistan, which made it difficult for Pakistani citizens to access the Latvian Embassy. Bhutanese citizens have difficulties entering China and applying for visas at the Latvian Embassy.[126]

On 31 December 2023, cooperation with the outsourced service provider Pony Express in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine will be completely discontinued. As of 1 January 2024, cooperation with the outsourced service provider VFS Global in Belarus and Australia will start. On 24 July 2023, cooperation with the outsourced service provider

120 Law "Amendments to the Law on the Operation of the Schengen Information System". - Latvijas Vēstnesis No 118, 20.06.2023. – [entered into force on 04.07.2023.]

121 Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council (EU) 2018/1862 of 28 November 2018 on the establishment, operation and use of the Schengen Information System (SIS) in the field of police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, amending and repealing Council Decision 2007/533/TI, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1986/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Commission Decision 2010/261/EU PE/36/2018/REV/1. - Official Journal L 312, 7.12.2018.

122 (c) children at risk of abduction by a parent, family member or guardian who should be refused travel;
(d) children who are subject to a travel ban and for whom there is a specific and obvious risk that they may be removed from, or may leave, the territory of a Member State; and
(i) become victims of trafficking in human beings or forced marriage, female genital mutilation or other forms of gender-based violence;
(ii) become victims of, or be involved in, terrorist offences; or
(iii) be conscripted or involved in armed groups, or may be ordered to take an active part in hostilities;
(e) vulnerable adults who must be prevented from travelling for their own protection and for whom there is a specific and obvious risk that they may be taken from or leave the territory of a Member State and become victims of trafficking in human beings or gender-based violence.
(3) The alert on the child referred to in paragraph 1(c) shall be entered on the decision of the competent authorities, including the judicial authorities of the Member States having jurisdiction in matters of parental responsibility, where there is a specific and obvious risk that the child may be removed unlawfully and unavoidably from the Member State in which the competent authorities are situated.
(4) The alert on persons referred to in paragraph 1(d) and (e) shall be entered following a decision by the competent authorities, including judicial authorities.

123 Law "On the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of Japan on the Work and Holiday Scheme". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 30A, 11.02.2023. - [entered into force on 25.02.2023]

124 Annotation to the draft legislation "On the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of Japan on the Work and Holiday Scheme". - Available at: https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS14/SaeimaLIVS14.nsf/0/09371885319D0A5CC22588FD00363F80?OpenDocument.

125 Cabinet Regulation No. 127 of 21 March 2023 "Amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 725 of 3 August 2010 "Regulations Regarding the Territorial Competence of Diplomatic and Consular Missions of the Republic of Latvia for Requesting Visas"". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 63, 29.03.2023. - [entered into force on 30.03.2023]

126 Annotation to the draft legislation "Amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 725 of 3 August 2010 "Regulations Regarding the Territorial Competence of Diplomatic and Consular Missions of the Republic of Latvia for Requesting Visas"". - Available at: https://tapportals.mk.gov.lv/annotation/20f90e64-a8a0-4a81-b486-049c2ff1f967.

Pony Express in Kazakhstan was terminated and a contract was signed with the outsourced service provider VFS.

In 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised several training events in the field of visas – annual training for consular officials of Latvian diplomatic and consular missions and training for mission clerks involved in the reception and processing of visa applications. The training for consular officials included topics related to current developments in the field of visa and migration and amendments to legislation, practical skills in profiling, interviewing and identifying persons. The training provided an insight into the latest developments in anti-corruption, data protection and its practical application, as well as the necessary knowledge to be able to deal with complex customer service situations.

In 2023, a new type of training was also launched, in the initial phase of which experts from national authorities (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Office of Citizenship and Migration, the State Border Guard, the State Security Service) travelled to countries at high risk of irregular immigration to learn about visa issuance issues and related security risks, as well as best practices in combating these risks, meeting with staff from other Schengen Member State missions, migration police officers and local authorities. At the end of the visit, information on the practice of other countries in processing visa applications and the methods used to identify and prevent security risks was collected and analysed, as well as recommendations for consular officials of Latvian missions in dealing with visa applications of citizens of the countries of the region were prepared.

12.

IRREGULAR MIGRATION

509 third-country nationals were detained in 2023 for irregular crossing the "green" border (251 in 2022). The main groups of detainees were Syrian, Afghan and Iranian nationals. The largest number of persons were apprehended at the Latvian-Belarusian border (491), as Latvia is used as a transit country to other EU Member States. Syrian nationals continue their journey to Germany.[127]

SBG refused entry to Latvia to 3,425 persons, which is by 50.42% more than in 2022 (2,277 persons). In 2023, the most frequently entry was refused to Ukrainian, Russian, and Moldovan nationals.[128]

In 2023, the SBG deterred irregular border crossings on the Latvian-Belarusian border in 13,863 cases of persons attempting to cross the state border irregularly (5286 in 2022). In 2023, the Belarusian authorities continued to take targeted measures to artificially create and maintain large flows of migrants transiting through Belarus to the EU. As a result of this deliberate action, a significant number of migrants continued to be present in Belarus, wishing to enter Western Europe, also by irregular crossing of the state border between the Republic of Latvia and the Republic of Belarus. The large number of people wanting to cross the national border also created tempting conditions for those who wanted to organise or carry out intra-EU transfers of irregular immigrants, i.e., to ensure their unauthorised stay in the Republic of Latvia or in another EU Member State.[129]

Schengen visas were cancelled for 321 third-country nationals (341 in 2022), a decrease due to a decrease in flows due to entry restrictions imposed on Russian nationals.

On 5 October 2023, the law "Amendments to the Criminal Law" was adopted[130]. The amended law provides that the penalty for irregular movement of a person across the state border will be imprisonment for up to three years or probation supervision, or a fine. The amendments also provide for increased criminal liability for the unlawful movement of a person across the state border, if this is done during a period of reinforced border security or during a state of emergency declared due to a threat to the inviolability of the state border. The applicable punishment wil be deprivation of liberty for a period of two years and up to ten years, with or without confiscation of property and with or without probationary supervision for a period up to three years.

Analysis of court judgements shows that in 2023 (until the draft law on stricter penalties for criminal offences related to irregular immigration was drafted), in only one criminal case for a crime related to providing persons irregularly crossing the state border between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Latvia with an opportunity to stay illegally in the Republic of Latvia by moving them across the state territory, the court imposed the most severe form of punishment – deprivation of liberty. The period of deprivation of liberty was short – four months. The fact that the convictions did not deter the persons and that they continued to commit crimes related to supporting the irregular crossing of the state border between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Latvia showed that both the penalties provided for in the Criminal Law and those imposed for the commission of these offences were disproportionately lenient as they did not achieve the purpose of the punishment.

127 Source: SBG.

128 Data source: SBG.

129 Source: SBG.

130 Law "Amendments to the Criminal Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 197, 11.10.2023. - [entered into force on 20.10.2023]

Preventing the abuse of legal migration routes

In 2023, the number of third-country nationals detained by State Border Guard officials for illegal employment in Latvia decreased by 18.42% to 124 persons in total.[131]

EMN national report for study: Illegal employment of third-country nationals: Situation analysis for 2017-2022

The study "Illegal employment of third-country nationals: Situation analysis for 2017-2022" provides an overview of the main changes in legislation and public policy, measures introduced to prevent and detect illegal employment, and penalties for third-country nationals.

The possibility of working in the EU without the necessary legal status is becoming one of the main drivers of irregular migration. Illegal employment is a complex problem that affects several areas, including migration, employment, social policy, fiscal policy, and personal rights. Although the scale and frequency of illegal employment varies across countries, small and large companies and economic sectors, employers engage in illegal employment schemes to reduce labour costs and circumvent regulations by using workers who are willing to do low-skilled, low-paid work in difficult and precarious conditions. As a result, tackling illegal employment is at the intersection of employment, migration and human rights.

Although the prevention of illegal employment of third-country nationals is not a national policy priority in Latvia, it is indirectly linked to the prevention of irregular migration and the fight against the informal economy, which are important national policy priorities. Changes to legislation are focused on attracting foreign workers and facilitating legal migration and procedures to alleviate labour shortages. However, the sectors where the most infringements are found are being monitored more closely. The main difficulties in detecting cases of illegal employment of third-country nationals are the rapid acquisition of information and evidence, the different and changing forms of illegal employment, the uncooperative attitude of the workers and the identification of the perpetrators.

Forged travel documents

In 2023, 304 third-country nationals were detained in Latvia for using forged travel documents (97) and vehicle documents (207).[132]

Cooperation with Frontex

131 Data source: SBG.

132 Data source: SBG.

Latvia's participation in joint operations organised by FRONTEX in 2023 (306 officials in total, including 28 State Police officials and 10 SBG second category experts):

Joint operations at external land and air borders (Terra / Albania Land / Serbia Land / Coordination Points Air / Focal Points Air / North Macedonia / Montenegro Land / – 110 experts;

Joint operations at the external maritime borders (Ledra / Themis / Poseidon / MMO C/E Baltic Sea / Albania Sea / Canary Islands / Seaports – 186;

Joint operations involving Frontex Agency Permanent Corps category 2 experts from Latvia (Terra / Serbia Land / Moldova / Poseidon / Return / Flexible Operational Activities Return) – 10 experts.

Latvia participated in operations in Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, Spain, Romania, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Montenegro, Finland, Estonia, Croatia, France, Moldova, Germany, Norway, Macedonia, Denmark, Cyprus, and Lithuania.[133]

133 Data source: SBG.

13.

TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

In 2023, 10 persons have been classified as suspects in criminal proceedings for organising trafficking in human beings and five persons have been convicted. 10 third-country nationals are recognised as victims of trafficking in human beings.[134]

Latvia continued its participation in the Working Group on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, which has promoted joint projects involving third-country nationals. For example:

- Within the framework of the CAPE project "Capacity Building, Assistance and Prosecution of Labour Exploitation Cases in the Baltic Sea Region", the Latvian Ministry of the Interior carried out an evaluation of the transnational referral mechanism in the Baltic Sea Region, in which experts highlighted problems in dealing with third-country nationals.
- The results of the report are being used for another project, PROMISE TRM[135], which aims to develop clear guidelines on referring child victims, including from third countries. These guidelines focus mainly on the Baltic Sea region.

The Association "Shelter"Safe House"" continued to implement the project "NET-WORKS to ensure the long-term integration of Third-Country Nationals Survivors of Trafficking (SOT) promoting job opportunities and work-life balance measures"[136]. The study was carried out for Latvia, Lithuania, Italy, Spain and Germany. Based on this research, recommendations have been developed[137] on how to better balance work and everyday life.

The Association "Shelter"Safe House "" together with NGOs from Lithuania – "Active Youth" and from Estonia – "*Mittetulundusühing Eluliin*" implement the project "They Have a Name". The project aims at prevention of trafficking in human beings by developing a small-scale study on anti-trafficking policies in the Baltic States. The project has produced a study on anti-trafficking work in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia[138], which will contribute to the fight against trafficking in human beings in the Baltic Sea Region. The study examines issues such as the current state of play in the prevention of trafficking in human beings based on relevant national statistics, the most common types of trafficking, existing prevention strategies, as well as best practices used by organisations and government institutions working in the field of prevention of trafficking in human beings.

Training and raising awareness

The Ministry of the Interior of Latvia participated as a partner in the ELECT THB project "Strengthened Law Enforcement Cooperation and Improved Training on Trafficking in Human Beings"[139]. The project has been developed in close cooperation with law enforcement and other institutions in Finland, Estonia and Latvia to

134 Data source: Ministry of the Interior.

135 The project PROMISE TRM. - available at: https://cbss.org/projects-cbss/promise/

136 "NET-WORKS to ensure the long-term integration of Third-Country Nationals Survivors of Trafficking (SOT) promoting job opportunities and work-life balance measures". - Available at: https://www.patverums-dm.lv/lv/net-works

137 Toolkit for practitioners on "tools and methods" to guarantee the job placement of survivors of trafficking (SOT). - Available at: https://patverums-dm.lv/svs/uploads/files/net-works_toolkit_en_digital.pdf

138 Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Report of the Experts Group on Trafficking in Human Beings A Baltic Sea States Edition. - Available at: https://patverums-dm.lv/svs/uploads/files/Combating-Trafficking-in-Human-Beings-2023.pdf.

139 Link to the project performance indicators: https://heuni.fi/-/elect_thb

strengthen knowledge and approaches to human trafficking. The aim of the project is to provide training in law enforcement and closer cooperation between the project partners (Latvia, Estonia, Finland) and Poland and Ukraine.

Within the framework of the project, the Ministry of the Interior organised four national trainings on labour exploitation and sexual exploitation. With regard to labour exploitation, the training dealt extensively with the recruitment of third-country nationals, providing a profile of victims and different recruitment schemes, how to identify and investigate these cases. The training was attended by police officers, border guards, migration officers, judges and labour inspectors.

In October 2023, the OSCE, in cooperation with the Latvian Ministry of the Interior, organised a training in Latvia on the "social pathway" in working with victims, with a special focus on the social pathway for third-country nationals. The aim of the training was to improve the "social pathway" approach to working with victims of trafficking in human beings.

In the workshop "Cooperation in the provision of services to victims of trafficking in human beings", which took place on 2 November 2023 in the framework of the project "Professional and modern development of social work", Centre MARTA shared its experience and knowledge with social workers of municipal social services, helping to strengthen both the understanding of the modern forms of trafficking in human beings and teaching to recognise victims of trafficking in human beings.[140]

In 2023, the Centre MARTA and the Ombudsman, with the financial support of the Ministry of Welfare, visited 18 out-of-family care institutions across Latvia to educate children and staff about the risks of human trafficking and to inform them where to turn for help.[141]

In the spring of 2024, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Riga Office in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the digital marketing agency CreateIT, is implementing a digital communication campaign to prevent human trafficking for Ukrainian civilians living in Latvia. The campaign will run for two weeks from March 11 to 25. During the campaign, informative materials are distributed on social networks to remind people how to protect themselves from the risks of human trafficking and where to turn for help.[142]

Coordination and cooperation between key participants

The National Border Guard and the State Labour Inspectorate worked closely on internal procedures for joint inspections and when to involve the State Police. The procedure has not yet been formalised, but as a result of this cooperation and exchange of information, a case of trafficking in human beings has been identified in 2023. The aim of the procedure is to strengthen joint inspection procedures between the State Border Guard and the State Labour Inspectorate.

140 MARTA educates on cooperation in support of trafficked persons. - Available at: https://marta.lv/lv/marta-runa/marta-izglito-par-sadarbibu-cilveku-tirdznieciba-cietusu-cilveku-atbalstam/.

141 Trafficking in human beings in Latvia: recruiters are not properly punished; orphanages are a risk area. - Available at: https://marta.lv/lv/marta-runa/cilveku-tirdznieciba-latvija-vervetajus-pienacigi-nesoda-riska-zona--bernunami/.

142 A digital campaign to prevent trafficking in human beings for Ukrainian civilians living in Latvia. - Available at: https://www.iem.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/isteno-digitalo-kampanu-cilveku-tirdzniecibas-prevencijai-latvija-dzivojosajiem-ukrainas-civiliedzivotajiem

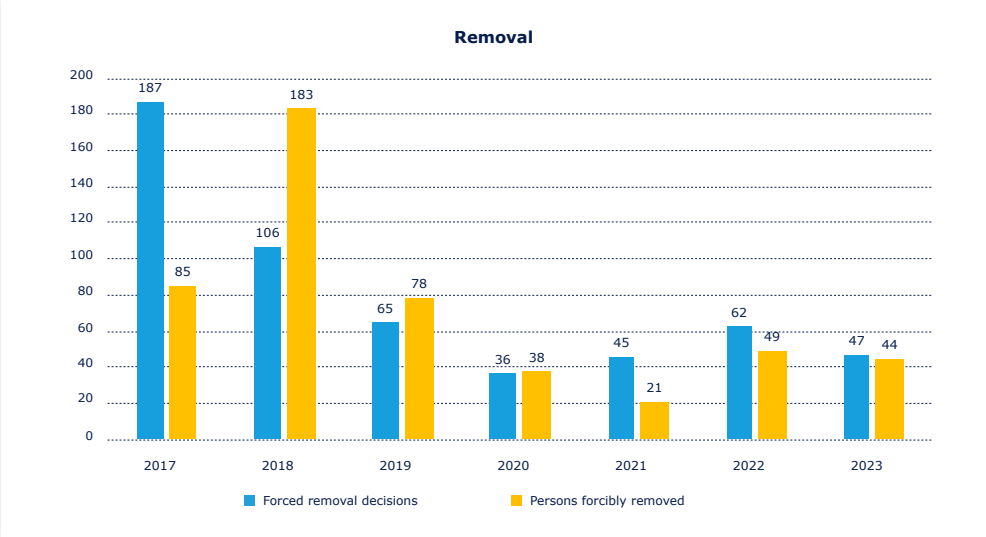
Identification of victims of trafficking in human beings

On 18 October 2023, the Centre MARTA, which provides social rehabilitation for victims of trafficking in human beings, together with the IOM, organised a meeting on how to develop victim referral in Latvia. It was discussed that the current referral mechanism already covers most of the identification and referral procedures, but that the biggest problems could arise in data protection when exchanging information on potential victims. In this context, it was recommended to work on possible agreements between state and non-govermnmental institutions. The aim of the meeting was to assess possible gaps in the provision of victim referral and to make recommendations for possible regulation.

14.

RETURN AND READMISSION

The number of persons who have left Latvia voluntarily increased slightly in 2023 reaching 1,984 persons (1,957 in 2022). Most of them were Uzbek and Ukrainian nationals.[143] 38[144] have received voluntary return assistance. The number of forcibly removed persons decreased slightly to 44 in 2023 (49 in 2022[145]). The largest number of forcibly removed third-country nationals came from Uzbekistan.



Latvia took part in two joint removal operations in 2023, as previous unsuccessful return attempts showed that third-country nationals were unwilling to return to their home country and were trying to obstruct the removal procedure in any way. In one case, a Nigerian national was deported to Nigeria (an operation organised by the Federal Republic of Germany in cooperation with FRONTEX) and taken by land to Frankfurt. In the second case, a Georgian national was deported to Georgia (the operation was organised by the Republic of Poland in cooperation with FRONTEX).

Strengthening cooperation with third countries of origin and transit on removal and readmission management

On 28 November 2023, the Protocol between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on the implementation of the Agreement between the European Community and Ukraine on readmission[146] was signed.

143 Data source: OCMA.

144 Data source: IOM Riga Office

145 Source: SBG.

146 Source: State Border Guard

14.

LIST OF LITERATURE AND OTHER SOURCES

Latvian legislation

Repatriation Law. - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 155, 10.10.1995. - [entered into force on 24.10.1995] The law will expire on 1 July 2028.

Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians. - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 45A, 04.03.2022. - [entered into force on 05.03.2022]

Law "Amendments to the Immigration Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 115, 15.06.2022. - [entered into force on 29.06.2022]

Law "Amendments to the Immigration Law". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 185A, 23.09.2022. - [entered into force on 24.09.2022]

Law "Amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians.". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 240A, 12.12.2022. - [entered into force on 13.12.2022]

Law "On the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of Japan on the Work and Holiday Scheme". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 30A, 11.02.2023. - [entered into force on 25.02.2023]

Law "Amendments to the Law on Construction of the External Land Border Infrastructure". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 47, 07.03.2023. - [entered into force on 08.03.2023]

Law "Amendments to the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 57A, 21.03.2023. - [entered into force on 01.06.2023]

Law "Amendments to the Law on Protection of Children's Rights". - *Latvijas Vēstnesis* No. 57A, 21.03.2023. - [entered into force on 01.04.2023]

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Abbreviations used

EU – the European Union

EMN – European Migration Network

IOM – International Organisation for Migration

OCMA – Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs

SBG – State Border Guard

AMIF – Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund