

Case Study Profile: Riga

Riga is the capital and largest city of Latvia housing one third of its inhabitants. Unlike other capital cities of Europe, the issue of housing is less defined in terms of increased demand for housing in a context of stagnating supply, but more in terms of quality and affordability. Since the 1990s' transition, Riga has lost around 300 000 inhabitants due to former migrants returning to other former Soviet republics and many leaving to Western Europe since Latvia joined the European Union in 2004 and after the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent austerity policies. At the same time, the city development is marked by suburbanization with upper-middle-class families leaving to separate houses around Riga, which has been a growing area for the past 20 years. Nevertheless, Latvia has the highest rate of apartment dwellers compared to houses in the EU (65.9%) with most people residing in Soviet-built apartments. Riga is a challenging housing milieu for migrants due to its homeowner-dominated housing market, lack of arrival infrastructure, complicated histories of immigration, and ageing housing stock.

Basic Facts and Figures

	Riga	Latvia
Inhabitants total ¹	614.618	1.893.223
Inhabitants with migrant background ²		
a) Latvian non-citizen passport ³	a) 15,8% (97.207)	a) 10,1% (190.522)
b) Non-EU citizens	b) 4,9% (30.084)	b) 2,9% (55.576)
c) EU-27 citizens	c) 0,6% (3.434)	c) 0,3% (6.343)
d) Latvian citizenship with migrant biography ⁴	d) <i>Not available, presumably higher than national share</i>	d) 4.0% (75.962)
Share of people at risk of poverty (%) ⁵	15.9	21.6
Share of tenant households (%)	<i>Not available, presumably comparable to national share</i>	~10-12% + informal tenants ⁶
Share of owner-occupied households (%)		~80%
Housing Vacancy ⁷	15,6	23,8
Average monthly expenses on housing (%) ⁸	11,8	12,2
Change in average rent from 2005-2018 (% in- or decrease) ⁹	<i>Not available</i>	+61

1 <https://stat.gov.lv/lv/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/iedzivotaju-skaits/247-iedzivotaju-skaits-un-ta-izmainas>

2 <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/population/population-number/tables/ire090-population-sex-ethnicity-citizenship>

3 A specific legal status in Latvia and Estonia which designates citizens of the former USSR who have neither Latvian nor other citizenship.

4 <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/population/population-number/tables/irv040-population-citizenship-and-country>

5 <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/ekonomika/latvija-nabadzibas-riskam-pern-bija-paklauti-216-iedzivotaju.a386449/>

6 Plus residual share of likely informal tenants (without a contract); https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/latvia_housing_report_web-1

7 https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__MA__MAS/MAS080

8 <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/population/housing/tables/mai010-housing-maintenance-expenditure-one-household>

9 https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/latvia_housing_report_web-1

Core developments related to the Nexus of Housing and Integration

There are no inclusive housing strategies that target beneficiaries of international protection and other third country nationals (migrants/newcomers more generally) as a particular group among the Riga city inhabitants. Riga municipality offers several nationally prescribed housing solutions, such as social housing and municipality housing for poor and low-income individuals and families; short-term dwelling for socially insecure individuals/families; care homes for retired people, persons with disabilities, and orphans; group flats/houses for people with mental disorders; and shelters for homeless people. As long as refugees/newcomers meet the eligibility criteria (permanent or temporary residence permit, officially declared place of residence, proof of insufficient income, indications of mental/functional disabilities), they can apply for and use these social services. The main development in the past year has been the possibility to apply for a housing benefit without having declared residency in the municipality. Until this measure, claiming housing benefits was impossible unless one already had secured accommodation, creating a vicious circle of precarity. The latest informal news is that Riga will develop a city-wide strategy of housing until spring 2022 where specific measures of support may be defined for refugees as well.

Potentials

- A **new municipal housing strategy** to be designed by spring 2022 which might complement the national housing strategy.
- A gathering momentum among **civil society groups** interested in developing the housing policy in socially meaningful ways: for example, the NGO “Free Riga” is making use of vacant sites and houses, fostering social and cultural participation. They are further interested in creating links between other NGOs that deal directly with specific social groups in order to streamline the housing service.
- A new halfway house project launched by an **NGO “Safe Shelter”** – already running, this is a new project and may prove to be a turning point in the way refugee housing integration is conceptualised and governed on municipal and state level.

Challenges

- Most beneficiaries of international protection face ongoing **discriminatory attitudes** on the part of local landlords. After learning about the legal status or the ethnicity of the potential renter, landlords often refuse to rent out the apartment or unjustifiably increase costs or add fees to the service, such as, demanding extra deposits.
- Refugees and beneficiaries of international protection face **high housing costs**. Since the private rental market is very limited and there is no public option of affordable housing, the rental costs are high even for local inhabitants with stable employment.
- The biggest challenge by far is the **lack of institutional design** that would engage social groups in need. The lack of institutional expertise and an overall strategy and the fact that public housing support is available only to the highest earners along with only the lowest earners has created a vacuum of institutional support for the bulk of the population.