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# Between Progress and Pushback: Latvia and the Istanbul Convention

On 25 September 2025, the Latvian Parliament voted to begin the process of withdrawing Latvia from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). This vote has been met with growing mass protests. We provide some background to understand the political and societal movements that underlie these events. Survey data shows that (a) violence against women is prevalent in Latvia and (b) there is public support for legislation aimed at combating a major expression of gender-based violence, such as intimate partner violence. However, the Latvian public appears polarized on perceptions about women and men's roles in society, which might conflict with the Convention's call for States to combat gender stereotypes. The vote's significance in terms of Latvia's geopolitical positioning between the EU and Russia also contributes to making the Convention a polarizing issue.

## Introduction

Latvia ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) in November 2023. The Convention entered into force on 1 May 2024. Since then, significant political debate has emerged around its continued implementation, with strong calls from some political parties and civic groups to withdraw. On 25 September 2025, the Saeima, Latvia's parliament, considered withdrawal. On 31 October, Saeima voted to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention (56 in favor, 32 against). President Edgars Rinkēvičs, noting the potential harm to Latvia's international standing, returned the law to the Saeima. Lawmakers then postponed further action until after the October 2026 elections. Mass protests erupted in the Latvian capital against the possible withdrawal. If the next Parliament pushes the withdrawal process to completion, Latvia will be the first EU country to withdraw from the Convention and the second among the original signatories to do so, after Turkey.

This policy brief outlines the background to the parliamentary vote and subsequent mass protests, traces the political process behind them, assesses their geopolitical significance, including Russian influence in Latvian politics, and considers whether the vote reflects a wider societal move away from the Convention's core principles.

## “We Don't Say Gender Here”

The debate in Latvia centres primarily on concerns around the term “gender” and how social roles are defined under the Convention, rather than its core aim of preventing violence and protecting victims.

Specifically, Article 3(c) of the Convention defines gender as “the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men.” This definition is instrumental in understanding violence against women as a fundamental expression of patriarchal norms that assign rigid roles in society to men and women. Such understanding is, in turn, considered a precondition for a holistic approach in combating gender-based violence (GBV) that includes legal protections but also profound cultural transformations. The controversy in Latvia surrounding this definition of gender, as opposed to biological sex, sits within a broader Latvian paradox. On the one hand, Latvia has a strong representation of women in the labour market and leadership - it ranks second in the European Union in terms of women in managerial positions (although this representation is weaker for political leadership; see Gerber, 2021, for more details). On the other hand, gender-role attitudes remain traditional: Latvia has one of the highest shares in the EU of respondents who believe caregiving is primarily a woman's responsibility and consistently shows one of the largest gender gaps in time spent on care-related unpaid work (Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia, 2024; Statistics Latvia, 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023).

The concept of “gender” as a social construct has entered Latvian public discourse only recently, and there is no widely accepted everyday equivalent for the English word in the Latvian language. The term used in institutional and policy contexts, *sociālais dzimums* (literally “social sex”), is technical and unfamiliar to many Latvians. In general usage, “dzimums” refers to biological sex,



and historically, Latvian policy and legal frameworks have operated under this binary understanding (Kalnbērziņa, 2023). Proponents of withdrawal, largely from conservative and nationalist political parties, argue that the Convention introduces ideas about “gender” that conflict with Latvian cultural values, family roles, and existing legal frameworks. For these actors, the Convention is perceived, or framed, less as a tool for protection against violence and more as a vehicle for social change initiated from outside, which, as such, allegedly undermines sovereignty.

## Parties' positioning on the Convention

Against this background, political parties' standing on the Convention has defined new fractures within the Saeima and in society more broadly, quickly becoming an increasingly polarizing matter with high significance for government stability, democratic representation, and alignment with EU core values. Although public debate has focused on ideological disagreements over gender, political dynamics played a significant role in the 2025 vote on withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention. New Unity, the largest party in the Saeima, led by Prime Minister Evika Siliņa, previously broke with its government coalition partners, the National Alliance and United List, to form a new coalition with the Greens and Farmers Union (ZZS) and The Progressives, partly to ensure the ratification of the Convention. The resulting government was sworn in September 2023 without new Parliamentary elections. The National Alliance and United List, long opposed to the treaty's gender terminology, viewed this shift as a betrayal by New Unity and have since aligned more closely

with Latvia First and For Stability! to push for withdrawal. Meanwhile, ZZS, a major player in Latvian politics, first supported ratification but later backed withdrawal, raising questions about policy consistency as its deputies effectively voted against their own earlier decision.

The result has left the governing coalition - still composed of New Unity, The Progressives, and ZZS - weakened and politically divided, with opposition parties exploiting the moment while the 2026 budget process remains critical. The situation also placed pressure on President Edgars Rinkēvičs, who eventually decided to return the withdrawal law to parliament, mentioning concerns over potential harm to Latvia's international standing as a key factor behind his decision. He recommended that the issue should be reconsidered after the elections in 2026. Overall, political repositioning and coalition instability have become deeply intertwined with a key human-rights commitment. One side, mirroring ultra-conservative rhetoric across Europe, criticized the treaty as promoting “gender ideology,” encouraging sexual experimentation, and harming children. Supporters countered that these claims amounted to anti-EU rhetoric.

At the same time, public mobilisation has been significant. Over ten thousand people have gathered in multiple peaceful demonstrations in Riga to oppose withdrawal, expressing concern about potential setbacks to women's rights and victim protection (Meduza, 2025; Hivert, 2025). International organisations have also highlighted that withdrawal would place Latvia in a unique position within the European Union, as no other EU member state has sought to leave this treaty (Amnesty International, 2025).



## Geopolitical significance

The Saeima's vote to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention risks undermining Latvia's long-built reputation as a Nordic-style liberal democracy with strong human-rights standards. If the withdrawal decision becomes law, Latvia would stand as the only country in the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) outside the Convention, while Lithuania continues toward ratification. The move prompted an unusual diplomatic intervention: parliamentary speakers from several NB8 states and ambassadors from 15 close partners urged Latvia to remain in solidarity on violence prevention (Collier, 2025). These appeals were ignored. Internationally, Latvia would be grouped with Turkey as the only states to exit the treaty, raising concerns among partners about backsliding on women's rights and domestic-violence protection. Observers warned that this decision could (and may still in 2026) reverse decades of work to portray Latvia as a modern, progressive European state, instead reinforcing outdated "post-Soviet" stereotypes. Rebuilding credibility requires diplomatic effort and clear, effective national action to protect victims.

It is also significant that the disagreement with other NB8 countries occurs at a time when, otherwise, there is growing cooperation between the NB8 members, in part in response to the geopolitical realities that make Latvia's relationship with other EU and NATO members arguably ever more critical.

Geopolitics also matter because monitoring and survey data indicate that gender-related policy debates in Latvia are susceptible to wider geopolitical narratives. Approximately one-third of

Latvian respondents believe that gender equality policies are "imposed by the EU," a sentiment that is significantly more common among Russian-speaking residents (EC, 2017, 2019). Analyses of Latvian media ecosystems show that narratives opposing "gender ideology" are regularly amplified in Russian-language outlets, linking such policies to moral decline and loss of national identity (CEEPS, 2023). These framings align with broader Kremlin messaging, which positions European human-rights norms as threats to cultural sovereignty (EUvsDisinfo, 2024), though there is no evidence of direct Russian intervention. However, the Latvian State Security Service has noted that debates on gender and family values are used as entry points for polarisation and for undermining trust in Latvia's Western partnerships (Latvian Security Service, 2024).

Taken together, this suggests that the controversy surrounding the Istanbul Convention does not occur in isolation. Rather, it intersects with information influence efforts that exploit pre-existing societal tensions around identity, norms, and Latvia's European orientation.

## What about incidence and perceptions around gender-based violence in society?

Meanwhile, survey data indicate that gender-based and domestic violence remain a significant and often under-reported problem in Latvia, suggesting that improvements in gender equality in the workplace have not yet translated into safety within households.

Estimates based on a 2021 survey on gender-based violence by the European Institute of



Gender Equality (EGEN) show that one quarter of Latvian women aged 18-74 have experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15, and 16% have experienced violence from their intimate partner (IPV). 23% of these women had not told anyone about the violence before the survey interview. Notably, in 2022, Latvia also reported the highest femicide rate in the EU, with 2.9 women being intentionally killed by their partner, former partner, or family member per 100,000 inhabitants. The survey also depicts a culture not fully responsive to relatively subtle forms of gender-based violence and permeated with significant stereotypes. For instance, 53% of Latvian women and 41% of Latvian men believe or tend to believe that women who share their opinion on social media should expect sexist, demeaning and/or abusive replies (EU averages are 18 and 23% respectively); 45% of women and 47% of men believe that a woman who suffers sexual violence under the influence of alcohol or drugs is at least partially responsible (respective EU averages are 13 and 20%).

Nevertheless, a large majority of Latvians seem to support the notion that IPV should be legislated in some way. A FREE Network survey of a representative (based on age and gender) sample (around 900 individuals) of the Latvian population shows that, as of September 2021, nearly 90% of respondents thought that the State should have specific legislation addressing IPV, a key tenet of the Istanbul Convention. This average masks heterogeneity by gender, with relatively fewer men (81% vs. 97% of women) expressing support for such legislation. Consistently, more Latvian men (14%) than women (9%) appeared to think that a woman beaten by her partner should not seek any help, because it is a private matter. For

comparison, in Sweden, a country that has long ratified the Convention (2014), these percentages are 4% and 3%, respectively. The same survey also confirms that the Latvian society is relatively less attuned to more subtle forms of IPV, namely, psychological violence. For instance, while the percentage of respondents in Latvia who believe that harmful beating is a form of IPV matches the percentage in Sweden (98%), only 77% of Latvians believe that the prohibition to dress as one likes is a form of IPV, against a Swedish percentage of 95%.

Finally, the FROGEE survey depicts a public opinion permeated by stereotypes about women and men's roles in society: nearly 30% of Latvians appear to believe that if a job is scarce men should be given more right to a job than women, nearly a majority report agreeing with the statement that "what most women really want is a home and children", and a majority (54%) thinks that a pre-school child suffers if his/her mother work.

In terms of attitudes toward DV legislation, it is also worth noting that the Latvian Parliament has recently strengthened its legal system to protect victims of domestic violence by approving, in February 2022, a law granting the police the right to separate the victim of domestic violence from the perpetrator, even without the victim's request. The FROGEE survey reveals that public knowledge around this provision at the time of discussion within the government was relatively limited (30% of survey respondents reported being aware of such discussion, see Berlin-Perrotta et al., 2024), signalling that decisions around DV legislation did not feature prominently in the public debate, at least at the time of the interview.



In sum, the data suggest that gender-based violence and IPV are pressing issues in the Latvian context. The public does not seem to be especially polarized on the extent to which major expressions of IPV should be legislated. Beliefs about more subtle forms of violence, or violence that is more clearly an expression of a patriarchal culture that assigns specific roles to women and men, appear to be more polarized; the same can be said more generally about beliefs on gender roles.

## Conclusion

In the face of the recent Latvian Parliament vote to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention and the growing public protests against it, we provided some background to understand the political and societal movements that underlie these events. Our analysis starts from the observation that, overall, the Parliamentary vote is not so much about the main purpose of the Istanbul Convention, which is to fight gender-based and domestic violence, but rather about the Convention's definition of gender as a social construct. We document that at the societal level, there is general support for legislation aimed at combating a major expression of gender-based violence, such as IPV. However, the Latvian public appears to be more polarized on perceptions about women's and men's roles in society, with more traditional views being popular among large shares of the population.

The Parliamentary opposition to the Convention, therefore, can be at best understood as an expression of society's unease with less traditional gender-based roles, coupled with political parties' positioning with respect to an increasingly weakening governmental majority. However,

framings of the Convention's definition of gender as an attempt to override the binary definition of sex, despite this being neither a direct nor an indirect tenet of the Convention, might also have contributed to inflaming the related debate. These framings have charged stances on the Convention with significance in terms of Latvia's geopolitical positioning between the EU, of which the country has long been a member, and Russia, a powerful reference especially for the ethnic Russian population. These factors combine to make stances on the Convention profoundly divided at a time when the country is exposed to increased external threat by Russia's heightened aggressiveness in the Baltic region.

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