Welfare and Values in Europe:
Transitions related to Religion, Minorities and Gender (WaVE)

Latvia:
Overview of the national situation

by Raimonds Graudins
1. Introduction

The description of the situation in Latvia is a challenging task because of the diversity of religions and ethnic groups represented in the country. There are also many complex and specific issues related to historical context, economic development and provision of social welfare. Given that a large part of the population is still struggling with problems at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the type of problems and their order of priority are often different from developed European countries. However, this report provides grounds for interesting comparisons in order to understand the nature and hierarchy of social problems across Europe and gain insights in order to provide policy recommendations.

Latvia is a small country with a population of 2.3 million in an area of 64,600 square kilometres. It is located on the eastern side of the Baltic Sea and has borders with Estonia in the north, Lithuania in the south, and Russia and Belarus in the east. Scandinavian countries are located right across the Baltic Sea and can be easily reached via sea or air transport.

The geographical location of Latvia puts it into a very advantageous position on the crossroads between east and west. These circumstances have had different effects on the development of the country. On the one hand, it has facilitated trade and relationships with other countries. On the other hand, the territory of Latvia has always been a target for acquisition by the most important powers of the Baltic Sea region (most notably Germany, Russia, Poland and Sweden).

As a result, Latvia has been exposed to influences from different cultures and religions. The first independent state of Latvia was established only in 1918 and more than 20% of the population were people of foreign ethnic origin. This, however, did not hinder the economic and social development as Latvia quickly achieved prosperity levels comparable to other European countries. This situation lasted until World War II, when Latvia was occupied and annexed to the Soviet Union.
The Soviet period has had a particularly strong impact on Latvian society with its emphasis on collectivism, brotherhood among the friendly nations, commitment to total employment, universal social coverage, complete gender equality, planned economy, and rejection of religion. Forced immigration was yet another aspect of Soviet policy aiming to ensure that Latvia and other Baltic states were tied with Russia through the significant population of ethnic Slavs.

After regaining its independence in 1991, Latvia has made enormous efforts to return to the pre-war traditions and to restore market economy. Many reforms have been carried out in order to be able to join the European Union in 2004. However, the post-soviet heritage and current state of international affairs pose many problems that need to be solved. Among these are questions related to ethnic and religious diversity, as well as, economic development and standards of living.

What are the shared values on which the welfare system is based? Does the state provide sufficient amount of social aid and services? Can religious organisations contribute to social welfare? Do religious values function as a source of cohesion or as a source of tension in the society? Are there observable links between religious and ethnic minorities? Does the ethnic composition in the country influence its economic performance and social climate? What is the attitude towards multicultural diversity? Do Latvians consider gender issues to be an important problem? One would expect that policy makers have answers to these questions. Though a survey of experts and review of the available research in these areas reveals that this might not be the case.

For example, according to a survey of experts and decision makers carried out by Graudins (2004), there is no common understanding about the model of the welfare state that should be implemented in Latvia. It also reveals that there are certain contradictions in the legislation, especially regarding the role of the church in the welfare system.

The notion of church as a welfare agent is relatively uncommon among both secular people and the representatives of the church in Latvia. Perhaps this is due to the lack of
institutional and informal traditions, since the church was restricted in its public activities during the Soviet times (Krumina-Konkova and Gills 1999). There is also a lack of academic studies related to this subject. Currently the Faculty of Theology of the University of Latvia has prepared applications for such projects, but there is no output available as of yet.

Research on the relationship between majority church and minority groups is almost non-existent in Latvia. Dr. Valdis Teraudkalns, a prominent Latvian researcher in the field of religion, is currently preparing a publication on the dialectics between different religions in Latvia. He also touched upon these issues when discussing emergence of charismatic religions in Latvia. According to Teraudkalns, traditional churches in Latvia are not supportive to the new religious movements (Teraudkalns 2001a).

The report on religious freedom in Latvia (2005) prepared by the US Government Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor concludes that the relations among religions in Latvian society are generally amicable and this has contributed to religious freedom. Concerning minority groups, the report highlights the fact that many Russian-speaking, non-citizen, permanent residents are members of the Orthodox Church, which is the third largest religion in the country. Still, there are no studies that would examine this linkage in more detail.

There are very few studies on religious minorities in Latvia. Existing research, including Krumina-Konkova and Gills (2005), tends to focus on new charismatic movements since they have been the most important in terms of number of members and have had a significant impact on the life of the church and the society. The authors find that Latvian society does not find it easy to communicate with new religions, probably because of lack of knowledge and objective information about these issues. They also note that belonging to religious minority groups changes the cultural identity of people and thereby has an impact on the development of a new multicultural identity.

Cultural identity and issues related to ethnic minorities, in turn, have received a due attention from the Latvian research community. These aspects are also high on political agenda since Latvia is rich with different minority groups and they represent a large share of the total
population. The history and composition of ethnic minorities has been discussed in Dribins (2001 and 2004), where the author draws the line between traditional national minorities and the Russian-speaking population that emerged during the Soviet times. Pabriks (2002) discusses ethnic proportions, discrimination and employment issues. Several studies have examined the integration policy and integration processes in Latvian society (Indans and Kalnins 2001, Pabriks et al 2001, Makarovs and Strode 2005, Zepa et al 2005). A few studies have been made concerning specific minority groups in Latvia: Jews (Dribins 2002), Roma people (Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2003), traditional Muslim nations (Scherbinskis 1998) and immigrants form the neighboring countries.

There is relatively less attention paid to the recent immigration and new minority groups. Apparently this has not been the most visible problem in practice since Latvia has not been particularly attractive for immigration (Indans 2004). However, there are studies that discuss issues related to tolerance in the Latvian society and in this context aspects of immigration, religion and ethnicity are discussed and closely linked with each other (see for example, Zepa et al 2004; Sulmane and Kruks 2006). These studies also measure the attitude of the Latvian society towards the representatives of Islamic culture.

The issue of gender equality is currently high on the political and research agenda. However, the main emphasis so far is on the economic aspects of gender equality that are not specifically related to religion. Thus, the most recent studies are on women in business and in the labour market (SKDS 2005a, Ziverte et al, 2005, Women in Business 2006). There are also studies concerning human trafficking (Supule and Krastina 2006) and education of gender equality in schools (Caune et al 2005).

In 1997 the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of Latvian Academy of Sciences published a book on gender equality that discussed different aspects of gender inequality in more detail. This book is essentially a collection of articles that touch upon legal issues, attitudes and values, as well as, gender roles in family and the society (see Koroleva 1997).
The types of discussions about immigration, gender equality and Islam that take place in contemporary Europe have not been topical in Latvia. Perhaps in the Latvian case we could draw some parallels with Orthodox Russian-speaking women of whom relatively many are unemployed. But there is hardly anything on this subject in the research databases in Latvia. There are, however, articles in academic journals discussing the role of women in modern Christian religions and Protestant religions in particular (Tēraudkalns 2001b, 2002a, 2003a, and 2003b).

Religious values have actively been discussed during the last couple of years. These aspects have been particularly important within the context of religious education in schools, morality in the society and cultural identity. The Institute of Philosophy and Religion of the University of Latvia has published a collection of articles dedicated to these topics with contributions from many prominent researchers in this field (Kule 2005). There is also earlier output from Teraudkalns (2003c and 2003d) looking at the interplay between post-modern culture and religion. Krumina-Konkova and Gills (2000) have discussed European visions and religious life in Contemporary Latvia.

After looking at the Latvian academic output in this area of studies, it is possible to identify the following areas where WaVE research could fill the gap in knowledge:

- Churches / religious organisations and social welfare
- Religious minorities in Latvia
- Links between ethnicity, religion and gender equality
- Sources of cohesion / conflict in the society
- Religion as a source of cohesion / conflict
- Values that we can see in action in the Latvian society

2. Characteristics of the national welfare system

Economic reforms carried out during the past decade have strengthened the private sector and created macroeconomic conditions that are favourable for entrepreneurship. The economy is liberal and open for trade and investment. As a result, for the past few years Latvia has been one
of the fastest growing economies in the European Union with GDP growing at 10.2% in 2005. However, rapid economic development does not necessarily bring the desired social outcomes.

Most of the Latvian population has yet to see the gains from the economic growth, as income inequality in Latvia is one of the highest in Europe. According to the data from Eurostat, the ratio of total income received by the 20% of the population with the highest income to that received by the 20% of the population with the lowest income in Latvia was 6.7 in 2005 versus a 4.9 average in Europe. Up to 19% of the population make their living below the risk-of-poverty threshold (after social transfers) in comparison with 16% in Europe.

The average income per person is barely half of the EU-25 level in purchasing power terms, but in market prices GDP per capita constituted only 5,500 euros in 2005 (data from Eurostat and Latvian Central Statistics bureau).1

The government tries to respond to this situation with new policy initiatives and by inviting other actors, including the family, non-profit organisations and the church to contribute to the social welfare. However, for these policy responses to function and to make them understandable there is a need for a conceptual understanding of the underlying issues and a clear framework for cooperation between the actors. In other words, the “rules of the game” should be clear, as should be the cause and effect relationships within the welfare policy. Due to the complexities of the modern world and historical factors, the government has had mixed success in solving these problems. The next sub-sections in this report provide a description and background of the welfare system in Latvia.

2.1 General description

Aidukaite (2004) attempts to put the Baltic countries within Esping-Andersen’s (1999) typology. According to her study, Latvia falls somewhere between the liberal and conservative-corporate regimes. Latvia’s insurance for the elderly and family benefits offer only a basic level

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1 It should be noted that the situation is improving and real wage growth in Latvia was 15.6% in 2006. At the same time, this is offset by continuous growth in prices and by increasing risks of the overheating in the economy.
of security and social assistance is means-tested, which is typical to a liberal approach. On the other hand, its social insurance schemes (unemployment insurance and short-term benefits) overlap with the corporatist model, since they are state-managed, they depend on previous contributions and in certain cases differ among occupational groups.

In its approach to welfare policy the state usually puts market efficiency first. Social policy has never been a top priority. The burden of social responsibility is put on the individual. Even if all major social insurance programs are in place, the benefit levels are fairly low. Citizens have to rely primarily on the market and family to secure their welfare needs.

At the same time the market is still in transition and the salaries are fairly low. According to Eurostat, average gross annual earnings in industry and services were 8.2 times lower than the EU average in 2004, which is a significant difference even when taking price factors into account. Moreover, in the absence of adequate labour unions and legal protection, the employees may become too much dependent on the labour market. In extreme cases this may even deprive them from certain social and human rights (vacation, better employment alternatives, etc.). Besides, not everybody is fortunate to have the support of a well-off family. Altogether this has also led to an increase in income inequalities and poverty rates.

One of the most debated and confusing areas of social welfare in Latvia is health policy. Currently it is a combination of minimum state health insurance and private contributions. In 2004 Latvia ranked second behind the USA in terms of the share that patients had to pay for health services. This system has been severely criticised because in such a situation access to health services becomes an issue for many people. The share of public expenditures devoted to the health sector also is comparatively low, never exceeding 3.4% of GDP in Latvia’s recent history (Rajevska 2005).

The relationships between welfare agents are determined by the market and legislation. The state is the main actor in social policy, but it tends to withdraw from social activities that can be sustained by the market. Thus, for instance, the pension system is increasingly privatised. In cases when, neither the state, nor the market, is willing to participate, the government does not
hesitate to invite other (traditional) providers of welfare, including the family, the church or NGOs.

An important feature stipulated in Latvian civil law is the principle of the responsibility of the family. It means that if a person applies for social assistance, the authorities also evaluate the financial situation of the family members of the individual (the so-called legal supporters). This is not a common practice in other countries because usually only the situation of the individual is analysed and taken into account.

Within the public sector, social policy is implemented in two levels – national and municipal level. The national government is first of all responsible for social policy strategy, legislation and implementation. It also manages social insurance and provides social services to disabled children and elderly people. The rest of social services, as well as, social assistance benefits are within the authority of the municipalities. It is commonly believed that municipalities are closer to the people and can better address their needs.

Public institutions have also the right to delegate their functions to the private sector or NGOs, maintaining full or partial control over the particular service and providing the necessary financial support. This is how social services are organised in several municipalities. Religious organisations can also participate through this mechanism because in legal terms they also represent the NGO sector (Graudins 2003). For example, based on the legal framework for cooperation between the municipalities and NGOs, the municipality of Riga (the capital of Latvia) has concluded contracts with the Riga Baptist seminary and the Diaconal Centre of the Evangelical Lutheran church of Latvia. The Baptist seminary provides shelter to homeless people and the Diaconal Centre operates soup kitchens for the poor (Aboltins, 2006).

2.2 Historical legacy

Aidukaite (2004) argues that the post-socialist welfare regime has been influenced by the heritage from the Soviet era. For example, the predominance of insurance-based social protection could be traced back to the Soviet times, when social security was provided through guaranteed
employment. Another characteristic is high coverage, but a relatively low level of social benefits. Historical factors might also explain the relatively passive contribution of the church to social welfare in Latvia. During the Soviet times the church was separated from society. Hence, the Latvian church cannot refer to a historical heritage comparable to the old European countries, where the role of the church and its social presence has been much more prominent (Krumina-Konkova and Gills 2005).

Another important aspect was the economic feasibility of particular ways of organising welfare. The reforms had to take into account the lack of resources for maintaining the existing systems, as well as, consider new social problems that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union (Aidukaite 2003). Concerning the church in Latvia, it has also been affected by the lack of resources as at the dawn of independence it did not have the means to provide much social support outside its parishes.

The political attitudes and beliefs of the society and policy makers also have had a substantial impact on shaping the social policy, as have international players, such as the IMF and the World Bank, which provided financial support for the reforms. In general, Latvia and the Baltic States have not been trying to copy any particular welfare regime. Nevertheless, they have analysed and compared approaches to social welfare in different countries and a number of policy transformations from other nations have taken place, including influences from the United States, Great Britain and Scandinavian countries (Rajevska 2005). As regards religion, Teraudkalns (2005) notes that the Lutheran church, which has been dominant in Latvia, has not been oriented towards social theology. As a result there is also a lack of particular intellectual and theological tradition in this respect.

### 2.3 The role of the majority church in the national welfare system

With regard to social policy, the church has the same opportunities to contribute to social welfare as any other NGO. However, there are also specific provisions concerning the church. The so-called “traditional” religions have signed agreements with the state that define the scope of cooperation, as well as, draw the borders between the state and the church. These treaties do
not contain specific clauses concerning welfare policy, but among other things they authorise traditional religions to provide religious education in public schools and to offer chaplain services in the military organisations, which can also be regarded as a form of social welfare provision. Section 4 presents additional information on the relationship between the state and the church, as well as, on the respective legal arrangements.

Since 2000 the Latvian Ministry of Welfare has included social “caritative” (charitable) work (from the Latin caritas – “charity”) in the classification of professional social workers. This means that religious-based social workers with special university education can be employed by state funded social services institutions. It is up to the director of the institution to decide if there is a need for such position in the staff.

2.4 The role of women in the welfare sector

According to data from the Ministry of Welfare, 54,000 people were working in the healthcare and social sector in 2004, of which 47,000 or 87% of the employees were women. The average monthly salary for women in this sector was 256 euros, which was 90% of the average salary received by men. In comparison with other sectors, this salary was 1.4 euros higher than the average salary for women in Latvian economy, which was roughly 255 euros. On average, women in Latvia earned 16% less than men in 2004.

The contribution of the health and social sector in terms of its share in total employment constitutes 5.3%. As can be also concluded from the previous paragraph, this sector is less important for men (only 1.3% of men are working in this sector) and relatively more important to women (9.5% of women are occupied in this field). Professions, such as a nurse and ward attendant, are almost exclusively female. These are also the positions with the lowest salaries.

2.5 Future challenges

Latvian society is concerned about the young population going to work abroad and not coming back because of the difference in living standards. It suffers from a severe brain drain
since often the most talented people leave the country. There is also a fear that growing emigration may subsequently trigger immigration from the Eastern countries or from the South to fill the workforce gap in the economy. Due to recent changes in the society and economic development, total unemployment has decreased in Latvia down to 6.9% in 2006, which is lower than EU average (7.9%). Female unemployment is even lower (6.1% in contrast with 8.9 in EU25). However, long-term unemployment is still higher than European average (4.1% and 3.9% respectively), reflecting that in Latvia there may be more people with operational capability, who are subject to permanent social distress.

Aging population and negative population growth are also a problem, putting stress on the public insurance system. According to Eurostat the proportion of population aged 65 and over was 16.5% (higher than in most European countries). The government has responded to this issue by encouraging the development of private insurance funds, raising the pension age, and putting stronger emphasis on the market. The social budget throughout the last years has been in surplus, which amounted to 72.85 million euros or 7.2% in 2004 (Ministry of Welfare 2005). At the same time, the level of old age pensions is very low amounting only to 123.35 euros on average in 2005, which was below the subsistence minimum at 150.08 euros (data from the State Insurance agency and Latvian Central Statistical bureau).

According to the UNDP development report (2005), poverty, social exclusion, and income disparity are still problematic issues in the country, especially in the rural districts. When measuring in accordance with the UNDP development index, Latvia lags behind its Baltic peers in terms of income component and life expectancy. The latter problem might also be due to the poor public healthcare system that needs to be addressed as well. Data from Eurostat shows that life expectancy at birth in Latvia is 65.6 years versus 75.8 on average in Europe as of 2005.

Gender issues will also continue to be high on the political agenda, in particular its economic aspects. The problems that are currently debated in Latvia also include single mothers, elderly women, trafficking, and violence against women.
Issues that affect the family constitute a problem too. The number of registered marriages has decreased more than twice since 1990 (Sebre et al 2004). On the other hand, existing families find it increasingly difficult to take care of the youngest and eldest members of family, which also creates demand for new social services. This problem can be related to high rates of female employment and increasingly demanding work schedules for both men and women.

There are also other urgent problems in the welfare sector in Latvia. Many of them are concerned with basic human needs, such as lack of affordable and high quality housing, for example. This sets the context for further discussions. In general, existential problems are equal for everybody in Latvia. Poverty does not sort people by religion or race. There is no evidence that poverty rates would be higher for certain ethnic/religious minority groups in Latvia, except Roma people, who have been officially recognised as a problem group. There are some distinctions related to gender, as we already discussed, but they are present in other countries, as well.

Several issues concerning the organisation of welfare are currently debated. Thus, for example, the role of the state in the provision of welfare is being discussed. Effectiveness of the whole system is another issue. Finally, the role of the bearers of traditional values is not yet clear, meaning that the purpose of such institutions as the church or the family in modern Latvian society is not defined from the political point of view.

3. Religious composition in the country

3.1. Registered members of religious organisations

There are many religious denominations and groups represented in the country. Table 1 shows the number of members of religious organisations in Latvia in 2004. According to this data, more than 55% of permanent Latvian residents belong to some religious denomination. This is the number, which religious organisations have reported to the Religious Affairs Council of the Ministry of Justice. Different religious organisations have different approaches for counting their members, therefore the number of active churchgoers is supposed to be lower.
the same time church representatives argue that the total number of believers must actually be higher because there are people who believe in God, but are not members of any specific religious organisation. This argument is also supported by data from sociological studies (see section 3.1. about “Believing without belonging”).

Table 1. Religious confessions and number of members in the parishes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>No. members</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia</td>
<td>539,327</td>
<td>40.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholics</td>
<td>395,067</td>
<td>29.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox Church</td>
<td>350,000</td>
<td>26.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Believer Orthodox</td>
<td>7,635</td>
<td>0.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptists</td>
<td>7,123</td>
<td>0.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostals</td>
<td>4,225</td>
<td>0.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Faith Christians</td>
<td>1,495</td>
<td>0.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Apostolic</td>
<td>1,007</td>
<td>0.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>0.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>0.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dievturi (traditional Latvian religion)</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>0.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Augsburg Lutherans</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>0.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic church ‘Jaunā Paaudze’ (‘New generation’)</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>0.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>0.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh-Day Adventists</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>0.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>0.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German Lutherans</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed Church</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Christians</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah's Witnesses</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hare Krishna</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Eastern apostolic</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodists</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukyo Mahikari</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apostolic</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Followers of Messiah</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.004%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baha’ists</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.004%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglicans</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.003%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahamists</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.002%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visarionians</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0.002%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.001%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL:</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,321,017</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*TOTAL POPULATION IN LATVIA: 2,312,819*

Source: Religious Affairs Council of the Ministry of Justice, Latvian Central Statistical bureau

The typical division between the majority church and minority religions is problematic in Latvia, since none of the religions represent even half of the religious population. However, the Lutheran tradition is the most important in terms of numbers. The Lutheran church is also considered to be the closest to the Latvian identity (Krumina-Konkova and Gills 1999 and 2005). Hence, we can regard it as a majority church in Latvia.

There is quite a significant diversity of religious movements present in the country. Apart from Lutherans, two other religions stand out, namely the Roman Catholic Church and the
Orthodox Church. In Latvia we typically refer to all three churches as major traditional religions. The dominance of the Lutheran church is not so prominent as to automatically assign the “minority” label to the other two religious traditions. In fact, a couple of years ago official sources, including the Council of Religious Affairs reported that there are more Catholics in Latvia than Lutherans. There are also differing views concerning their institutional strength. However, volatility in the data is mainly due to changes in reporting methodology and the information in Table 1 is the most reliable at the moment.

In terms of percentage, the Latvian Lutheran Church represents slightly more than 40% of the religious population, Roman Catholics and Orthodox are estimated approximately 30% and 26.5% respectively. The rest of religious movements taken separately each represent less than one percent. Out of total population the major traditional religions represent 23% (Lutherans), 17% (Catholics), and 15% (Orthodox).

3.2. Believing without belonging

Data about religious population that is obtained through sociological studies differs from the church statistics presented above. The marketing and public opinion research centre SKDS has been studying religiosity of Latvian residents across several years. According to their latest survey (SKDS, 2005b), about 71.9% of people in Latvia affiliate themselves with some religious denomination, which is almost 17% higher than the number reported by religious organisations. Additionally, 10.6% of the respondents are believers, who say that they do not belong to any confession. Thus, non-registered believers with and without attachment to certain religion together constitute 27.6%.

Up to 15.8% of respondents indicate that they are non-believers. For the remaining 1.7% of respondents it was either hard to tell or the answer was not applicable. The number of non-believers has increased since 2003, when it constituted 11.9%. However, earlier surveys from 2000 and 2001 reported an even higher proportion of non-believers (over 17%).
The percentages of major religions and their order of significance also vary according to the surveys from different years. In 2000 and 2001 the largest religions denomination was Lutherans. In more recent surveys from 2003 and 2005 the majority of respondents say that they belong to the Orthodox Church. However, due to the volatility of data, the marginal differences between percentages, the limited sample size and the levels of statistical error it is hard to tell whether we can draw any definite conclusions, such as that the role of Lutheran church is diminishing. The role of the Orthodox Church is the most prominent in Riga, where more than 50% of the population belong to the Russian speaking Diaspora. In central and western Latvia where the Latvian population is more dominant, the proportion of Lutherans is the highest. The eastern part of Latvia has historically been more Catholic.

Other sociological studies that include a survey of religious aspects, such as Zepa et al (2004), report varying percentages, but they also confirm that the proportion of religious people is higher than suggested by the data from the Religious Affairs Council, indicating the presence of non-registered believers who may or may not have an affiliation with certain religious groups. All studies find that most of Latvians are Lutherans, most of Russians are Orthodox, and most of other national groups are either Orthodox or Catholic. It is also interesting to note that the proportion of religious people seems to be higher among the minority groups than among ethnic Latvians. The proportion of religious people is also higher in the countryside than in the cities.

4. Characteristics of the majority Church

According to Article 99 of the Latvian Constitution (Latvijas Republikas Satversme 1998), the church shall be separate from the state. However, this does not exclude cooperation. In 2004 the Lutheran church together with the other six traditional religions signed individual agreements with the state that defined the status of these religions in Latvia and established their rights to provide chaplain services in the army and religious education in public schools. Following these agreements, the Parliament has approved the law on the Latvian Lutheran church, which contains roughly the same set of provisions, but brings this cooperation to a higher legal level. Similar laws have been drafted for several other traditional religions, as well.
The periodical *Kristus Dzive* has published data on the situation in Latvia for 1991 shortly after regaining independence. According to this information, 10,666 people were baptised in the Lutheran church (35% of all baptisms), 1,549 weddings were organised in Lutheran church (32.2% of all weddings that took place in the church), and 1,439 funerals were carried out with the assistance of the Lutheran church (15.2%). Funeral services are the only ones where the Lutheran church was not dominant, as 52.8% of religious funerals were organised by the Catholic Church and 20.8% by the Orthodox Church (Kristus Dzive 1991).

The Consistory of the Latvian Lutheran Church has kindly provided information on the evolution of religious services in recent years. Thus, in 2005 the Lutheran church has registered 15,761 baptisms, 1,095 weddings and 2,286 funerals. According to the data from the Religious Affairs Council of the Ministry of Justice, overall there were 12,579 weddings in Latvia in 2005, of which approximately 20% have been held in churches. This percentage seems to remain constant over the years.

If we compare the latest data with the information from the previous periods, then it is evident that the church overall has maintained its position as a provider of ritual services. Slightly lower numbers of weddings and higher numbers of funerals reflect the current demographic patterns. But the increase in the number of baptisms indicates that there is a stable interest in religion, despite the notion of secularisation in the society.

A simplified organisational structure of the Latvian Lutheran church is presented in Figure 1. The highest decision making body is the Latvian Synod, which is a meeting of the representatives of all parishes taking place at least once every three years. The functions of the Synod are similar to those of a shareholders’ management structure in a company. One of its tasks is to appoint the archbishop. The audit commission and Consistory are under the authority of the synod as well.

The organisation is managed by the Consistory, which is led by the archbishop. The decision-making bodies include the Presidium (consisting of archbishop, his assistant and senior
dean), the Capitol (the council of rural deans) and the Commissions (created to manage different functional areas of the organisation, such as finance, pastoral issues etc.)
In the pastoral dimension, the next step down in the hierarchy is the deanery supervised by the rural dean. The parishes and the vicars are at the bottom end of the hierarchy. The consistory also manages a large number of projects and institutions (including commercial enterprises) that are necessary to support the primary activities of the church.

According to the data from the latest yearbook of the Latvian Lutheran church, there are 32 employees at the top level of the consistory, not including the archbishop, of which 14 are rural deans. The rest are professionals working in the commissions. In addition, there is also the clergy working in the secretariat of the archbishop and the consistory (at least 30 people).

Concerning the pastoral capacity of the organisation, there are 123 vicars, 55 evangelists, and 14 honorary ministers working in the Lutheran church. Many of them are serving in more than one parish. In many rural areas the parishes are small and quite passive, therefore the pastors have to combine duties.

The number of workers in the church organisations is very difficult to estimate. This type of data has not been reported in full in any publicly available source. Besides, there are many part-time and voluntary workers, which make it challenging to track them down. The Consistory could not provide reliable data either, but according to a high level church representative this is one of the bits of data that they are currently gathering.

The Lutheran church in Latvia has several sources of income. They collect regular taxes from the parishes. There are also private and corporate sponsors, as well as, foreign funds that provide assistance. There are partnerships with the state and municipalities where the public sector provides financial support, too. Finally, there is also some income from the church properties and real estate. The church does not publish reports on their financial situation. However, at the end of each year data on the financial situation of the church is submitted to state tax authorities.
4.1 Brief information on the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches

The Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Churches have well-established hierarchies and decision-making authorities similarly to the Lutheran Church. However, since these churches are subject to supranational authorities (the Vatican and Moscow Patriarchy, respectively), their organisation is more autocratic. The sources of finance are not much different from the Lutheran church, but these churches also benefit from being a part of international network.

The Catholic Church in Latvia is represented as the Riga metropolis (province) within the Vatican system. It is managed by the curia and the highest authority is the Archbishop Metropolitan of the Riga Archdiocese. At the moment the highest Catholic official in Latvia is the Catholic cardinal Janis Pujats. The organisation of Catholic Church is divided in 4 dioceses and 289 parishes. The Catholic Church in Latvia is very well developed institutionally. It manages educational establishments, monasteries, as well as, charity organisations, including Caritas and different community based initiatives. More information about the welfare activities of the Roman Catholic Church in Latvia will be presented in the Latvian case study report.

The Riga metropolis of the Orthodox Church is part of the Moscow patriarchy. It is led by an archbishop metropolitan and also has other decision-making authorities, such as a synod. The activities of the Orthodox Church mostly take part within the churches with virtually no outside prayer and support groups. The Orthodox Church in Latvia is rather a beneficiary than a benefactor of social assistance and enjoys support from wealthy individuals. Nevertheless the Orthodox Church has established several charity organisations that aim to address the spiritual and social needs of its members. It also manages several monasteries and is very active as a publisher of religious literature.

Even though representatives of each denomination are deeply convinced that their belief is the most correct one, the relations between traditional churches are very positive. Since each of the churches individually lacks the influence and financial power, they often team together in
order to implement projects or make public statements. Ecumenical services have become a regular tradition during the most important religious and national festivities. According to the representatives of the churches, the mission of ecumenism is to unite people and promote integration in the society.

4.2 The Church as a critical voice

The Latvian Lutheran church promotes conservative values and it is quite common for the church to assess issues that are being discussed in society. Thus, the representatives of the Latvian Lutheran church have been discussing welfare issues and have even invited the government to pay more attention to problems related to family policy and poverty. In its public relations the Church tries to keep a distance from the state institutions and play the role of a critical voice.

In relation to religious minority groups there are no explicit expressions of tension. However, as noted above, traditional churches in Latvia are not supportive to new religious movements, such as Pentecostals or other religions that hitherto have been of marginal interest in Latvia (Teraudkalns 2001). In reaction to a growing publicity of minority religions, the Latvian Lutheran Church encourages its members and the society in general to preserve and strengthen their beliefs in Christian values and return to the parishes.

4.3 The majority Church in welfare provision

The information in this section is taken from the website of the Diaconal Centre of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia. The Diaconal Centre is the main body of the Lutheran church through which the social involvement of the church is organised. This centre was established largely thanks to the financial and intellectual support from the Lutheran Church in Germany, and the representatives of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church sometimes joke that this is an example of how German deaconry works in Latvia.

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2 For more information see http://www.diakonija.lv
The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia is administratively divided into 14 deaneries (see Figure 2). There is a diaconal coordinator for each deanery appointed by the diaconal centre. The task of this person is to organise the training of voluntary workers from the parishes and to facilitate cooperation among them. The diaconal coordinator also communicates with vicars concerning diaconal issues.

The parishes are responsible for the implementation of diaconal work at the local level. They elect their diaconal leaders and establish diaconal institutions, such as diaconal support and care centres and chapels. They also develop projects and implement various support programmes.

Parish level diaconal work is concerned with a variety of tasks. They provide services to the members of congregation, as well as, organise cooperation with local municipalities, governmental and non-governmental institutions. Services are provided to a wide range of people, irrespective of creed or denomination. Depending on its capacity, parish-level diaconal work offers:

- prayer and support groups
- Christian counselling (individual and group work) at the diaconal centres, as well as, making visits at home, hospitals, old people’s homes and other institutions
- support by visiting sick and elderly people at home, providing transportation to church
- fellowship within the congregation through various activities and joint efforts
- practical aid in cases of emergency: food, second-hand clothes, shoes, housekeeping goods, etc.
- consultations of doctors and other specialists, as well as, medical and practical homecare

The Diaconal Centre of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia has also implemented a number of projects. For example, in 1998 they established a support centre for family and children. Another family and children support centre opened its doors in 2006. The centres operate on a daily basis (typically from 12h00 to 18h00) and they are attended by children between the ages of 4 and 16, who come from families in social distress. The centres also work with the parents. During the day each of the centres can serve approximately 25-35 children. More than 1,200 individual and over 70 group consultations are provided during the year.

The Diaconal Centre also offers other assistance, for example, a Christian Counselling Line (support and psychological assistance in critical situations), Soup Kitchens3 (warm meals and food packages to the members of parishes and the wider population in social distress), Christian Counselling and Chaplaincy (if a person finds himself in an extraordinary situation, during sickness, in need of special care and support) and other Support Groups and Training.

The Diaconal Centre of the Lutheran Church has participated in the foundation of 11 local diaconal centres all over Latvia, as well as, one social centre in the Riga district. It has also provided consultancy to parishes on project development and undertakes supervision and coordination of practical help (e.g. human aid from the partners on the national level).

There are no services that are specially targeted towards minority groups but all members of Latvian society can benefit from the welfare services provided by the church. Unfortunately

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3 The Diaconal Centre of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia operates two Soup Kitchens in Riga. There are Soup Kitchens also in other cities, such as Kuldiga, Talsi, Kekava, and Saldus
there is no specific information on how minority groups in Latvia benefit from church welfare provision.

**4.4 The majority church in relation to gender and family**

The dominant patterns of roles for women and men in Latvian society have been shaped by social and economic realities during the Soviet times and during the years of independence. The role of the church has been marginal in this respect, but as a promoter of conservative values it also stands for the traditional model of family.

In general the Latvian Lutheran church supports the idea of equality between men and women in the society. However, the archbishop of Latvian Lutheran church has received much attention in Latvia and abroad for refusing to ordain female priests. According to Archbishop Jānis Vanags, “women undoubtedly possess the same talent and intelligence as men. But the position of vicar is reserved for a man [according to the Scriptures]. This has been the position of the church and it has not been contested by any serious counter-arguments yet.” (Araja, 2005).

**5. Welfare, religion and gender**

The description of the gender regime in Latvia is a complex task. According to Luse (2005), the perceptions of the role of men and women in the society have been changing through times and are still in transition. The situation is also very different from family to family, depending on their economic well being. However, the traditional model of family is still dominant in the society.

During Soviet times gender equality was considered to be an important matter. Slogans also found their expression in practice – all women were working in the Soviet Union. However, it is also documented that aside from duties on the job, women were also responsible for doing the housework. Hence, the situation has also been described as a ‘double burden’ for women.
The early 1990s and independence brought a shift towards neo-traditional gender attitudes, where men were supposed to become “breadwinners” and strong players in the market, while women were supposed to fulfil the traditional role at home. However, the economic conditions in the country brought corrections in these attitudes. In many instances men were not able to bring enough income and women were forced to enter the labour market in order to make ends meet.

In certain cases the psychological burden of responsibility has been too high for men, which has led to depression and alcoholism. In such situations important shift in responsibilities has often occurred, where women have taken over the role of the person in charge. Besides, there is a relatively large number of single mothers in Latvia (ibid).

The information above should be considered as a general background when looking at the employment figures for women in Latvia. According to the data from Eurostat, 59.3% of women in Latvia were working in 2005. Even though it is a decrease in comparison with the early 1990s, the numbers still hit the bar of the Lisbon agenda (57% mid-term target by 2005) and were higher than the European average (56.3%). The Ministry of Welfare has been very proud of this achievement, but it ignores the fact that it is partly a heritage from the past and a consequence of the harsh economic reality. The latter is something that poses many challenges for women.

5.1 Legal equality

According to Eglite (1997), Latvia has never hesitated to recognise gender equality and has always displayed willingness to incorporate it into legislation. For example, immediately after its independence in 1990 Latvia joined the United Nations convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Since 1995 either the mother or the father can take advantage of the parental leave.

Significant improvements have also been made in the labour code. There are even certain norms that put women in a more favourable position than men. For instance, when choosing
from two job candidates, employers should give priority to the female applicant if their qualifications are equal.

Taxation and social entitlements are based on individual rights. However, the overall financial situation of the family is considered before granting somebody a social benefit.

In general, despite some minor problems that are found from time to time, the legal base of gender equality is considered acceptable from the gender point of view. The problem is how to turn these norms into practice. Perhaps there is a need for additional formal and informal enforcement mechanisms. Currently disputes can be solved mainly through the court, which is quite expensive.

6. Overview of the minority presence in the country

Table 2 presents information on the national composition of the population of Latvia in 1935 and 2005. A distinctive characteristic of the country today is that the majority population constitutes only 58.8% of the total number of inhabitants. There is a significant Russian speaking minority, which constitutes 26.8%, not counting other people with Slavic origin, such as Byelorussians and Ukrainians. This explains why Latvian people are much more concerned about language, cultural, and citizenship issues than their western peers. This also means that the context for discussions about minority issues and the balance of powers is very different.

Researchers make a distinction between two broad groups of minorities in Latvia. First, there are historical minorities who have been present in Latvia before World War II. Statistical data from 1935 shows that at that time the total population in Latvia was 1.9 million and Latvians represented 77% of the population. The largest minority group was Russians, but at that time they represented only 8.8%. The next most important groups were Jews (4.9%) and Germans (3.3%) with other minorities being less significant. These minorities historically coexisted in Latvian society. During the first independent state of Latvia they preserved their national traditions, but at the same time they accepted the idea of being part of the Latvian state, which was build around the Latvian national ideals.
The second largest group of minorities are post-war immigrants that are mainly Russian-speaking people, who came to Latvia during the Soviet era. They generally represent the same nationalities as the pre-war minorities, but their attachment to national roots is less prominent. In fact, researchers describe this group as a ‘non-national minority’ that is bound together by common language (Russian) rather than ethnic origin (Dribin 2004). This group has very close ties with Russian intellectual and spiritual culture and often does not share the national interests and traditions of the rest of the population. For example, representatives of this group advocate the idea of a two-community Latvia and two national languages.

Radical political movements both Latvian and Russian tend to capitalise on this situation and even provoke conflicts (ibid). An example of this was the protest against reforms in education in 2004, shortly before elections of the European parliament. The reforms aimed to prepare students in Russian schools for studies in state universities by gradually increasing the proportion of subjects taught in Latvian. Pro-Russian politicians took active part in the organisation of different events and manifestations, and slogans, such as “Hands off Russian schools!” and “Russians are coming!”, appeared at the time. Latvian nationalistic parties did not fall behind and responded with “Latvians, don’t give up!” and other expressive phrases. Meanwhile, the majority of Russian schools did not find the reforms problematic and they were informed about this move well in advance. Thus, the reforms were eventually implemented. But these activities were nevertheless successful for the political parties concerned as they both were able to get seats in the European parliament, which was hardly expected.

When analysing the Latvian case and comparing it with other countries, it is important to take into account that people with a foreign ethnic background enjoy different levels of economic, political, and social rights across Europe. It is commonly believed that in Western Europe ethnic minorities are often isolated and excluded from the society. However, in Latvia the Russian-speaking minority takes active participation in all vital processes of public life. Key areas of national economy are often managed and operated by Russian speaking entrepreneurs.

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4 The data in Table 2 does not make a distinction between pre-war minorities and after-war immigrants, but it can be judged from the differences in the numbers of people representing different ethnic groups in different periods.
There are political parties that are established to protect their interests and to represent them in the national and even European parliament. Besides, the widespread knowledge of Russian language allows any Russian speaking person to feel comfortable in the Latvian society even without mastering the national language.

The situation with other minorities is rather interesting too. Most of the minorities (especially Poles and Jews) speak Russian, have joined the Russian speaking community and even report Russian as their mother tongue, which might be a consequence of the Soviet times. At the same time, significant parts of the minorities still retain their national language (more than 50% percent of Lithuanians and Estonians list their national language as their mother tongue). The Latvian language becomes increasingly prominent among these groups of people, as well. Nowadays it is not uncommon for people in Latvia to be fluent in several languages.

Table 2. National composition of the population of Latvia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of people</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvians</td>
<td>1 467 035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russians</td>
<td>168 266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byelorussians</td>
<td>26 803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainians</td>
<td>1 844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poles</td>
<td>48 637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuanians</td>
<td>22 843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>93 370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma people</td>
<td>3 839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germans</td>
<td>62 116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonians</td>
<td>6 928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1 905 936</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Latvian Central Statistics bureau

Not all permanent residents in Latvia are citizens of Latvia even if they have a Latvian passport. As of January 01, 2007, there are approximately 395,000 people predominantly with foreign ethnic backgrounds, who have not fulfilled the requirements to obtain Latvian citizenship and have the denomination ‘non-citizen’ in their passports. The process of naturalisation still
continues and it has accelerated since Latvia’s membership in the European Union. There are also cases when people decide to accept citizenship of other countries (Russia, for example).

Different ethnic groups also may belong to different religious organisations. Most Latvians belong to the Lutheran Church or the Catholic Church. The Orthodox Church is the most popular among the Russian speaking population. The traditional national minorities, in turn, may cultivate their historical traditions. Thus, for example there are Tatars and other people from the former southern Soviet republics, who are Muslims. There are also Jews, who follow their faith. Speaking about other religious minorities, it is often hard to make any linkage with ethnic origin without deeper investigation. For example, the charismatic religions seem to attract people with different ethnic backgrounds. Perhaps they find other uniting factors related to the context of post-modern society, but there is lack of knowledge and studies on these issues in Latvia.

6.1 Attitudes towards integration and immigration

Since regaining independence in 1990, the Latvian government has implemented an integration policy that is oriented towards multicultural diversity (Dribin 2004). The state retains its national identity in a sense that everybody must know the national language and show respect to the country. But it strives to establish democratic values and adjust its institutional framework in order to be able to serve the needs of a diverse society. Minorities are given the opportunity to preserve their traditional values and take part in building the multicultural society.

However, this question is not yet fully resolved. Studies, such as Zepa et al (2004), show that a significant part of the population still would like to see the identity of the country based on its national values and history rather than accept the multicultural reality. A similar rhetoric can sometimes be heard from some leaders of political parties.

Even though Latvia has always been rich with people from foreign ethnic backgrounds, the immigration that took place during the Soviet times has had the most prominent impact on Latvian society. This is because of its dimension and the impact of political assimilation. Recent
immigration has not been that much of an issue, as Latvia is prone to emigration rather than immigration at the moment. There is also a lack of studies and data that would provide relevant information about recent immigration.

However, several studies show that in general Latvian society is not in favour of immigration, especially in the context of the labour market (see, for example Indans and Kruma, 2006). This might also be related to the Soviet experience. After many years of forced immigration people are looking for social cohesion and additional immigration is not welcomed. At the same time polls, such as Eurobarometer 63, indicate that only 2% of people in Latvia consider immigration as a threat.

There are no hot debates related to the Muslim presence in the country as there are only few hundred followers of Islam in Latvia. They are modest in their activities and remain invisible in the society. However, studies about tolerance in the society have raised questions about attitudes towards Muslims and potential immigration from the Muslim countries. Opinions vary, but such immigration would be considered as negative by a certain part of the population because of fears of aggression and terrorism (Zepa et al, 2004).

Minority groups are typically concentrated in urban places. There are also specific regions in the countryside where national minorities represent a local majority (especially in the regions that are close to the Russian border). But there is no evidence that they would be isolated from the rest of the society in terms of locality and place of residence.

7. Religious minority groups

Ringolds Balodis (1999), the former head of the Religious Affairs Council of the Ministry of Justice, provides the following classification of religions that best describes the situation in Latvia:

1) Traditional religious organisations (as also referred earlier in the text) - eight confessions that are listed in the Article 51. of the 1937 Civil Law (Lutherans, Roman Catholics,
Orthodox Church, Old Believer Orthodox, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jews).

2) “Non-traditional” religions - religions that have not been historically present in Latvia, but are regarded as traditional religions in other countries (e.g. Muslims, Buddhists, Anglicans and others)

3) Registered new religious movements - movements that are established as a result of separation from traditional churches (e.g. Augsburg Lutherans,) as well as, independent movements that register themselves as religious organisations, including those that are referred to as ‘sects’ (e.g. Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses)

4) Associations that are in fact new religious movements, but do not want to be recognised as such to avoid special attention, control etc. (e.g. Brahma Kumaris, different cultural organisations, esoteric organisations, non-governmental organisations, and even commercial enterprises).

5) Non-registered new religious movements (e.g. Satanists).

6) National religion – there is a religion called ‘Dievturi’ in Latvia, which is of local scale and is based on folklore and traditional rituals. There might be similar examples in other countries.

From the legal point of view, religious organisations belong to the non-governmental sector. Legal requirements are designed in a similar fashion to other NGOs in the country. According to the legislation, religious organisations need to register and provide basic annual reports to the Religious Affairs Council and state tax authorities. Thanks to this order the authorities and society in general may obtain more or less reliable information about the religious movements represented in the country. However, as it is evident from the classification of religions in Latvia, religious groups might be organised in a variety of forms. Thus, we never have the complete picture. There is also a lack of empirical studies describing these organisations and the type of activities that they are involved with. Hence, there is a need for further research in this area.

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5 A literal translation of the name of this religion in English would be “Beholders of the God”.

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There is no commonly accepted definition of religious minorities in Latvia, but the classification presented above may help us to identify which religions might be considered as such and what are their characteristics. For example, religious movements belonging to categories 2-6, can definitely be regarded as minority religions, because these are registered or unregistered organisations with a relatively small number of followers.

If we consider the number of followers as the most important criteria then more than half of organisations included in the list of traditional religions also might be considered as religious minorities (e.g. Old Believer Orthodox, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Jews). In that case we narrow down the list of major religions to three religious denominations: Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Roman Catholic Church, and Orthodox Church. From this perspective all other denominations presented in Table 1 can then be regarded as religious minority groups.

Identifiable relationships between ethnic origin and religious denomination can be found mostly in the groups of “traditional” and “non-traditional” religions. In the first case, there is a relationship between the largest ethnic groups and majority churches (e.g. Latvians attend the Lutheran church and Catholic church, Russians attend the Orthodox Church). In the second case religious minorities are at the same time ethnic minorities (e.g. Jews and Muslims). The linkage between the ethnic and religious factor is not so obvious in case of other religious groups and there is a need for deeper investigation on the relationship of different ethnic groups and new religious movements.

Relationship between ethnic background, religious groups, and gender equality has not been explored in Latvia. Issues concerning gender in relation to minority religions are not high on the agenda in public debate. In Western Europe gender and minority issues relate most frequently to Islam, but in the Latvian case these problems do not surface, as the presence of Muslim minority is not so prominent. Perhaps Muslims in Latvia are also less strict in following their religious practices or they keep their faith so private that it is not visible to the rest of Latvian society. Overall, issues related to religious minorities and smaller ethnic groups, such as
Muslims in Latvia are overshadowed by the significance of problems related to the Russian minority.

Gender issues in relation to traditional religions also have not been widely discussed, except the reluctance to ordain women in the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church. However, it is obvious that there are signs of patriarchal legacy in traditional religions and traditional models of the society in general. This illustrates the fact that we are more likely to question these problems in minority communities and minority religions, while we tend to ignore them in our own society and traditions.

Most community organisations establish some sort of networks for self-support and religious groups are not an exception. However, we do not have sufficient information about such networks and it is hard to judge, whether they indicate presence of discrimination or gap in social services provision. This again illustrates the need for additional research in this area.

According to Scerbinskis (1998), existing Muslim organisations play an important role in unifying and defending the interests of Muslim people. In one way or another they also cover social issues. At the same time the author indicates that Muslims are increasingly stepping on the path of integration. Some of them become part of the Latvian community, but more often they join the Russian speaking population. Most children from non-Russian minority families study in Russian schools. Nevertheless, it is said that immigrants from the former southern and eastern Soviet countries (including Muslims) tend to preserve their identity and traditions.

There is only one active mosque in Latvia, which is located in rented office space in Riga. Though, if the Muslim community remains active, building a mosque is only a question of time. There are no specific legal requirements for establishing places of worship in Latvia and there is no evidence that religious minority groups would encounter difficulties in this respect. The only instances, when additional registration in the Religious Affairs Council is needed, are in the case of opening of an educational establishment, monastery, mission or diaconal centre. Thus, supposedly the most critical factors for building a new place of worship is the acquisition of the necessary property, real estate, and finance, as well as, the regular administrative routines.
However, as there is no empirical research on this topic, a survey among representatives of religious minority groups in Latvia could shed some light on how this actually works in practice. This may also be included in the tasks of the fieldwork for the WaVE project.

8. Conclusions

This report provides a state-of-the-art assessment of the situation in Latvia with regard to areas relevant for the WaVE research. It gives an overview of the existing literature on the subject, describes the national welfare system, as well as, presents information on the religious situation in the country and welfare activities of the majority religion; it also describes existing ethnic and religious minority groups.

The overview of main issues in the society and the survey of existing research related to the WaVE study in Latvia revealed that the project can contribute new knowledge in such areas as role of religious organisations in social welfare, religious minorities in Latvia, links between ethnicity, religion, and gender equality, as well as, sources of conflict and cohesion in the society.

Latvia, together with other post-communist countries, represents a special case in Europe. It is historically rich with different religious and ethnic groups. At the same time it has managed to avoid aggressive conflicts among the different groups in the society. A better understanding of the chemistry in Latvian society may provide interesting insights for the analysis and comparison with the situation in other European countries.

Statistical information shows that risks of poverty and social distress are higher in Latvia than in most of other European countries, which to a large extent is a consequence of the political and economic transition. At the same time there is no evidence of significant differences among majority and minority groups in terms of quality of life and standards of living. Lagging social indicators are also compensated by a tighter labour market and higher economic growth.
Latvia is also specific in a sense that there is no single majority religion. Rather there are several dominant religious denominations that cooperate in order to achieve common goals. The historical development of the role of the church in the society and its relationship with the state is also very different from Western Europe. While in many European countries the social role of the church is established and has been maintained for decades and even centuries, in the Latvian case it started anew after regaining independence from the Soviet Union.

The development of gender regimes is also very peculiar in the Latvian case. Many women are taking part in the labour market (more than in Europe on average), but they are not necessarily happy with this situation. While legal equality seems to be established, problems include equal employment opportunities and equal pay for men and women.

The characteristics of religious minorities in Latvia represent an open area for research, too. It is commonly believed that the relationships between different religions in Latvia are amicable. Religion is more often regarded as a source of cohesion rather than a source of conflict. At the same time there is relatively little knowledge on the religious minorities present in the country and the links between ethnic, religious and gender issues have not been discussed very much.

Overall, this report shows that there are many issues and areas of study in Latvia that are interesting from the perspective of the WaVE research. Thus, one of the next steps of the research is to select the priority areas that should be explored in more detail during the fieldwork. At this stage we have defined three main areas of focus that we would study in relation to the majority and minority issues in the locality: social and economic inclusion, the role of religious organisations, and aspects related to gender equality.
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1 The list was provided by the Religious Affairs Council and we have followed their categorisation, translating the names of each group into English.