



SAEIMA OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA



■ Main building of the Saeima

Latvia is an independent democratic republic, and the sovereign power is vested in the people of Latvia.

The Saeima is composed of 100 representatives of the people – members of parliament (MPs). The Constitution sets forth the main functions of the Saeima, and the Rules of Procedure drafted by the Saeima sets forth its internal rules and regulations.

The Saeima is elected for a term of four years in general, equal and direct elections conducted by secret ballot and based on proportional representation. All citizens of Latvia who enjoy full rights of citizenship and who on election day have attained 18 years of age are entitled to vote.

Any citizen of Latvia who enjoys full rights of citizenship and who is more than 21 years of age on election day may be elected to the Saeima. A person elected to the Saeima acquires the mandate of an MP upon giving the oath of office.

The work of the Saeima is managed by the Presidium elected from among the MPs at the beginning of the Saeima's

term of office. The Presidium consists of five MPs – the Speaker, two Deputy Speakers, the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary.

Each committee specialises in a particular area of legislation or fulfils other functions – for example, assesses the validity of public expenditures, considers violations of the principles of ethics or reviews Latvia's positions on EU issues.

Pursuant to the Rules of Procedure, there are 17 standing committees in the Saeima.

At least five MPs belonging to the same political party or list of candidates may form a parliamentary group. If an MP leaves a parliamentary group, he/she retains the mandate of an MP and is then considered an unaffiliated member of parliament. Parliamentary groups may form political blocs.

The Council of Parliamentary Groups is formed in order to determine and coordinate the activities and strategies of parliamentary groups and political blocs within the Saeima and its committees, as well as to resolve issues

which are not covered by the Rules of Procedure. This Council is composed of the Presidium and one MP from each parliamentary group and political bloc.

The work of the Saeima is organised in sessions. Each year the Saeima holds three regular sessions: an autumn, winter, and spring session. Extraordinary sessions may be convened during the recess. Plenary sittings are usually held once a week on Thursdays. Live broadcasts of plenary sittings and sittings devoted to answering parliamentary questions can be heard on the radio and viewed on the Saeima website. In accordance with the Rules of Procedure, the Saeima may hold a closed plenary sitting if at least two-thirds of the MPs present vote to do so; however, this has never happened so far.

The working language of the Saeima is Latvian.

LEGISLATION

The Saeima has several functions, the most important of which is the adoption of laws. Draft laws may be submitted to the Saeima by the President of Latvia, the government, sectoral committees of the Saeima, not fewer than five MPs or not less than one-tenth of the electorate. The Saeima is entitled to make amendments to the Constitution. The most lively and thorough debates concerning draft laws take place in the committees, which consider matters that are then debated at the plenary sittings.

ADOPTION OF THE NATIONAL BUDGET

Before the beginning of each fiscal year, the Saeima decides on the annual revenues and expenditures of the state. The government submits a draft state budget to the Saeima, and a vote on the state budget is actually a vote of



■ Plenary sitting of the Saeima

confidence in the government. Consideration of the draft state budget and related draft laws usually results in the lengthiest debates at plenary sittings.

After the end of the fiscal year, the Cabinet of Ministers submits an overview of the national budgetary implementation to the Saeima for approval.

PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY

The Saeima supervises the everyday work of the government; the government as a whole and each minister individually are politically accountable to the Saeima.

Once a year at a plenary sitting, the Prime Minister reports on the government's performance and its planned activities. Furthermore, the Saeima hosts the annual foreign policy debate, which is attended by experts on foreign affairs. The Ombudsman also gives an annual report on the work of the Ombudsman's Office at a plenary sitting.

The Saeima holds sittings devoted to answering parliamentary questions. During these sittings, MPs hear answers to their questions submitted to the Prime Minister, line ministers or the Governor of the Bank of Latvia about matters within the competence of these officials.

If MPs are dissatisfied with the work of a ministry, they may submit an inquiry to the government. If the Saeima accepts this inquiry, it may also decide

to hold a vote of no confidence in the relevant minister or in the entire government. Committees have the right to request information necessary for their work and explanations from specific ministries, institutions subordinated to them, and local governments; they also have the right to invite relevant public officials to provide information in person at committee meetings.

Parliamentary investigative committees, in cooperation with experts, have the right to scrutinise the work of state and municipal institutions, as well as private agencies and companies which directly or indirectly receive state subsidies, loans or government contracts or participate in the privatisation of national or municipal property. Parliamentary investigative committees have the right to invite and question public entities on the matter they are investigating.

APPOINTMENT OF PUBLIC OFFICIALS

The Saeima uses the open ballot procedure for electing, approving and appointing many public officials of this country, as well as accepting their resignation or dismissing them. These public officials include the President of Latvia, the Prosecutor General, the Director of the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau, the Governor of the Bank of Latvia, members of the National Council of Electronic

Mass Media, the Director of the Constitution Protection Bureau, judges, the Ombudsman, the Auditor General and other officials as stipulated in the legislation.

The government may commence its duties after it has received Saeima's vote of confidence. The President of Latvia nominates the Prime Minister. The Saeima takes a vote of confidence in the new government after the nominated Prime Minister has presented the government's platform to the Saeima.

RATIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITY

In accordance with Article 68 of the Constitution, all international agreements which pertain to matters that must be decided according to legislative procedure require ratification by the Saeima.

Along with their work in the plenary sittings, committees and parliamentary groups, MPs also meet foreign officials and delegations. The Saeima is a member of international parliamentary organisations, and it actively cooperates with parliaments of other countries.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE SAEIMA

The parliament has a total of about 550 staff members. Organisational units of the Administration, the Legal Bureau, the Interparliamentary Relations Bureau, the Public Relations Department and the Analytical Service provide technical assistance to MPs in their daily work and during plenary sittings, as well as fulfil other tasks related to the functioning of the Saeima.

INTERESTING

- Saeima has been the name of the parliament of the Republic of Latvia since 1922. The Latvian etymological dictionary defines the word saeima as gathering, assembly, with the root derived from the word iet (to go in Latvian).