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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LATVIA

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National Report. LATVIA

Executive Summary

The “Standard Eurobarometer” research has been carried out in Latvia for the second time since the country became a member of the European Union (EU) after one full year of membership. This research looks at its citizens’ experience of membership rather than their expectations for membership.

Climate of Opinion

EU 25 citizens are satisfied with life in general with 80% satisfied and 19% dissatisfied. However, in the past six months, since the last Eurobarometer Standard research, this percentage has decrease.

The level of satisfaction with life in Latvia is still lower than the EU 25 average, but it is increasing. Latvian citizens believe that all areas of life such as their household, employment and personal financial situation will improve as well the country’s economic situation with increases ranging from 3% to 9% in different areas.

The level of respondents’ optimism for the next twelve months regarding improvement in their personal lives and circumstances for the nation as whole is now higher than the EU 25 average.

Trust in National and International Institutions

Latvian respondents’ trust least in political parties, 10%, compared to the EU 25’s figure of 19%, and their level of trust in political parties is the second lowest figure with Poland at 5% being the lowest. However, this level of trust has increased greatly, from 6%, since the previous report, EB 62. This is a positive indicator of people’s involvement in the political process.

An increase in trust is also apparent in Latvian government and parliament (Saeima) which contrasts with the slight decrease in the EU 25. In fact, Latvian respondents’ level of trust in the government increased by 8% to a level now higher than the average for the EU 25.

Due to the highly public activities by the government and anti-corruption bureau, the level of trust in the justice system in Latvia has increased. However, it is still lower than the EU 25’s average level.

The latest research has shown a decrease of 6 percentage points to 44% in the levels of trust in the EU of EU 25 respondents. Latvian respondents’ trust in the EU has increased to 48%, a figure that is now higher than the EU 25 average. Nevertheless, as was seen in the previous research, Latvians’ levels of trust in the EU are higher than their levels of trust in Latvian national institutions.

In the EU 15 countries, there is a tendency towards decreasing levels of trust in the EU, whereas, in the NMS there are increasing levels of trust in the EU.

Image of the EU and knowledge of the EU

Since EB 62, there has been an increase in the level of Latvian respondents who believe that Latvia's membership in the EU is a good thing. There has been a corresponding decrease in the level of respondents who believe that membership is a bad thing. There is a correlation between the level of knowledge about the EU and the positive attitude towards the country's EU membership.

In the EU 25, more than half of the respondents believe their country's membership in the EU is a good thing but this level is falling.

The level of Latvian respondents who believe that being an EU member state brings more benefits than disadvantages has increased by 6 percentage points to a level which is now higher than the EU 25 average.

The dominant emotional attitude towards the EU in Latvia is neutral, 41%, but the positive attitude is greater than the negative attitude and is almost at the same level as in autumn 2004.

Primarily, Latvian respondents associate the EU with the freedom of travel, work and study within the EU which is the same as EU 25 responses. Secondly, Latvian respondents associate the EU with a bureaucracy, as was shown in the last research, but with a declining figure. Thirdly, Latvian respondents associate the EU with a stronger say in the world.

Loss of cultural identity, unemployment and democracy are least associated with the EU by Latvian respondents.

Latvian respondents' self-evaluation on a scale of 1 to 10 (with one being the least knowledgeable and 10 being the most knowledgeable) has shown an increased level of respondents at level 5. This self-perception is borne out by the actual results of questions concerning the different aspects of the EU.

The most used sources in Latvia for obtaining information about the EU are television - by 75% of respondents, followed by radio 48%, followed by daily newspapers. The numbers of Latvians using television and radio as a source of information about the EU is higher than EU 25 levels but the figure for Latvians using daily newspapers is lower than EU 25 levels.

Of the Latvian citizens surveyed, the number who replied that the information regarding the EU was objective was comparable with the corresponding EU 25 levels of 44% to 47% depending upon the type of media. Latvian respondents believe that the daily newspapers have the most negative information and television has the most positive information regarding EU issues.

Trust in the EU Institutions

The most well known EU institution is the European Parliament (EP) with 82% of Latvian respondents recognizing it. However, this represents a decrease of 8 percentage points on the EB 62 level. This decrease is also seen in the EU 25 overall, with only three Member States showing an increase - Latvia with a 6 point increase is one of these. The increase in this level in Latvia can be attributed to public awareness that Latvia's MEPs have an influence on economic and political issues in the EP that affect Latvian national interests.

In Latvia and in the EU 25 as a whole, the second most well known EU institution is the European Commission (EC) as was the case in EB 62. Once again, only three Member States within the EU 25 showed an increase in the level of trust in the EC with Latvia being one of them. In fact, Latvia displayed a significant increase from the second lowest level of trust in the EC to almost the average level of the EU 25.

Most significant problems in Latvia and the EU

Latvian respondents believe their biggest problems are inflation / rising costs, with 55% selecting this, an increase of 10 percentage points on EB 62. Also, this is a staggering 39 percentage points higher than the EU 25 average. Latvia is the only country in the EU 25 that sees this as the major problem. This is probably due to the fact that Latvia is going through its longest period, almost a year, with the highest annual inflation rate for 15 years, at around six to seven percent, compared to the usual annual percentage increase of one percent previously.

The major problem selected by EU 25 respondents overall remains unemployment with 50%, whereas this is the second ranked problem in Latvia with a score of 35%. The problem ranked third in Latvia was the healthcare system with 25 % of respondents citing this, a decrease of 5 percentage points on EB 62. NMS countries tend to rank the healthcare system as a major problem higher up the scale than the EU 15 countries.

The biggest discrepancy between Latvian problem rankings and the EU 25 problem rankings were for terrorism (EU 25 10%, Latvia 1%), and immigration (EU 25 14%, Latvia 2%).

Positive and negative effects of Latvian membership of the EU Desirable EU priorities

According to Latvian respondents, being an EU member state has a positive influence on the solution of the following problems: defence and foreign policy 59%, the fight against terrorism 47% and the environment 48%. Surprisingly, the same number of respondents as in the last survey, 44%, believes that the EU has a positive effect on the education system in spite of the fact that the EU has no direct influence in this area.

According to Latvian respondents, being a member of the EU has a negative influence on inflation / rising costs i.e. 71% believe that these have increased due to being in the EU. This was identified as the major problem Latvians are facing. However, there are global and national political and economic factors which influence inflation and rising costs that people do not take into account.

The survey shows that in Latvia the number one priority for action to be taken by the EU is to fight poverty and social exclusion, with 62% citing this. This is a significant 28 percentage points above the level for the EU 25 which shows that there is a strong belief that the national government is not addressing these problems properly. The political elite is concentrating mostly on macroeconomic goals rather than finding solutions to everyday problems.

Fears caused by Latvian membership in the EU

Latvian citizens' greatest fear arising from their country being a member of the EU remains that there would be more difficulties for Latvian farmers, cited by 63% of respondents but showing a notable decrease of 9 percentage points from autumn 2004.

An equally serious fear is the increase of drug-trafficking and international organized crime with 63%, which in EB 62 was ranked second.

Remaining the third biggest fear (62%) was that Latvia would have to pay more and more to the EU.

The level of all the top-ranking fears has decreased by between 7 and 9 percentage points, due to greater public awareness of the effects and possibilities arising from being an EU Member State.

Before joining the EU, one of the greatest fears was that Latvia would lose its national identity, culture and language. Already the last survey, EB 62, showed that these fears are diminishing and this has continued in this survey. Now, only 33% fear that they will lose their culture and national identity, a decrease of 8 percentage points from the last survey. Similarly, only 39% fear that they will lose their national language, a decrease of 9 points from the last survey. These results show Latvian respondents appreciate EU policy on language and multi-culturalism.

In EB 62, more than half, (56%), of Latvian respondents said that losing the national currency, Lats, is one of the worst consequences on joining the EU. In this survey, respondents are more or less evenly divided in the belief that changing the national currency to the Euro is a good thing (46%), with 48% considering that it is a bad thing.

European Monetary Union

When Latvia joined the EU it signed a treaty that stipulated Latvia must join the common currency zone. However, 57% of respondents, a decrease of 2 percentage points from EB 62 believe that it will be a good thing to join the European Monetary Union (EMU). In this survey, support for EMU and the Euro, 59%, has fallen even more throughout the EU 25 with a 4 point decrease.

Compared with other EU Member States which have not joined the EMU, Latvia has a more favourable attitude to joining the Euro zone. Within the Baltic States, the greatest level of support for joining the Euro zone is in Lithuania, followed by Latvia and then Estonia.

Further enlargement of the European Union

The attitude to enlargement of the European Union varies greatly throughout the Member States. The level of EU 25 support is 50%, with the lowest level of 31% in Austria and the highest level 79% in Slovenia. The newest Member States of the EU, NMS, are more supportive to enlargement with figures of more than 60% in all countries in favour of enlargement.

Almost two-thirds (64%), of Latvian respondents said that they are in favour of the enlargement of the EU. They are showing a high level of support for the candidate countries that are scheduled to join in 2007 with 65% in favour of Bulgarian membership and 57% in favour of Romanian membership.

However, Latvians show a similar low level of support, 36%, as the EU 25, 35%, for Turkey joining the EU. This is contrary to the official position of the national foreign policy of Latvia where the president and foreign minister have pledged Latvia's full support for Turkey's candidacy.

The Treaty of the Constitution for Europe (The Constitutional Treaty of the EU)

The Constitutional Treaty of the European Union was ratified in Latvia on the 10th of June by the national parliament after the referenda in France and the Netherlands. The survey shows that in several countries, namely Greece, Italy, Lithuania, and Hungary, where the Treaty was ratified by their national parliaments, the knowledge about the Treaty is very low. Latvia may also be included in this group with one-third of respondents stating that they had never heard about the Treaty.

There are different reasons given for supporting or not supporting the Treaty in each country of the EU 25, but there are a few common reasons throughout.

In the EU 25 and Latvia, the common reason with the highest level of respondents' support is that the Treaty is necessary for further development of the

European Union. The common reason with the second highest level of support in the EU 25 and Latvia is that the Treaty will help to improve the functioning of the EU institutions. For the EU 25, the third most important reason for supporting the Treaty is the strengthening of the European identity whereas this is insignificant in the Latvian survey. The biggest difference in the level of support for a reason between Latvia and the EU 25, 5% and 22% respectively, is that the Treaty will enable the European Union become stronger economically than the United States of America. Latvia is one of four countries, along with Poland, Portugal and Belgium where there is a relatively high level of support for the Treaty because “it does not contain anything bad”.

In the EU 25 and Latvia, the common reason with the highest level of respondents for a reason against the Treaty is the fear of losing state sovereignty. For Latvia, this fear of losing state sovereignty is actually the reason that records the second highest level. The reason with the highest level of opposition to the Treaty for Latvian respondents is lack of information and the third most selected reason against the Treaty is that “it does not contain anything good”.

The reason against the Treaty with the greatest range of scores is that of Turkey joining the EU with 1% of Latvians citing this - the least selected option, at one end of the scale and several member states with figures of more than 40%, at the other end of the scale.

The Latvian survey shows that the most trusted source for information regarding the Treaty are journalists, with 35%, significantly higher than in any other Member State. The second most trusted source in Latvia is the government - at a higher level than EU 25 overall. The third most trusted source in Latvia is the European Parliament with the same level as in the EU 25. Next, with equal levels as trusted sources, are the European Commission and friends and relatives. The lowest level of trust as a source of information is in political parties, with a rating of 1%.