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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LATVIA

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Introduction

The Eurobarometer Standard survey was carried out in Latvia covering 1018 respondents, from the 28th of March to the 23rd of April 2006. This was the fourth such survey since the country became a member of the European Union (EU). EU 25 citizens polled appear to be more positive towards the problems facing their countries and towards the EU as a whole than when they were last polled. However, the views of Latvian respondents in Eurobarometer Standard 65 (EB 65) have remained either constant or have become more negative.

Climate of Opinion

EU 25 citizens' level of satisfaction with life in general has slightly improved compared to the last EB survey.

The level of satisfaction with life in Latvia is still lower than the EU 25 average, with 60% satisfied and 40% dissatisfied. It has remained unchanged since the last survey and is still one of the lowest levels of satisfaction in the EU 25.

Latvian citizens believe that some areas of life, such as their household's financial and their personal financial situation, will improve over the next year. The level of optimism for the next twelve months for improvement in the household financial situation is 9 percentage points higher than the EU 25 average.

Latvian citizens have shown a continued trend in not worrying about their employment situation, although the official rate of unemployment is the ninth highest in the EU 25.

About one-third of EU 25 respondents - a fall since the previous survey - believe that their country's economic growth will worsen in the next 12 months. In Latvia, unlike in the EU 25 overall, the rate of respondents' belief that the national economy will improve has decreased.

In Latvia, the rate of respondents who believe that life has improved in the past five years is 20% higher than the EU 25 average, respectively 53% to 33%. The prognosis for life improving in the next five years finds Latvia in third place after Ireland and Estonia.

Trust in National and International Institutions

Latvian respondents, once again, have least trust in **political parties**, 6%, compared with the EU 25's average of 22%. Trust in political parties is at the lowest rate in the EU 25. In a parliamentary election year, this is a worrying trend.

For the EU 25, the rate of trust in **the national parliament** has increased to 38%, whereas in Latvia this rate has decreased to among the lowest in the EU 25 with 21%. Overall, in the EU 25, there has been an increase in this rate of trust, whereas in Latvia it has fallen.

The EU 25 level of trust in **the national government** has increased to 35%; whereas the rate of trust in the Latvian government has decreased to 25% - now a significant difference.

The level of trust in **the justice system** in Latvia has decreased, maintaining a continual downward trend, and is still lower than the EU 25 average level.

In the latest research, trust in the EU has shown no change from the 45% in the EU 25. Latvian respondents' trust in the EU is the fifth lowest in the EU 25 at 42%. Still, as in all previous EB surveys, Latvian respondents' levels of trust in the EU are higher than the level of trust they have in Latvian national institutions.

Image of the EU and knowledge of the EU

In the EU 25, an increasing number of respondents believe their country's membership of the EU is a good thing. Also, there was a decrease in the number of respondents who believe their country's EU membership is a bad thing. However, in Latvia, there was decrease in the rate of respondents who believe that EU membership was a good thing, down to the second lowest rating behind Austria. Latvia also continues to have the highest rate of

respondents in the EU who believe that membership is neither a good nor a bad thing.

Latvian respondents' self-evaluation of their EU knowledge on a scale of 1 to 10 (with one being the least knowledgeable and 10 being the most knowledgeable) has shown an average level of response at 4.6, with the EU 25 average at 4.5. This self-perception is borne out by the actual results of questions concerning different aspects of the EU.

The most used sources for obtaining information about the EU in Latvia are **television** with 71% of respondents citing it, followed by **radio** 40%, followed by the **daily newspapers** with 35%, and **other printed media** with 22%. The rate of Latvians utilizing television as a source of information about the EU is higher than the EU 25 average. The rate of Latvians using printed media is lower than the EU 25 levels. In Latvia, the number of people using the internet as a source of information about the EU is growing, and is now at a higher level than in the EU 25 on average. In Latvia, 13% of respondents do not look for information about the EU at all.

Primarily, 64% (the rate has doubled in the eighteen months since EB 62) of **Latvian respondents associate the EU with the freedom of travel, work and study within the EU**, which is significantly higher than EU 25 response level of 50%.

Secondly, Latvian and EU 25 respondents associate the EU with **peace**. This is the first time that Latvians have rated peace this highly. **Thirdly**, and also for the first time, Latvian respondents associate the EU with **cultural diversity**. Latvian respondents' rate of associating the EU with **bureaucracy** has diminished, and no longer constitutes one of the top three places in their ranking.

According to Latvian respondents, the loss of cultural identity, higher level of crime, and weaker border controls are the characteristics least associated with the EU. In the EU 25, social security, loss of cultural identity, and higher level of crime are the traits least associated with the EU.

In Latvia, since the last survey, there are positive changes in respondents' attitudes towards the EU's influence on citizens' lives.

Trust in the EU Institutions

The most well known EU institution is **the European Parliament (EP)**, with 85% of Latvian respondents recognizing it, in contrast to the EU 25 average

of 89%. The EU 25 rate of trust in the EP is higher than in Latvia, at 52% compared to 40%, this difference showing a marked increase.

The second most well known EU institution in Latvia and the EU 25, as in the previous EB surveys, is **the European Commission (EC)**. Latvians' rate of trust in the EC has decreased to the second lowest in the EU 25 after that of UK citizens.

The third most well known EU institution is **the Council of Ministers of the EU**. This is the institution where national interests are represented but its level of recognition in the EU 25 is growing very slowly. The rate of trust and recognition of the Council of Ministers of the EU in Latvia continues to increase.

Most significant problems in Latvia and the EU

For the fourth consecutive survey, Latvian respondents believe their biggest problems are **inflation / rising costs** (the inflation rate in Latvia, according to "Eurostat" for the past three years has been 6 to 7 percent). This is significantly 42 percentage points higher than the EU 25 average (13%). **Latvia is the only country in the EU 25 that sees this as the major problem. The general trend in the EU has been a decline in the respondents who cite inflation/rising costs as a problem, with some countries reporting very small percentages of respondents (1% to 3%) seeing this as significant problem.**

A major concern for the EU 25 remains **unemployment** with 49% of respondents citing it, i.e. a 6 percentage point increase. In Latvia, unemployment is the second ranked problem, with 32%. The state of the national economy is the second most highly ranked major problem in the EU 25 at 26%. In Latvia, **the state of the national economy**, with 18%, is the fourth most highly ranked problem.

The biggest discrepancy between the order in which Latvians ranked problems and how average EU 25 citizens did so is in the case of **terrorism** (EU 25 10%, Latvia 0%). In Latvia, the number of respondents who identified immigration as a problem doubled, from 4% to 8%.

In the EU 25, respondents believe that the most important tasks for the EU to improve the effectiveness of the economy are to **increase investments in education and professional training**, to **invest in science** and to **streamline the formation of new enterprises**. In Latvia, the most important tasks identified were investments in education and professional training, the streamlining of the

formation of new enterprises and the improvement of the transport system infrastructure.

Concerns arising from Latvian EU membership

In this survey, the rate of all concerns associated with Latvian membership in the EU has fallen.

As in previous surveys EB62 and EB63, the greatest concern associated with EU membership in Latvia **is the difficulty posed for Latvian farmers.** However, in the EU 25 this rate is decreasing.

Latvian citizens' second and third greatest concerns are **the increase in drug-trafficking and international organized crime and the increase in Latvian monetary contributions to the EU.**

The biggest discrepancy in concern levels in Latvia (at 58%) and the EU (at 47%) is posed by the fear that membership of the EU may cause an economic crisis.

Positive and negative effects of EU Latvian membership

According to Latvian respondents, being an EU member state has a positive influence on the following problems: **defence and foreign policy** 59%, **the fight against terrorism** 47% and **the environment** 48%. Surprisingly, the same proportion of respondents as in the last survey, 44%, believes that the EU has a positive effect on the education system; however, in reality, 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. This was identified as a major problem facing Latvia. However, there are global and national political and economic factors which influence inflation and rising costs that people have failed to take into account.

European Monetary Union

In “EB 62”, more than half, (56%), of Latvian respondents said that losing the national currency, the Lats, would be one of the worst consequences of joining the EU. In “EB 63”, the number of respondents is approximately evenly divided between the two views that changing the national currency to the Euro is a good thing (46%), and with 48% stating that it is a bad thing. In this survey, **59% of Latvian respondents said that losing the national currency is a bad thing**, the fourth highest rate in the EU 25 after the U.K, Cyprus and Lithuania.

When Latvia joined the EU, it signed a treaty that stipulated that Latvia must join the common currency zone. However, Latvia’s inflation rate (see above) does not meet the Maastricht criteria and the possibility of joining the Euro zone has had to be postponed, as was the case of Lithuania.

In this survey, support for EMU has slightly decreased throughout the EU 25. In Latvia, this rate decreased by a significant 9 percentage points to 46%, which is the second lowest figure in the EU 25.

Further enlargement of the European Union

The attitude regarding enlargement of the European Union varies greatly throughout the member states. **The level of EU 25 support for enlargement is 45%, 4 percentage points less than in EB64, with all countries displaying a decrease.** The newest member states of the EU, the EU 10, are more supportive of enlargement with none of these countries having a rate lower than the EU 25 average.

The majority (62%, same as EB64) of Latvian respondents said that they are in favour of further EU enlargement.

However, the EU 25 countries, including Latvia, with a rate of 5%, believe that further enlargement of the EU is not an important priority.

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 2005 by the national parliament after its failure to pass the referenda in France and the Netherlands.

After the ratification process and the stall in talks, support for the Constitution in the EU 25 is 61%. Support since the last survey decreased in all three Baltic countries – Estonia (47%, -2 percentage points), Lithuania (58%, -7 percentage points) and Latvia (52%, -5 percentage points).

However, the level of respondents in Latvia who have no opinion regarding the Constitution is a very high 29%, the second highest in the EU - after Estonia.

In the EU 25, there are differing opinions regarding the future of the Constitution. The least support is for the **Constitution to be dropped**, at 13%. This is also not a popular option in Latvia. A quarter of respondents in the EU 25 believe that **the ratification process should be continued**, with Latvia and France demonstrating the lowest rate of support for this option. The most popular choice is **to review the Constitution and start the process anew** (EU 25, 47% and Latvia 57%).