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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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National Report. LATVIA

Executive Summary

When Latvia joined the European Union (EU), on May 1st 2004, this was the second most significant political event in the country after it had regained independence from the USSR in 1991. This is the first Eurobarometer research survey conducted since Latvia became an EU member.

Prior to the referendum in 2003 regarding the question of joining of the EU, Latvian public opinion polls showed one of the lowest percentages of support for joining the EU, hovering around 50% of people in favour of joining with around 20% of people polled undecided. Euro-sceptics warned of several negative aspects of joining the EU. Firstly, Latvia would lose its sovereignty. Secondly, Latvia would once again be involved in a heavily centralized economic system as it had been during the period when it was a republic within the Soviet Union and the negative consequences of such a system. Thirdly, Latvia would lose its national identity, culture and language. The most influential arguments for joining the EU were, in order of their influence, national security, financial support and the opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes of the institutions of the EU.

Climate of Opinion

Latvian citizens are in a positive state of mind with 55% satisfied with life in general. However, this is the lowest percentage in the Baltic States (Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia) and around 27 percentage points lower than the EU 25 average. The belief that the country as a whole will be improving is much higher than the level of belief in the EU 25 in general but for personal improvement the percentage is about the same as in the EU 25.

Latvian respondents believe their biggest problems are inflation/rising costs, with 45% selecting this. 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 has just had the highest annual inflation rate for 15 years, seven percent, compared to the usual annual percentage increase of one percent. The major problem for the EU 25 overall is unemployment with 46%, whereas this is the second highest ranked problem in Latvia with 33% of the poll citing it. It was cited as Latvia’s most serious problem in the Eurobarometer Spring 2004 survey. Latvians ranked the Healthcare system in third place with 30 %, whereas in the EU 25 this problem is ranked sixth. The biggest discrepancies between Latvia and the EU 25 in terms of problem rankings were for terrorism (EU 25 16%, Latvia 2%), and immigration (EU 25 13%, Latvia 2%).

Trust in National and International Institutions

Latvian respondents’ trust is highest in the mass media (television, radio, press) as in the other Baltic States. The most significant difference in trust is in television, where Latvians trust is 69% compared to the EU 25 average of 50%.

Latvian respondents’ trust is least in political parties, 6%, compared to the EU 25 17%, and their level of trust in political parties is the second lowest figure recorded with Poland at 5% being the lowest. Levels of trust in political parties in the other Baltic States are around ten percentage points higher. Mistrust in political parties in Latvia is reflected in low levels of trust in the national parliament (21%) and national government (26%).

Latvian respondents’ trust in the EU, 39%, in Eurobarometer Spring 2004 had dropped by 6% from the previous survey. The latest results show an increase of 8 percentage points to 47% and is close to the EU 25 average of 50%. Normally, the average levels of trust in national institutions in the EU 25 are higher or the same as the levels of trust in the EU.

Latvian citizens’ level of satisfaction, i.e. percentage responding very satisfied or fairly satisfied, with how democracy works is higher in relation to the EU than for their own country, 57% versus 45%. In the EU 25, the level of satisfaction with the way democracy works is usually higher for democracy at national level.

Image and knowledge of the EU

The dominant feeling towards the EU in Latvia is neutral (which is typical of the new member states), 43%, but positive attitudes are more prevalent than negative ones, 39% versus 16%. More than half, 54%, of Latvian respondents associate the EU with hope - higher than the EU 25 average of 47% - and fewer people in Latvia than in the EU 25 overall feel indifferent towards the EU.

Of the Latvian citizens surveyed, 44% replied that the presentation of information regarding the EU by their national media was objective, whereas 39% thought that it was too positive, compared with a corresponding EU 25 level of 28%.

Latvian respondents’ self-evaluation on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being the least knowledgeable and 10 being the most knowledgeable) of their knowledge of the EU shows that more than half think their level of knowledge of the EU is low or very low (1 – 4 53%, 5 24%, 6-10 24%). This self-perception is borne out by the actual results of questions they were asked concerning different aspects of the EU. The most used sources in Latvia cited for obtaining information about the EU are television with 83% of respondents (EU 25 71%), followed by radio 50% (EU 25 34%), and then daily newspapers 48% (EU 25 49%). Since joining the EU, there is a greater desire to obtain specific information about the EU from other sources, such as books, brochures, magazines and the Internet.

Trust in EU Institutions

The most well known EU institution is the European Parliament (EP) with 90% of Latvian respondents recognizing it. The level of trust in the EP is at 45% with 76% of respondents saying that it plays an important role in the EU.

The second most well known EU institution is the European Commission (EC) with 85% of Latvian respondents recognizing it, with a level of trust of 41% and 70% saying that it plays an important role in the EU. Since the spring 2004 survey, the level of trust in the EC has increased by 9 percentage points, but it is still at its second lowest level in the EU 25 after the United Kingdom.

The third most well known EU institution is the Council of Ministers of the European Union with 60% of Latvian respondents recognizing it, a level of trust of 34% and 58% saying that it plays an important role in the EU. In fact, the Council of Ministers of the European Union is the institution where national interests are represented and defended. There is a lack of communication between the Latvian government and the public explaining decision-making processes and national positions in the EU. About one-third of respondents gave a “don’t know” response to questions about the role and importance of the above-mentioned institutions.

Latvia’s EU membership – benefits, role of EU policies

According to 51% of Latvian respondents, their country has benefited from EU membership. This represents an increase of 2 percentage points from the spring 2004 survey. However, this is the lowest level recorded in the Baltic States (Lithuania 78%, Estonia 56%) and one of the lowest in the new member states.

The socio-demographic groups who believe that membership of the EU is of benefit to their country are (in order of highest to lowest) the self-employed, students and managers. Those believing that their country does NOT benefit from EU membership are (in order of highest to lowest) house persons, those living in rural areas, pensioners and the unemployed.

According to Latvian respondents, being a member of the EU has a positive role to play in relation to the following issues: defence 65%, foreign policy 57%, the fight against terrorism 51% and the environment 51%. The positive influence of the EU in the areas of defence and foreign policy is connected with Latvia’s bilateral relationship with Russia. Now, Russia has to deal with Latvia as part of the EU rather than as a single state and has to take into consideration the EU’s defence and foreign policies that Latvia has a role in formulating.

According to Latvian respondents, being a member of the EU has a negative influence on inflation/rising costs, i.e. 66% believe that these have increased due to being in the EU. This was identified as the main problem Latvians are facing. Also, membership has had a negative influence on taxes - as after joining the EU certain taxes

were increased to comply with EU legislation. In the EU 25, the EU is also identified as having a negative influence on the aforementioned problems.

38% of Latvian citizens personally feel that being a member of the EU will give them the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU. This level is much lower than in the other Baltic States and in the EU 25 overall. Almost the same number of respondents (37%) associates the EU with bureaucracy. For 22%, the EU means the euro and a stronger say in the world.

Concerns arising from Latvian EU membership

Latvian citizens’ greatest fear on joining the EU was that there would be more difficulty for Latvian farmers, with 72% citing this concern. The group with one of the highest percentages selecting this response is, of course, rural village inhabitants. Surprisingly, white-collar workers recorded the highest level of fear at 83%. House persons, manual workers, pensioners, people aged between 40– and 55 and people with a high school education shared this level of fear.

The second greatest fear related to the increase of drug-trafficking and international organized crime with 70% citing this. There were no marked differences in the responses of different socio-demographic groups.

It is surprising, given that their country is the poorest EU member state, that the third biggest fear, cited by 70% of the poll, was that Latvia would have to pay more and more to the EU. Once again, there is no significant difference in the responses among the various socio-demographic groups. In the EU 25, and in those countries that actually pay the most towards the EU budget, such as Germany, this is a fear that is mentioned quite frequently.

Before joining the EU, one of the greatest fears in Latvia was that it would lose its national identity, culture and language. The current survey shows that these fears have diminished. This fear is at a higher level among those aged 55 years or older at 54%, and among people who have the lowest education level, at 58%.

The greatest fear within the EU 25 countries overall is of jobs moving to countries with lower labour costs: 74% of respondents gave this response. Interestingly, in the Latvian survey a significant percentage, 51%, listed this fear even though Latvia has the lowest labour costs in the EU 25.

European Monetary Union

When Latvia joined the EU it signed a treaty that stipulated Latvia would join the common currency zone. 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. However, 59% of respondents, an increase of 4 percentage points from spring 2004, now believe that joining the euro would be a good thing. The socio-demographic groups showing the highest level of support for the euro are (in order of highest to lowest) the self-employed, house persons, managers and people with university degrees. The least support comes from manual workers and pensioners. Pensioners give less support for another currency change because, in the past 60 years in Latvia, the currency has changed several times and the great majority have experienced a devaluation of their money with a corresponding decrease in their standard of living.

Compared with the EU 25 overall, support for the euro is slightly lower. Within the Baltic States, the greatest support for the euro is in Lithuania at 69%, with Latvia and Estonia recording similar results.

Further enlargement of the European Union

Almost two-thirds (65%) of Latvian respondents said that they are in favour of the further enlargement of the EU, an increase of 16 percentage points compared with spring 2004. In the new member states, support for enlargement of the EU is higher than in the EU 15. The average support for further EU enlargement in the EU 25 is 53%. The socio-demographic groups showing the highest level of support for this are the self-employed, students and persons with a university degree. Those most opposed to it are managers and pensioners.

European Union Common Foreign policy, Defence and Security policy

Latvian respondents are generally in favour of the European Union’s Common Foreign policy, Defence and Security policy recording figures that are higher than the EU 25 average levels. Latvians’ strongest support is regarding defence and foreign policy. They show slightly lower levels of support in relation to human rights, immigration and political asylum issues.

Latvians’ high level of support for the European Union’s Common Foreign and Defence policy is due to their country’s geo-political situation with Russia. There is a need for a common foreign policy for dealing with international crises, such as the Iraq invasion, as this situation highlighted the possible consequences of disagreements between member states. Latvian respondents exhibit a noticeably higher level of support, at 75%, compared with the EU 25 average of 67%, for the post of an EU Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe

The Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe will be ratified by the national parliament in Latvia. Latvian respondents’ support for the Treaty is currently at 61%, an increase of 4 percentage points since spring 2004. Average EU 25 support for this Treaty is 68%. At 27%, the Latvian percentage of “don’t know” responses is the second highest in all of the EU 25. This seems to reflect two main problems. Firstly, Latvians feel they are not really a part of the EU and are not interested in the most important current issues of the EU. Secondly, the information regarding these important events, such as the Treaty, is not being publicized enough to meet the different needs of citizens.

One of the Latvian government representatives’ absolute conditions for inclusion in the Treaty (commonly known as “red lines”) was that the European Commission should be composed of commissioners coming from each of the member states. In fact, 84% of Latvian respondents support this principle, which is similar to the level of support shown elsewhere in the Baltic States. This higher level of support is common throughout the new member states, although levels of support for this are lower in EU 15 countries. However, the Treaty does not contain this stipulation regarding the composition of the European Commission.