



# **Project „Me in the EU for Five Years” Report on Changes in Participatory Policy after Latvia’s Accession to the European Union and Suggestions to Improve the Situation**

**Association ‘Civic Alliance Latvia’  
Riga, 2009**

**Working Group**

Ausma Pastore  
Rasma Pīpiķe  
Inta Šimanska

**Translation**

Dagnija Deimante-Hartmane

Report is available in Latvian and English.

Report is posted on the webpage ([www.nvo.lv](http://www.nvo.lv)) of association “Civic Alliance Latvia” and is submitted to State’s Chancellery, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, The Ministry of Regional Development and Local Government of the Republic of Latvia, National Members of European Parliament, European Commission Representation in Latvia, The General Directorate of Communication and European Economic and Social Committee.

Report is financially supported by

**European Commission Representation in Latvia**



EIROPAS KOMISIJAS  
PĀRSTĀVniecība LATVIJĀ

and

**Society Integration Foundation**



Project “Me in the EU for Five Years” has been implemented by association ‘Civic Alliance Latvia’ in collaboration with the European Commission Representation in Latvia and the Society Integration Foundation. The aim of the project is to help the European Union institutions understand the changes that have taken place in the lives of Latvian people after Latvia’s accession to the EU.

## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	6
Views of People on the Changes in Latvia. Suggestions .....	8
1 Economic Development and Welfare of People.....	8
2 National Security and Defence .....	12
3 Culture and Identity of Latvia, Its National Independence.....	15
4 Social Security, Health Care Possibilities .....	17
Participation in Decision Making Process .....	19
1 Local Authorities and Ministries .....	20
2 Parliament .....	22
3 Participation Challenges.....	23
Conclusions and Suggestions .....	24

## ABBREVIATIONS

Ad hoc	Especially for a particular event
USA	United States of America
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
EU-15	European Union memberstates till 01/05/2004
EP	European Parliament
EHEC	European Health Insurance Card
CM	Cabinet of Ministers
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
Nord Stream	Gasline via the Baltic Sea that will provide Germany with gas from Russia

## FOREWARD

Association 'Civic Alliance Latvia' (CAL) is grateful to all participants of the discussions both in regions of Latvia and in Riga, as well as it expresses its gratitude to all regional partners that organized regional discussions of people and non-governmental organizations in Aluksne, Daugavpils, Jelgava, and Ventspils; it would not have been possible to summarize the information that is presented in this report without your help. We would like to thank also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia that provided its premises for discussions in Riga.

CAL is thankful to the European Commission Representation in Latvia and the Society Integration Foundation for the support they provided during the project, as well as expresses its gratitude to the whole project team from 'Civic Alliance Latvia' for the successfully implemented project, the aim of which was to learn about people's views about the impact of the European Union on a person's everyday life. It has been reached and CAL presents this report to you, politicians, clerks and officials, so you could do your job and build policy that corresponds to the needs and interests of people.

Best regards,

Rasma Pīpiķe  
Director  
Association 'Civic Alliance Latvia'

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the report is to give a survey of people's views on changes, both positive and negative, that have taken place in Latvia after the accession to the European Union (EU), as well as deal with the consequences of negative changes separating responsibilities of individuals, local authorities, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Parliament and the EU institutions, and to show the changes in participatory policy after Latvia's accession to the European Union, state problems and give suggestions to improve the situation. The report is based on the views of people and non-governmental organizations that were given during discussions organized within the project "Me in the EU for Five Years - Me Myself, Me in the Local Government, the State and the European Union" that was carried out by association 'Civic Alliance Latvia'. Meanwhile on CAL homepage there were 10 interactive questions about welfare, participation in decision making and economy in order to get a wider view on the opinions of Latvian people about the changes after the country's accession to the EU. The report will be submitted to the government and Parliament of Latvia and the EU institutions.

Within the framework of the project "Me in the EU for Five Years" there were held discussions from December 2008 till May 2009. Four discussions were organized in Aluksne, Jelgava, Daugavpils and Ventspils. Their aim was to learn about people's views on the changes in their lives after the accession to the EU, their understanding about what has improved and what has become worse, the reasons for these changes, as well as possible solutions on individual, local authorities, state and the European Union level. There were 65 participants in regional discussions - they were school and university students, retired people, entrepreneurs, NGO representatives, deputies to local authorities; Latvians and representatives of minorities.

Three discussions were held in Riga and representatives of civil society - officials of NGOs and local authorities, public administration, as well as members of the Parliament and candidates to the European Parliament - took part in the discussions. The aim of the discussions was to learn about the opinions of representatives of NGOs, local authorities, public administration and candidates to the European Parliament about the changes in the participation of the society in policy making on the level of local authorities, state and the European Union. Each discussion was worked out and it had a different methodology. There were 95 participants in the discussions in Riga. It should be added that altogether there were 160 participants - 86 NGO representatives, 16 officials and deputies from local governments, 28 representatives from the public administration and the Parliament and 13 candidates to the European Parliament.

The first part of the report gives a summary of the views expressed by people about the changes in Latvia after Latvia's accession to the European Union, as well as their opinions about the actions to be taken to improve the situation on the level of individuals, non-governmental organisations, local authorities, state and the EU institutions.

The second part of the report gives a summary of changes in participatory policy on the level of local authorities, state and the European Union institutions that is based on the views and experiences shared in the discussions in Riga by representatives of non-governmental organisations and public administration institutions of all levels.

At the end of the report there are given conclusions on the opinions expressed in the discussions, as well as suggestions to policy makers and non-governmental organisations to improve participatory policy.

Methodology of the discussions and the opinions expressed there are recorded and published on association 'Civic Alliance Latvia' homepage [www.nvo.lv](http://www.nvo.lv) under the title - Projects. The implementation of the project was financially supported by the European Commission Representation in Latvia and the Society Integration Foundation.

## VIEWS OF PEOPLE ON THE CHANGES IN LATVIA. SUGGESTIONS

The following four chapters reflect a summary of local people's views from different regions in Latvia about the changes after Latvia's accession to the European Union in 2004. The views were on four issues: economic development of the country and welfare of people, country's external security and defence, culture, identity and independence of Latvia, social security and health care possibilities. The above mentioned issues were widely discussed on different forums before Latvia's accession to the European Union, so the task of the participants of the discussions was to analyze pre-accession discussion materials and evaluate them from today's point of view.

### 1 Economic Development and Welfare of People

---

*After Latvia's accession to the European Union people had to adopt to the competition in the EU labour market in order to use the advantages offered by free flow of goods, capital and labour force.*

The results of the discussions show that most people see and appreciate the advantages offered by free market which appeared as a result of Latvia's accession to the EU. They evaluate opportunities of raising EU funds to support infrastructure and agriculture of Latvia, new technologies, modernization, raising labour productivity, tourism development, and work in other memberstates, as well as support of their relatives in Latvia.

There were five interactive questions on association 'Civic Alliance Latvia' homepage ([www.nvo.lv](http://www.nvo.lv)) about welfare of people and various aspects of economy. One of the first questions was *Has the living standard of your family risen after accession to the EU?* (see Chart 1. *Rise in living Standard*)

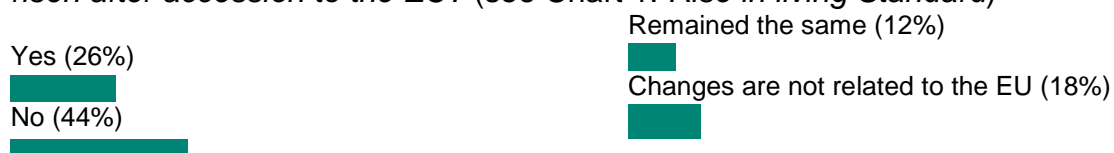


Chart 1. Rise in living standard

Most respondents say that living standard on individual level has not risen after Latvia's accession to the EU. Similar opinions were expressed during discussions as people mention that income growth is relative because it cannot be felt due to high inflation.

Respondents at the same time point out that young people's and students' living standards have risen (43%), as well as the living standard of active and creative people (20%). In all seven discussions several participants pointed out that the biggest advantage is, firstly, chances of studying and working abroad for young people and exchange projects, as well as the possibility of raising funds to modernize and develop enterprises. At the same time people feel sceptical about the accession to the EU saying that mostly they are state officials who



have experienced the growth of welfare - 28% (see Chart 2. *Rise in living standard in different social groups*).

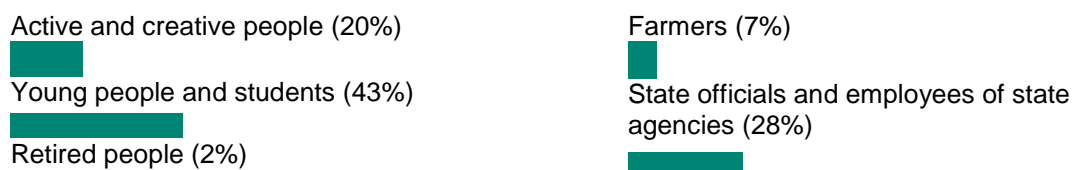


Chart 2. Rise in living standard in different social groups.

Respondents pessimistically answered other questions related to economy as it was the time of overtaking PAREX bank by the government and people's great concern about the economic crisis in the country. Most people pointed out that the only change on the individual level has been (see Chart 3. *Changes on individual level*) - we eat less (86%) and on community level - (see Chart 4. *Changes on community level*) - corporate insolvency (40%).

**In what way has the accession to the EU changed your and your family's way of life?**



Chart 4. Changes on community level.

**Which changes, to your mind, are related to the accession to the EU?**

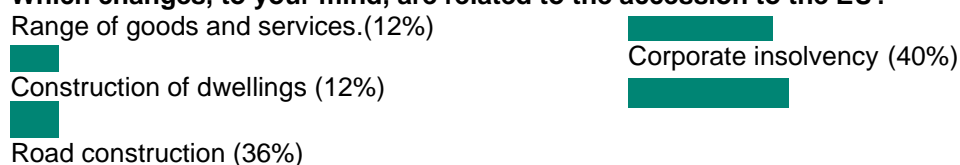


Chart 4. Changes on community level.

Respondents were asked to answer the question from a broader, EU perspective (see Chart 5. *Economic benefits*). The biggest part of respondents (55%) answered that the accession to the EU has offered a possibility to stand the competition in labour market in other countries (this aspect was brought up in every discussion). The survey shows that people consider it to be a positive sign that prices of goods and services are similar to those in the EU market. However, the fact that prices are on the same level like in the EU-15 countries because of the high price of energy resources there was considered negative. As this information is controversial, it is not possible to find out colleration without a deep analysis.

**In your opinion inhabitants of Latvia have access to**

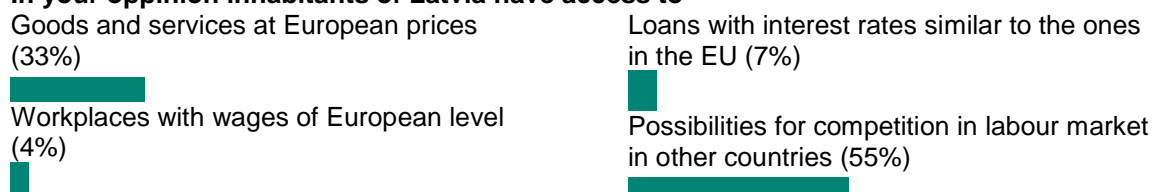


Chart 5. Economic benefits

It should be stressed that the results of the survey are suggestive of definite trends and they do not reflect the overall view of the society as the data are not representative.

It should be also added that according to the results of the discussions people expressed regret about the fact that after the accession to the EU Latvia has lost such traditional branches as sugar production and inshore fishing. Even more, Latvian producers of agricultural products cannot compete with EU-15 producers because the latter

- Have advantages concerning the climate;
- Have acquired efficient production, processing and other technologies;
- Have larger subsidies than Latvian producers.

People mentioned a negative fact that it is possible with the help of the EU to buy expensive technologies produced in the EU, but not competitive technologies produced in other countries. It was admitted that policy of the EU subsidies and compensations force people to give up producing agricultural and other products.

People feel negative about weakening of economic relations with the former republics of the USSR - Russia, Belarus, Ukraine. The EU quality standards do not allow to purchase cheaper products there and use them in Latvia, for example, in pharmacology.

People have controversial opinions about free flow of labour force. On the one hand the possibility to get education in the EU countries and to make a career there is highly appreciated. On the other hand, it has been observed that highly qualified specialists (engineers, teachers) leave Latvia to do unskilled jobs (hotel service, workers in warehouses, unskilled workers in agriculture). At the same time highly qualified researchers and scientists emigrate to the USA and other countries outside the EU.

People were critical about politicians who have failed in fixing better conditions for Latvian people in the European market, as well as about the government that is too eager to implement various EU regulations and directives, thus putting Latvian manufacturers, NGOs in a worse situation than manufacturers of other EU countries, even more, disproportionately burdensome obstacles have been created in uptaking EU funds. People themselves are partly to be blamed for this situation because of their lack of appropriate knowledge and skills in uptaking EU funds and also because they are increasing consumption and not ensuring efficiency.

When thinking about the reasons of the negative consequences, part of the participants of the discussions put forward *conspiracy theories* - markets for some goods (sugar and meat - Denmark; dairy products - France, Germany; fish - Germany, Scandinavian countries, etc) have already been divided among the EU-15 countries. Secondly, Latvian politicians make agreements in the European Commission that are not in favour of Latvia and its people, thus getting material benefits for themselves or for a small group of people.

## Suggestions

- ▶ Individual level
  - Manage one's own property, show activity and initiative, uptake the EU funds, this way raising the living standard.
  - Become self-employed, create and use ideas for welfare of oneself, relatives and community.
  - Raise work efficiency.
  
- ▶ NGO level
  - Take part in international collaboration networks and follow up the policy of Latvia and the EU.
  - Protect and advocate interests of the development Latvia in different sectors.
  - Make a pressure on Latvian politicians to get equal conditions for Latvian farmers and manufacturers with farmers and manufacturers of other EU memberstates.
  
- ▶ National level
  - Work out a plan of economic development, reduce bueraucracy and control, simplify report forms.
  - Promote self-employment and development of small enterprises.
  - Raise competetiveness of Latvian manufacturers and promote production efficiency.
  - Reduce bueraucracy which is bigger in Latvia than in other countries in uptaking the EU funds. Currently it demands expensive resource administration also for the beneficiaries that have to spend a lot of resources on recording and accounting. Experience of the countries that trust and rely on previous cooperation experience should be analized and administrative apparatus should be reduced.
  - Come to such conditions that are in favour of the economy of Latvia and its people and not to such ones that are convenient for politicians and demand less effort.
  - Collaborate with neighbouring countries outside the EU when it is mutually advantageous, for instance, with Russia and Belorus (transport, glass fiber, cable production).
  
- ▶ EU level
  - Determine equal quotas and subsidies on agricultural products for all memberstates.
  - Plan the EU funds not only for the development of infrastructure but also for the development of industry.
  - Open labour markets of all memberstates for Latvian people.
  - Ensure mutually convenient conditions for manufacturers of all memberstates.

## 2 National Security and Defence

---

*During the last five years there have been significant changes that affect national security of Latvia. The Latvian people have to take responsibility for protection of the border of the EU and also they have to face challenges of the "open borders". The most important fact in this context is Latvia's accession to the Schengen zone.*

Participants of the discussion pointed out that thanks to the military cooperation with other countries they feel much safer because of the powerful allies. People acknowledged benefits to national security:

- The EU is a stable framework for the existence of a national state;
- Feeling of safety against the threats of being occupied has grown;
- Decisions are taken in agreement with all the memberstates and acting in achieving a common aim that increases the impact on international level;
- Russia has become less aggressive towards Latvia;
- The Schengen agreement strengthens the EU external border. As the border of Latvia with Russia is the EU external border, the EU funds and other resources can be used for its protection.

In the context of external security the participants of all the discussions expressed their views on Latvia's membership in NATO saying that it was part of the integration of Latvia in Europe. Thanks to Latvia's membership in NATO the Latvian army has become professional and voluntary - the young people do not take part in international missions against their will. The army's material resources have improved. For example, there has been established a militant school in Aluksne. NATO membership takes a lot of resources from the defence budget but these resources can also be used for human aims, for example, patriotic upbringing and sports. The participants of the discussions have not separated integration processes in both the organisations.

People point out that alongside with positive tendencies there are also challenges. The most urgent are the following:

- Not always the EU memberstates have the same opinion about particular security issues;
- The hope that in case of a conflict other EU countries will support Latvia is not strong. For example, some EU-15 memberstates when dealing with the conflict in Georgia (August-September, 2008), took the side of Russia;
- Latvia gets involved in conflicts, including military conflicts. Latvia has become more dependent on the USA. The Latvian army has to take part in military conflicts and it has to deal with the consequences, even if it is against the wish of the Latvian people.
- Threat of terrorism has enlarged - Latvia is considered part of Western world that is an enemy to the Islamic countries. Migration within the EU let radically minded adherents to the Islamic faith get into Latvia.
- Security within Latvia is becoming weaker - recession in economy causes and aggravates criminal situation (fights, thefts, robberies, insecurity in the street).

The participants of the discussions worked out ideas concerning these problems that could be carried out by themselves, local authorities, public administration and European institutions to improve the situation.

## **Suggestions**

### ▶ Individual level

#### Strengthening of national security

- Educate and inform children and youth on national security and anti-terrorism issues.
- Promote upbringing of patriotism in the family, school, work, army.
- Learn to discuss, form arguments, solve conflicts.

#### Fight against terrorism

- Condemn terrorism.
- Explain the attitude of the Latvian people towards other cultures and conflicts when participating in international projects

#### Strengthening of inner security

- Participate in charity, support the poor, as well as those people who are in a critical situation.
- Form associations to promote security.

### ▶ Level of local governments

- Promote patriotic upbringing at school.
- Educate community members.
- Participate in cross-border projects.
- Develop new forms of social assistance.
- Support work with groups of social risk.

### ▶ National level

#### Strengthening of national security

- Educate politicians on national security and anti-terrorism issues.
- Defend the national positions of Latvia and avoid taking part in conflicts.
- Ensure support of allies in possible conflicts, for example, with Russia.
- Not to be assured that other countries will help, be ready ourselves.
- Not to reduce the number of borderguards.

#### Fight against terrorism

- Fully implement the Schengen agreement and strengthen the external border.
- Cooperate effectively with Europol and Interpol in prevention terror threat.
- Support the movement of military youth organizations.

#### Strengthening of inner security

- Ensure economic growth of the country, welfare of people.
- Fight crime, continue probation process.
- Not to reduce the number of policemen.
- Use defence budget also for human aims (for example, let civil people use army sports premises).
- Increase fight against drugs.

▶ EU level

- Strengthen external borders of the country, especially with Russia.
- Not to get involved in military conflicts (for example, the USA and Iraq).

### 3 Culture and Identity of Latvia, Its National Independence

---

*Accession to the European Union was a challenge also to the culture and identity of the Latvian people. Before the accession Eurosceptics warned about migration that would be a threat to the survival of the Latvian nation. However, during the last five years neither critical changes in the national composition nor threat to the national independence of Latvia has been observed.*

According to the views of the participants of the discussions free movement within the territory of the EU, study, voluntary work opportunities, cooperation and cross-border projects, exchange of experience and job possibilities in the EU memberstates let the people of Latvia present their country and be more prepared for new challenges.

Latvia is open and friendly to tourists. At the same time, Latvian people have a possibility to put Latvia on the map taking part in various art, culture and science projects abroad, they have a wider chance to learn about other cultures. As a result Latvia has become more popular in Europe and in the world, at the same time, other nations learn about culture of Latvia, for example, Song and Dance Festival, there are days of Latvian culture, they get to know our artists, musicians and choirs. There are some aspects people mention as positive changes:

- Latvian self-assurance has risen greatly;
- Both people individually and nation in general feel freer to express their views;
- Generation gap is vanishing. All generations, including school children and elderly people learn how to listen to each other because all opinions are equally important;
- Communication barriers with people in leading positions have disappeared. At present it is possible to express one's views freely, even if they are different, which was not possible during the Soviet times;
- Also, ethnical minorities have a bigger chance of development. Minority representatives speak Latvian, and they have not forgotten their native tongue. People with different views support national policy and the language, there are minority schools, there is a possibility to get education in the native language. Pupils from multinational schools have no problems in learn together, these are their parents who sometimes have conflicts;
- Local patriotism has increased.

However, also in this sphere the participants of the discussions found negative tendencies. One of the most important is the wish of the Latvian people to be alike other Europeans in order to be part of everything that is Europe, this way there is a risk of losing one's national identity. Secondly, not always the Latvian people are united, Russians still feel discrimination. There can be observed arrogant behaviour towards representatives of some cultures (for example, Russians). There have been cases of discrimination of different races and different sexual orientation. It was a really hot topic with the participants of the discussions in Daugavpils and Ventspils. In Jelgava the participants of the discussions pointed out that due to economic interests cultural differences have been forgotten, goods and services have become standardised and made alike. When travelling around

the EU, it is more and more difficult to find goods and services characteristic of the particular country. A sceptical opinion was expressed that in a long term the Latvian people will not survive (low birth rate and high level of mortality). Also, the EU will not exist forever and therefore Latvia has to think about how to maintain independence after that period.

## **Suggestions**

### ▶ Individual level

- Preserve national and patriotic values in the family.
- Speak about common values with people of different nationalities, not to stress the differences.

### ▶ Level of local governments

In order to strengthen the civil society, events for minority and Latvian pupils from different regions should be organized, for example, debates and sport tournaments.

### ▶ National level

- Support events that promote national self-esteem, for example, Song and Dance Festival.
- Not to force learning and use of the official language.
- Find positive motivation for learning the official language.



## 4 Social Security, Health Care Possibilities

---

*Although the discussions in the regions of Latvia were held during economic recession and the time when living standards of people were falling, there were very few arguments and suggestions on these issues. In most cases the influence of the EU was evaluated positively, although the fall of the living standard was also associated with the accession to the EU.*

The participants of the discussions admitted that during the last five years in Latvia a lot of positive changes have taken place thanks to the EU:

- Improved systems of insurance, social benefits and pensions;
- Introduced system of private pension funds;
- Drastically improved infrastructure of medicine, hospital equipment, modern technologies are being introduced, medical qualification increased;
- Medical services are available to the citizens of Latvia also in other EU countries, for example, EHIC;
- Accessibility for disabled people has been improved, there is more information about different aids;
- There are new possibilities in the spheres of social security and health care and there are funds available for exchange of experience and increase of qualification for people working in the sphere of social security both in NGO and public sector;
- NGOs that work in the spheres of health care, social security and charity are part of the EU cooperation network, they get new knowledge and experience, become more influential on national level in advocating for rights and needs of people;
- Society has a wider access to the information about healthy life style, sports and healthy food;
- EU co-financing is available for elderly people's homes, shelters and trainings for social workers;

However, people have observed that the last five years have not solved and even have made new problems:

- System of family physicians has been made in a way that it does not promote patients' visits to specialists;
- Health care has become more expensive;
- Medicine have become more expensive because of the expensive licences for their production that have to be bought;
- Medicine companies even have doctors who lobby their interests;
- Pensions are not adequate to the actual standard of living;
- Social insecurity and unemployment have enlarged, unfavourable demographic changes are taking place in Latvia;
- Disabled people lack technical aids and there are minimal job opportunities, there are no quotas for disabled people in enterprises.

## Suggestions

### ▶ Individual level

Search for and learn the information about health care and social security, develop critical attitude towards medical advertisements, keep to healthy style of life.

### ▶ NGO level

- Observe policy makers.
- Initiate changes in the system of family physicians.
- Inform society about the possibilities in the sphere of health care and social security, about the patients' rights and social rights.

### ▶ Level of local governments

- Promote healthy life style and organize events to ensure it.
- Provide premises for health care, equipment, medical access.
- Support enterprises that employ disabled people.
- Provide people with health care closer to their living place.

### ▶ National level

- Examine the system of health care, thus reforming the institution of family physicians.
- Carry out actions that would promote uptaking the EU funds for social and health care spheres in a short time.
- Apply tax rebates to enterprises that employ disabled people.
- Liberalize pharmacy market.
- Finance and support enterprises producing aids for disabled people.

### ▶ EU level

- Strengthen protection of the rights of patients and consumers.
- Liberalize pharmacy market.
- Reduce taxes on medicine produced in the EU.

## PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Activities of non-governmental organisations in making and implementing policy on all levels (local, national and the EU) started already before Latvia's accession to the European Union and they are still going on. Non-governmental organisations participate in decision making and they themselves show initiative.

Participation in EU decision making process is a new experience for Latvia's associations and foundations, as well as for politicians. Ministries and Parliament Commissions have worked out mechanisms for cooperation with NGOs to coordinate national positions. However, in order to cooperate, both parties - public administration and NGOs have to have an ability to act quickly, as there are just a few days allocated for alignment of different opinions, and national positions are classified as information of restricted access. Representatives of ministries admit that in many spheres it is difficult to find non-governmental organisations that are competent in certain EU political issues.

At the same time a great role in the EU policy making is played by national organizations that join the EU NGO cooperation networks and platforms. In Latvia the problem lies in the fact that the state actually does not give any support to NGOs that stand for interests of definite groups, they have difficulties in raising funds in international network. Thanks to the cooperation among the EU level NGO unions and Latvia's associations and foundations, supranational organizations inform Latvia's NGOs about their position and the EU policy on a certain topic and it helps Latvia's NGOs influence both local politicians and representatives of Latvia in the European Parliament. Also, Latvia's NGOs take part in the formulation of the views of the European NGOs. It must be admitted that in Latvia just a few organizations have managed to protect their interests actively during the EU lawmaking process. The general view on this is that in this process there are a lot of officials responsible for it and it is difficult to understand who is the right person the organization should contact expressing its opinions, officials reply formally and the organization has wasted its resources.

'Civic Alliance Latvia' on its homepage had an interactive question to learn about the people's activity in the decision making process on the EU level (see Chart 5. *People's participation in EU decision making*). Most respondents, 39%, pointed out that they have individually influenced decision making by taking part in the elections of the European Parliament, while 37% said that they had influenced decision making with the help of NGOs that strengthens positions of associations and foundations in the transition of viewpoints from social groups to institutions.

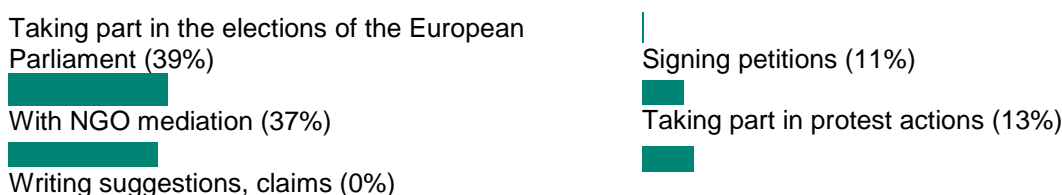


Chart 5. People's participation in EU decision making.

CAL homepage contained also a question on mechanisms how to represent one's view on the EU level (see Chart 6. *Participatory mechanisms*). Most people

answered that the most efficient way is participation in protest actions - 83% of respondents. It should be added that the question was asked during the week of January 13, 2009, when there were riots in Old Riga. It could partly explain the rebellious mood of the answers. However, at the same time it should be stressed that in some discussions the participants claimed it was not possible to change the existing system and radical means had to be used.

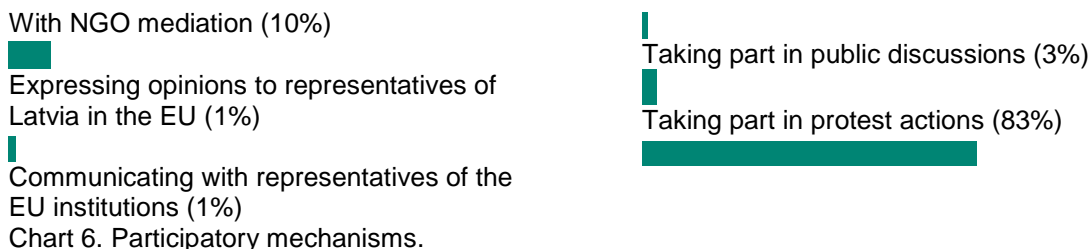


Chart 6. Participatory mechanisms.

## 1 Local Authorities and Ministries

It is difficult for people to understand the spheres of responsibilities, projects worked out by ministries or local authorities and possibilities of participation. Both representatives of local authorities and ministries pointed out that NGOs' capacity, expertise and also persistence when putting different questions on the agenda of the local government or public administration, has enlarged. Also, in the local governments and public administration the understanding about the necessity to involve the groups of people who are the target audience of the policy initiative, has enlarged. Within the last five years representatives of local authorities and ministries have become more active in searching for organisations and their views, they organize discussions on possible changes in legal acts and policy documents. The representatives of the discussions stressed that more and more often local authorities and ministries not only just inform about the decisions but they also consult on the content of the document during its formation. In the time period of the last five years the following changes in involving NGOs in decision making process have been noticed:

- There have been formed advisory councils of different spheres in ministries and local governments;
- NGOs are involved in work groups;
- Associations give positions on changes in legislation and policy documents;
- Mutual understanding has grown.

At the same time both in ministries and local authorities it has been observed that the quality of cooperation largely depends on the individuals who interact. When the officials responsible for the sphere leave, the cooperation has to be renewed again from the very start which is a negative aspect of the cooperation for both parties. There are problems that are left unsolved because NGOs have no clear understanding about the specific character and spheres of responsibilities of the officials. At the same time officials do not understand that NGOs do not have full-time lawyers or other experts who can allocate their time for studying national or international documents in a short time, that they do not have finances to work full-time and that, for example, many NGOs dealing with social sphere cannot use so much energy and resources for defending their interests like it can be done by organizations of manufacturers, trade unions or professional associations.

People and representatives of public administration mentioned the fact that participatory mechanisms on the level of the Cabinet of Ministers are positive examples of good practice. There is a comparatively transparent and open system of policy making in the Cabinet of Ministers (there are some differences on the level of Ministries) - participatory mechanisms have been made to follow the new policy documents and laws (drawing conclusions and participation in project coordination meetings), and also inclusion of new issues on policy agenda - bringing up problems in meetings of Council for Implementation of the Cooperation Memorandum between NGOs and the Cabinet of Ministers.

## 2 Parliament

---

A new dimension is addition of the EU policy issues to the Parliament's national agenda when the former foreign policy questions turn into home policy questions. This way decision making process has become more complicated, it demands mobilization in time, understanding of European issues and responsibilities of the different institutions is necessary.

On the homepage of 'Civic Alliance Latvia' there was a question: *Should the Parliament have more rights to influence EU decision making?* (see Chart 7. *The role of the Parliament*). The aim of the question was to find out the respondents' view on the role of the Parliament in the EU decision making process where it was confronted to the ministry level. Most respondents have admitted that the Parliament should have more rights in making the EU decisions as it represents the interests of the society - 78%.

Yes, because it represents the interests of the society (78%)

No, ministries build the policy (8%)

Don't know (14%)

Chart 7. The role of the Parliament

Representatives of the Parliament pointed out that people can submit positions on legal acts (the right given by Constitution) and easily track the decision making process in its different stages. People can follow the decision making process in three main ways – on the website of the Parliament, by contacting civil servants in Parliament's committees and members of Parliament. Parliamentary commissions can invite NGO representatives as experts to work on various issues. If organizations have reasonable proposals for amendments of law and they can convince Members of the Parliament, there have been cases when the Parliamentary Commission submit proposals to the Parliament on behalf of an MP.

Civil servants point out that the experience of both the Parliament and Chancellery in cooperation with the society in policy making has been internationally recognized and was advised to other countries.

### 3 Participation Challenges

---

The last project discussion was held during pre-election campaign of the European Parliament, therefore a special attention was paid to discussion of the existing experience of cooperation between NGOs and members of the European Parliament and there were ideas put forward to improve it after the elections. Organizations shared their experience on the low responsiveness of the members of the EP. Although several organizations and institutions mentioned positive examples of cooperation, there were organizations that had had bad experience.

People can speak, express their opinions, but their needs and proposals are not taken seriously - neither by local authorities and state nor by the EU, it's one of the statements that rose from discussions. During the discussions frustration could be felt from both sides - organizations do not appreciate the work that officials have done to involve society, at the same time officials consider that organizations have to coordinate their opinions beforehand, they have to give structured information about NGO experts, should avoid emotions and have to ensure feedback - they have to give competent answers to the officials' questions, as well as they have to be consequent - opinions shouldn't be changed right after having made the decision. Non-governmental organizations have to learn to compromise.

There were expressed opinions that on all levels it is difficult and sometimes not possible for non-governmental organizations to defend interests of the society or a vulnerable social group against unfavourable decisions if they are economically disadvantageous to influential politicians or business groups. Procedures of making decisions let, for example, Parliamentary Commission hold a meeting that has not been pre-announced to go through a particular issue, the Cabinet of Ministers have the right to announce any project to be "urgent" or an issue of restricted access. It is similar with the situation in the local governments, for example, they can make a short announcement in the newspaper that is difficult to notice about a public consultation being organized in an inconvenient place and time for the people but after it give a catchy article about the low interest of people. In a similar way there was organized a discussion of the nationally significant project "Nord Stream" in Riga that had a wide public debate in Sweden, Finland and Germany because of its ecologic and economic impact. Such practice enlarges mistrust and lack of possibilities to influence policy decisions.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

As it has been proved by discussions, people are quite well read about the EU issues, they can analyse changes in their lives that have taken place after Latvia's accession to the European Union, they willingly take responsibility for formation of their own welfare and they see the responsibilities of the local authorities, public administration and the EU institutions. Although there are a few people who tend to see the development of Latvia in "black" and "white" colours, look for the "guilty" ones and see "a plot" everywhere, in all the discussions there were put forward proposals to improve the situation. The participants of the project admitted that discussions and the possibility to express their views there to the people who make decisions in the local governments, the country and the European Union, is a necessary and good practice.

Although the biggest part of the participants of regional discussions are not well informed about decision making mechanisms in state administration and the European Union, it is not an obstacle to form opinions on the EU issues. The participants of the discussions examined their position during the discussions of the pre-election campaign relating it to today's situation and also revealed their attitude towards the present European Union initiatives.

The discussions showed that people take an active part and express their views if policies are being discussed in everyday life context. Such a category as, for example, free labour flow can be better understood when analysing their own and their friends' and relatives' experience and it is not so well understood when discussing the chapters of policy documents, relevant articles of legislation or the European Community Court sentences.

### **Suggestions to Institutions to Promote Public Involvement**

1. Ensure continuity of cooperation between involved parties not to start from the beginning again in case the officials leave.
2. Not to overestimate the role and possibilities of people and non-governmental organizations in policy making. People and organizations can give valuable suggestions but cannot do the job of public administration.
3. Ensure participation possibilities that do not require unadequate resources from people and NGOs. Stress should be put on participatory methods that are based on listening, discussion of some issues, and not analysis of complicated documents.
4. Be proactive in looking for an opportunity to get into touch and involve social groups. Institutions have to take into consideration the fact that not all groups are organized and not all of them have resources for ensuring participation in protecting their interests.
5. Ensure accessibility of resources for NGO participation in policy making, including participation in the European NGO networks.
6. Provide adequate time and finance resources for society involvement.
7. Not to rely just on establishing collaboration mechanisms but use them with sense of responsibility.



8. Evaluate people's and NGO's arguments on their merits.
9. Ensure efficient feedback not overloading officials, so that they are able to inform people and NGOs that have participated in the meetings about policy decisions and their arguments.
10. Ensure openness and transparency in decision making.
11. Avoid such decision making procedures that exclude or make participation of the society difficult, for instance, going through an urgent issue, not pre-announced meetings, not enough information about the possibilities of participation, relying on involvement of organized civil society.

## **Suggestions to Associations and Foundations**

1. Get aware of the responsibilities of officials and institutions and their limits in the decision making of the particular sphere in the local governments, Ministries and the Parliament, as well as the EU institutions.
2. Establish *ad hoc* or permanent cooperation coalitions of associations and foundations in the particular sphere, as well as get involved in NGO networks of the EU and international organisations in order to discuss the opinions before announcing them to the institutions in charge, thus saving resources and giving well-considered arguments.
3. Ensure the feedback with the representatives of the institutions answering the invitations of state administration institutions. The answer that the organisation is not going to share its opinion is also a way to improve cooperative culture.
4. Be responsible in decision making process and change the opinion after decision making just with good reason.
5. Listen to different opinions and be ready to change views and look for compromise if new information and reasonable arguments are brought up.
6. Cooperate with each other and observe public administration institutions so that there does not appear a situation when the social groups that are to be influenced by this decision do not take part in the discussions.
7. Select and offer information about expertise available to NGOs on different issues to decision makers of all levels.