

REPORT ON CITIZENS' CONSULTATIONS ON EUROPE IN LATVIA

A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Citizens' consultations on Europe organized in Latvia indicate that citizens of Latvia highly appreciate the opportunities provided by the European Union and believe that freedoms currently enjoyed by the EU citizens need to be strengthened and deepened in the future.

The main concern expressed during the consultations is that of a disintegration of the European Union due to the rise of populism and/or public apathy. People perceive lack of fairness and equity in Europe as well as lack of security. Citizens expressed fear of losing the national identity. There are also concerns regarding whether the EU can find solutions to the present-day challenges of the contemporary world.

The citizens of Latvia would like the European Union to be able to adapt to all kinds of global transformation by investing in education, science and innovation, as well as provide security for Europeans. The citizens of Latvia would also like to see a more equitable European Union, especially regarding living standards both within individual Member States and across the Union. A deeper connection with citizens of other Member States is also desired.

More than 1500 citizens have been engaged in consultations that took place both in the regions of Latvia and online.

B. NATIONAL REPORT

I. MAIN OUTCOMES

Around 837 people took part in 23 events on the future of Europe organized in Latvia during the summer and autumn of 2018. More than half of these events were organized by civil society organisations experimenting with different formats to engage general public in the debate on Europe.

In addition, a large-scale idea crowdsourcing action was organized online in a dedicated online platform *Dialogi par Eiropas Nākotni* (Dialogues on the Future of Europe) collecting citizens' ideas on creating more wealth, happiness, security and justice for Europe. Altogether more than 370 ideas were collected, and 721 registered

participants (around 1 500 not registered participants) took part in online voting casting their votes 26233 times for the ideas they considered as being the best.

Main hopes on the future of Europe expressed by the citizens of Latvia were as follows:

- ✓ Freedoms and opportunities currently enjoyed by the EU citizens need to be sustained and deepened in the future.
- ✓ Europe should be more equitable, in particular regarding social standards.
- ✓ Europe should provide more security for its citizens.
- ✓ Citizens of Latvia desire a deeper connection and more face-to-face contacts with citizens of different EU Member States.
- ✓ Europe needs to adapt to all kinds of global transformations – political, economic, and scientific – via high quality education systems, investment in science and innovation, and flexible procedures that encourage rather than obstruct citizen and business initiatives.

Main concerns on the future of Europe raised by citizens were as follows:

- ✓ The fear of disintegration of the European Union.
- ✓ Perceived lack of fairness and equity in Europe.
- ✓ Lack of security in the context of military, terrorist or hybrid threats.
- ✓ Fear of losing the national identity, linguistic diversity and self-determination.
- ✓ Concerns regarding whether the EU leaders and institutions can find the right solutions to the present-day challenges of the contemporary world.

II. CALENDAR AND METHODOLOGY OF THE CONSULTATIONS

Citizens' consultations on Europe in Latvia were organized from summer through to November 2018. Consultations took place in various regions of Latvia, in Riga and online. The calendar of the consultations is presented in the table below.

Date	Place	Main organizer: civil society organisation	Participants	Characteristics of participants
09.10.2018	Salacgrīva	yes	30	General public
10.10.2018	Ventspils		44	Students, teachers, general public
11.10.2018	Alsunga	yes	60	General public
15.10.2018	Rēzekne		40	General public
15.10.2018	Jelgava		13	Students, teachers
16.10.2018	Daugavpils		50	University students, professors
18.10.2018	Jēkabpils	yes	75	College students and general public
18.10.2018	Preiļi	yes	12	General public
18.10.2018	Bauska	yes	45	High school students
19.10.2018	Kuldīga	yes	8	NGO activists

22.10.2018	Līvāni	yes	20	Elderly people, NGO activists
22.10.2018	Jēkabpils	yes	15	NGO activists
25.10.2018	Liepāja		70	Students, professors, elderly people
26.10.2018	Valmiera		35	Master level students and professors
26.10.2018	Jelgava	yes	11	General public
29.10.2018	Kuldīga		35	Students
30.10.2018	Tukums	yes	40	NGO activists and general public
02.11.2018	Jūrmala	yes	17	NGO activists (social issues)
02.11.2018	Rīga	yes	25	EU-affairs experts
05.11.2018	Rīga		15	Representatives from business organisations, trade unions and general public
05.11.2018	Limbaži	yes	26	General public
October 2018	Online	yes	50	Online discussion involving rural entrepreneurs, NGO activists, members of municipal assemblies
May-October 2018	Consultations organized by Farmers' Federation of Latvia	yes	101	Rural entrepreneurs, rural residents, farmers

About a half of all citizens' consultations were organized by civil society organisations active either locally or at the national level, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided funding to cover their expenses.

Organizers of citizens' consultations were free to choose their own formats for arranging the consultations; some of organizers chose a traditional discussion format while others opted for more innovative formats, such as workshops or brainstorming. All event organizers were prompted to choose conversations with the audience over lectures and expert commentaries. Organizers of the events and/or civil society observers wrote a summary about each event, particularly noting the main thematic categories and concerns discussed by participants, as well as the ideas on the future of Europe.

In parallel to regional consultations, the ideas on the future of Europe were collected on the online platform *Dialogi par Eiropas Nākotni* (Dialogues on the Future of Europe) <https://manaeiropa.manabalss.lv>. This platform is part of the popular e-petitioning platform ManaBalss. Both the citizens who attended the consultations and everyone else were encouraged to come up with their own ideas and to vote on ideas submitted by others. Ideas collected during the regional consultations were also added to the idea pool on the platform.

Overall, 374 ideas on the future of Europe were collected on the *Dialogi par Eiropas Nākotni* platform, and 721 participants voted on the ideas collected there casting their votes 26233 times for the ideas they preferred. Citizens of Latvia were asked to vote for ideas separated into randomly chosen pairs within specific thematic groupings (for example, how to make Europe more secure?) This method was chosen in order to enable the idea collection and voting to happen in parallel. This method allows to discern the ideas that are the most and

least often supported by participants when these ideas are contrasted with some other suggestion proposed by participants in that thematic grouping.

At the conclusion of the regional consultations and online idea collection, two Latvian civil society organisations – Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS and Civic Alliance Latvia – wrote a summary report on citizens' consultations on Europe in Latvia.

III. MAIN TOPICS DISCUSSED AND/OR RAISED BY THE CITIZENS

Altogether, there were 19 main thematic sets of aspirations regarding the future of Europe raised by participants during the consultations in Latvia. Among these aspirations five were most frequently recurrent:

- (1) Citizens of Latvia highly appreciate the opportunities provided by the European Union, such as freedom to travel, freedom to study and work in other countries, the common market. Financial support for the development of Latvia funded by the European Union has also been deeply appreciated by citizens of Latvia. The most frequently heard request during the consultations on the future of Europe in Latvia: **the freedoms and opportunities currently enjoyed by the EU citizens need to be sustained and deepened in the future.**
- (2) The citizens of Latvia balance the call for competitiveness with the **need for Europe to be more equitable**. Desire to achieve similar living standards throughout the European Union is one of the major aspirations of the citizens of Latvia – the reduction of social inequality both among and within EU Member States has been one of the most frequently mentioned hopes during consultations in Latvia. The consultations have also indicated that the citizens of Latvia would like to see smaller EU Member States having a greater say in decisions regarding the future of the EU.
- (3) The citizens of Latvia would like to see that **Europe provides security for Europeans** both regarding military threats, terrorism and hybrid warfare.
- (4) The **need for deeper connection between citizens of different EU Member States** has also been one of the constant topics during the consultations in Latvia. The citizens of Latvia would welcome additional opportunities to get acquainted and to cooperate with citizens of other EU Member States via exchange programs, via creation of common enterprises and other kinds of citizens' initiatives.
- (5) Citizens of Latvia believe that both Latvia and Europe as a region need to be **adaptable to all kinds of global transformations – political, economic, scientific – via high quality education systems, investment in science and innovation, sustainability of environment and climate, and flexible procedures that encourage rather than obstruct citizen and business initiatives.**

Other topics touched upon during the consultations in Latvia:

- the necessity for a more united and stronger European Union;
- high hopes in the European Union as a guarantee of prosperity in the future;
- better environmental protection;
- creation of a European federation;
- expansion of the Eurozone;
- increased peer pressure within Europe;
- higher standards in Europe in different domains;
- high ambitions;
- improved general understanding on Europe;
- self-determination of member states;
- strengthening of common values;
- market protection;
- return migration to Latvia;
- cooperation with other regions;
- more humane attitude to people with disabilities.

IV. MAIN CONCERNS EXPRESSED BY THE CITIZENS

Altogether, there were 25 sets of various concerns on the future of Europe raised by participants during the consultations in Latvia. The most frequently recurrent concerns were the following:

- (1) **The fear of disintegration of the European Union.** Following the referendum on the EU in the United Kingdom, the citizens of Latvia are uncertain about the future of the EU and the freedoms guaranteed in the EU (especially, free movement); they also have noted the rise of Eurosceptic, populist and anti-democratic movements throughout Europe. During consultations in Latvia, many citizens noted that the threat to the future of Europe is amplified by public apathy, low interest in the EU and the European Parliament elections, as well as low sense of empowerment and self-esteem regarding the future of Europe.
- (2) A very prominent concern raised by the citizens: a **perceived lack of fairness and equity in Europe.** Among the topics raised by citizens were the following: some EU Member States get away with breaking common regulations while Latvia is diligently trying to fully meet its obligations, lack of fair competition in agriculture and business (larger member states having an advantage), second rate status of Latvia regarding impact on EU decision-making.
- (3) One of the major concerns of Latvia's citizens regarding contemporary challenges: **security.** The citizens of Latvia are concerned that the European Union has not yet managed to find appropriate solutions that would make Europeans feel safe from military and terrorist threats. Latvia, being a state on the external border of the EU, has seen its **border territory depopulated** (due to workforce migration to other EU

countries), which has amplified the perception of risk in the minds of the remaining citizens.

(4) Even though the citizens of Latvia would like to see a stronger Europe and European Union, they are **concerned about losing their national identity, linguistic diversity and self-determination** in the process. The fear of losing one's cultural and national identity in the process of further EU integration has been one of the recurrent themes throughout the consultations organized in Latvia.

(5) **Citizens are concerned whether the EU is capable of finding solutions to the challenges of the contemporary world.** In this regard, the citizens of Latvia are uncertain whether the EU has a strategic vision, leadership and capacity to implement the vision. In their daily life citizens of Latvia, especially in rural regions, have either themselves encountered or have heard about excessively complicated EU procedures – bad experience germinates doubts about the overall capacity of the EU to find the best solutions to the challenges of the contemporary world.

Other concerns featured throughout the consultations were the following:

- fears about migration from third countries into European Union;
- concerns about the preparedness of both Latvian and the European Union towards future financial/economic crisis;
- concerns about diminishing solidarity within the European Union, especially regarding the next budgetary period;
- lack of understanding of the EU- and interest in it among general population;
- non-existence of a common EU identity;
- demographic considerations;
- climate change and environmental degradation;
- poverty;
- mismanagement of public resources and corruption;
- globalization;
- consumer society;
- weakening democratic institutions;
- loss of Christian values;
- lower quality standards;
- focus on materialistic values;
- Latvia's dependence on the EU;
- Inflation;
- problems encountered by people with disabilities;
- youth unemployment;
- challenges for Latvia's citizens living in the UK following Brexit.

V. RECURRENT AND/OR INNOVATIVE CITIZENS' PROPOSALS AND/OR REPRESENTATIVE VERBATIMS

Citizens' proposals in Latvia were collected both during the consultation events and on a dedicated, innovative online platform *manaeiropa.manabals.lv*. Participants could not only propose their own ideas, but also vote on the online platform for the ideas that were already collected. The ideas collected were very concrete and diverse.

The ideas were collected and organized in five large thematic blocks, responding to the following questions:

- ✓ How to increase happiness in Europe?
- ✓ How to increase security in Europe?
- ✓ How to bring more fairness into Europe?
- ✓ How to increase wealth for Europe?
- ✓ Other ideas for the future of Europe.

For the purpose of this report, we have selected top three ideas and three most innovative ideas in each thematic block. In general, they correspond to the hopes and worries expressed by participants during the consultations in Latvia (see Chapters III and IV of this report).

How to increase happiness in Europe?

Top 3 ideas (chosen most often by online voters):

1. Ensure that there is a common minimum wage and old age pension across the EU in line with each country's purchasing power
2. Provide additional funding to research on finding a cure to various forms of cancer
3. In order to develop local identity, support centres should be created in small towns that would provide support to small and medium-sized farms/agricultural holdings

Most innovative proposals:

1. EU should support creation of a bedtime reading book with fairy tales from each EU member state and its translation into all EU languages
2. Projects supported by the EU need to consider cooperation between generations – namely, both young people and elderly need to be engaged together
3. Europe should look at Scandinavian countries for best practices on successful work/life balance – high productivity with short working hours

How to increase security in Europe?

Top 3 ideas (chosen most often by online voters):

1. People should be encouraged to learn more about politics to prevent populists from manipulating public opinion
2. There should be common road traffic rules across the European Union, as well as common standards for building safe roads
3. In order to prevent using harmful ingredients in food, there should be stricter

control over food processing factories and companies that sell food

Most innovative proposals:

1. European Union should provide support to people for living in poorer territories along the external border of the European Union, who would otherwise migrate to other regions.
2. European Union should lessen the widespread perception that it is on verge of disintegration and that it cannot cope with security challenges. Perception makes reality. Therefore, EU should create an impression of being strong and in control.
3. Information on income and taxes of each individual living in the EU should be made publicly available – as is the case in Norway. This will decrease the risk of corruption and tax evasion.

How to bring more fairness into Europe?

Top 3 ideas (chosen most often by online voters):

- 1) By setting common social standards across the EU, the gap between the rich and the poor should be eliminated
- 2) The tax policy across the EU should be friendlier to small and medium-sized enterprises
- 3) Provide more support for those sectors that invest in the future rather than try to make fast profits

Most innovative proposals:

- 1) Introduce electronic textbooks so that schoolchildren would not be obliged to carry heavy backpacks
- 2) Europe should recognize the right of citizens to access the internet
- 3) Netflix and other internet platforms should offer the same quality of service (number of films) to all the EU Member States

How to increase wealth for Europe?

Top 3 ideas (chosen most often by online voters):

- 1) Initial investments that help to start new businesses in degraded territories should be tax-free
- 2) Students at high school should be taught various skills that they will need in their adult life, such as planning their budgets
- 3) The duty of Europe is to diminish social inequality as soon as possible

Most innovative proposals:

- 1) Encourage a country that has achieved top results in certain domain to be the change agent for the EU as a whole: for example, Finland regarding education systems, Slovakia on income equality, etc.
- 2) Europe should become the global leader in artificial intelligence, robotics and automation, and should build a wealthy society based on income thus generated
- 3) Europe should do better in explaining its regulation (that concerns entrepreneurs) via infographics and using other creative means

Other ideas for the future of Europe

Top 3 ideas (chosen most often by online voters):

- 1) Bureaucratic expenses should be cut and the number of administrative procedures should be reduced
- 2) EU should make the recycling of PET bottles mandatory, and container-deposit system should be mandatory across the EU
- 3) Europe should not permit that democracy and fairness is defeated by business interests, greed and money

Most innovative proposals:

- 1) EU institutions should stop buying their publicity via advertising – such articles/broadcasts are boring and encourages local/national media to stop reporting on the EU if such coverage is not paid for by EU institutions
- 2) Support for life-long learning should prioritise long-term projects and not one-off events
- 3) Europe should consider aging as a treatable illness

VI. OTHER (FURTHER COMMENTS ON AND/OR EVALUATION OF THE EXPERIENCE, e.g. best practices on communication)

With the benefit of hindsight, there were several particularly successful elements in Latvia's Citizens' consultations in Europe, notably the following:

- ✓ The innovative digital platform made it possible to involve a large number of people in idea sourcing as well as put those ideas for voting in order to test their popularity.
- ✓ The most successful events were structured as conversations and brainstorms having maximum participant engagement and minimal thematic input from the moderator and/or experts.
- ✓ Inviting local civil society organisations to organize part of consultations and covering their expenses in organizing such events. It was the local civil society organisations who proved to be the best in attracting general public to their events, sometimes linking consultations on the future of Europe with other topics relevant to their respective municipalities.
- ✓ Finding media partners for idea crowdsourcing on the future of Europe. The public broadcasters' website lsm.lv informed a broader public both about the interim results of the voting and embedded in its platform a widget that allowed its audience to propose new ideas.

In the future, we would suggest a more closely coordinated consultation process throughout the EU. A common schedule of events would allow us to link up via the internet participants in Latvia with participants in similar consultation processes in other Member States. This

would encourage participants to see themselves more clearly as Europeans deliberating together on the future of Europe.

