

The Debate in Latvia on the Future of Europe

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Convinced of the inherent “Europeanness” of their country, Latvia’s representatives have taken an active part in the Convention on the Future of Europe where various aspects of Europe’s future have been discussed since spring 2002. At the same time, the Latvian government and various organizations have strived to consult with and inform the populace about the Convention and the issues on its agenda, as well as encourage public debate on those issues¹ What has emerged so far is a discussion among interested individuals and organizations on the Europe of the future and Latvia’s place in it, rather than a full-fledged national debate. The tepid discussions, however, are likely to heat up with the approaching referendum on Latvia’s joining the EU that is scheduled for 20 September 2003.

There are several explanations for this situation: Latvia was invited to join the EU in December 2002 and, despite the country’s energetic efforts since the mid-1990s to become a member of the Union, for the populace arguing about restructuring the Union seemed like a remote pursuit best left to intellectuals and politicians. Furthermore, so much work and resources were needed to meet concurrently the membership requirements of both the EU and NATO that the government could not launch as massive an information campaign as would have been appropriate. Nonetheless, the dissemination of information and discussions with the public have increased substantially over the last few years, with nearly every government institution trying to prepare for the day when Latvia is a bona-fide member of the European Union.²

A key role in the shaping of Latvia’s public opinion on the EU has been played by the European Movement – Latvia (EM-L), founded on 20 May 1997 by 18 citizens of Latvia committed to Latvia’s membership of the European Union. It is a non-governmental organization not affiliated with any political party and has nothing to do with party politics. Since 21 February 1998 it has been a National Chapter of the International European Movement. The EM-L was instrumental in the organization of The Latvian National Convention on the Future of Europe which aims to inform the public about the European Convention, as well as contribute to ongoing public discussion on the European Union, and the future of Europe after the Union's enlargement. The National Convention also prepares non-binding guidelines for Latvia's delegates at the European Convention. The Steering Committee of the National Convention comprises Latvia's representatives at the European Convention, representatives of the European Movement - Latvia, the European Integration Bureau, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The first session of the Convention was held on 9 May 2002 as part of the Europe Week, which has been observed in Latvia for the fifth consecutive year. Latvia's Prime Minister Andris Berzins and the President of the European Movement - Latvia Ainars Dimants presided over the session. Three topics were addressed: Latvia's sovereignty, identity, and role in the Europe of the future Europe. The discussion brought together more than 200 delegates - people from all over Latvia representing different nationalities, professions, and interest groups. The participants, for the most part, enunciated their views and concerns about the EU

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¹ For a survey of these activities in Latvia, see Internet < <http://www.eib.lv/konvents.php>>.

² See the long list of activities by the parliament, government and other institutions and organizations, that has been compiled for the past year by the European Information Bureau in Internet < <http://www.eib.lv/>>.

and expressed support for Latvia's joining the EU. The discussions, therefore, could not be described as a debate.

The second session of the National Convention on the Future of Europe was held on 22 August 2002 and it dealt with the substantive issues discussed also at the European Convention in Brussels: subsidiarity and delimitation of powers; Charter of Fundamental Rights; the role of national parliaments; economic governance; foreign policy and defense; and preparations for the EU accession referendum. One of Latvia's representatives at the European Youth Convention, Debora Pavila reported about the European Youth Convention held in Brussels in July 2002. Information about the project "Youth 2002" that was carried out in Denmark was also provided. The next session of the National Convention is planned for March 2003.

The two sessions of the National Convention in 2002, as well as the discussions in the media and the statements of government officials, show a fairly widespread consensus on a number of fundamental concepts including the following:

- the European Union is a union of sovereign states rather than a federation or some new-fangled "super-state"; at the same time, some federal elements would be acceptable and welcome;
- the EU enjoys authority and speaks with one voice in the international arena;
- old and new EU members are treated equally;
- power, responsibilities and opportunities are divided fairly between the large and small member states of the EU;
- emphasis is placed on national identity, including the national language; by the same token, the EU does not have a single lingua franca.
- citizenship is accorded by the state rather than the EU;
- a region does not become a replacement for a state or a nation.

Public opinion polls reveal, however, a phenomenon in Latvia that has also been diagnosed in previous candidate states for EU membership as they come closer to actually joining the Union: with membership in sight, doubts about the wisdom of Latvia becoming an EU member have not subsided. Furthermore, in recent months the portion of Euro-sceptics among the people of Latvia is higher than among the people of other countries about to join the Union, though in the mid-1990s the overwhelming majority of Latvians were Euro-optimists. A public opinion poll reveals that in November 2002 45.9 percent of the people supported and 35.9 percent were against accession to the EU, while 18.1 percent were undecided.³ Somewhat similar thinking is evident in the assessment of the most important events of the year 2002: 24.6 percent of the respondents chose the parliamentary elections in October, 19.4 percent opted for NATO's invitation to Latvia to begin accession process to join the Alliance, while only 5 percent said EU's invitation to Latvia to join its ranks.⁴

³ Baltic News Service (BNS), 20 December 2002. For a graphic showing showing the trends since 1998 of support for Latvia's membership of the EU membership, see the reports of the European Information Bureau in Internet <<http://www.eib.lv>>.

⁴ BNS, 28 December 2002.

The government of Prime Minister Einaris Repse is clearly aware of this situation and has drawn up plans for an information campaign that is intended to present a balanced picture of the pros and cons for the different segments of the Latvian populace of the country's joining the EU so that the electorate is able to make an informed choice in the referendum in September. The Latvian government anticipates a positive outcome to the referendum and the Election Commission is addressing the issues that need to be resolved before Latvian cast their ballots in the European Parliament elections in 2004.