

# LATVIA'S TEN YEARS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: PUBLIC OPINION AND DECISION-MAKING PRACTICES

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## Introduction

This report aims to evaluate Latvia's first decade as a European Union (EU) Member State, focusing on engagement of public officials and citizens in the EU decision-making process. The report is organized in four chapters:

- A look back: Latvia's first steps in the EU – admission to the EU and Latvia's current level of integration;
- Attitudes in Latvia towards Latvia's membership in the EU – attitude towards the EU, understanding of the purpose of the EU, the costs and benefits of EU integration;
- Citizen engagement in EU decision-making: a self-assessment and optimal methods of engagement;
- Representing Latvia's national interests at the EU level: an assessment of how effectively Latvia's public officials assert Latvia's national interests.

This report is part of a larger project, evaluating the integration of new Member States<sup>1</sup> into the EU decision-making process. Two additional comparative reports have been published:

- A Baseline Study on Indicators for EU New Member States' Level of Integration and Engagement;<sup>2</sup>
- A Comparative Report on EU New Member States' Level of Integration in EU Decision-Making.<sup>3</sup>

The report on Latvia is one of six reports produced in the EU new Member States or accession countries. National reports have also been produced in Poland, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro, based on a review of literature, interviews with public officials and EU experts, two commissioned public opinion polls and citizens' focus groups.

The Latvian public opinion polls were commissioned in September 2013<sup>4</sup> and September 2014<sup>5</sup>, the citizens' focus group was conducted in early March 2014<sup>6</sup>. Latvia's report relies on interviews with approximately 20 public officials and EU experts. Footnotes reference public officials by office, not by name.

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 are referred to as "new member states".

<sup>2</sup> Kazoka, I. A Baseline Study on Indicators for EU New Member States' Level of Integration and Engagement. PASOS, October 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Kazoka, I. Comparative Report on EU New Member States' Level of Integration in EU Decision-Making. PASOS, October, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Technical information on opinion poll Nr. 1. Implementer: Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS, data set – permanent residents of Latvia, ages 18 to 74, selection – 1004 respondents, interview method – interviews in respondents homes, geographic reach – all regions of Latvia, dates – 12 September 2013 – 26 September 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Technical information on opinion poll Nr. 2. Implementer: Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS, data set – permanent residents of Latvia, ages 18 to 74, selection – 1004 respondents, interview method – interviews in respondents homes, geographic reach – all regions of Latvia, dates – 19 September 2014 – 2 October 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Citizens' focus group, conducted in March 2014, with 20 participants. Unpublished, informal report on main conclusions.

## Looking Back: Latvia's First Steps in the EU

Like most other EU Member States, which joined the European Union as a part of the "Eastern Enlargement" (2004 and 2007), Latvia's path to the European Union began shortly after break-up of the Soviet Union. The Latvian government submitted an application for membership in 1995, identifying EU accession as one of Latvia's most important foreign policy priorities.<sup>7</sup>

In order to accede to the European Union, Latvia had to prove adherence to the Copenhagen criteria: the existence of a functioning, competitive market economy, a stable democracy and institutions for the protection of human rights, capacity to implement EU legislation, support for political, economic and monetary union. In 2002 EU institutions affirmed that Latvia meets the Copenhagen criteria, and recommended the accession of Latvia to the European Union. Latvia, along with other former Soviet bloc and Mediterranean countries,<sup>8</sup> acceded to the European Union 1 May 2004.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to accession, all ten candidate countries held referenda; all referenda were positive. Results showed, that of all 10 candidate countries, the citizens of Latvia were comparatively sceptical. Although 67% supported accession to the European Union, this was a low level of support compared to other candidate countries.<sup>10</sup> For example, in Poland 94% of participants in the referendum supported accession to the EU.

<b>GDP per person in new EU Member States, compared to EU average<sup>11</sup></b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2013</b>
<i>Lithuania</i>	52%	74%
<i>Latvia</i>	47%	67%
<i>Slovakia</i>	57%	76%
<i>Romania</i>	35%	54%
<i>Poland</i>	51%	68%
<i>Estonia</i>	57%	72%
<i>Bulgaria</i>	35%	47%
<i>Malta</i>	80%	87%
<i>Hungary</i>	63%	67%
<i>Czech Republic</i>	78%	80%
<i>Cyprus</i>	91%	86%
<i>Slovenia</i>	87%	83%

Source: Eurostat<sup>12</sup>

Latvia is among those member states more closely integrated into the EU system. In 2007 Latvia joined the Schengen area, allowing Latvian residents to move unimpeded within the European Union. Joining the Schengen area was not automatic; for example, Bulgaria, Romania and Cyprus still have not joined. On 1 January 2014 Latvia adopted the euro (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Lithuania have yet to do so).

<sup>7</sup> A more detailed overview is available [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary.

<sup>9</sup> The Eastern enlargement continued in 2007 with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania.

<sup>10</sup> Shared 8 – 9th place out of 10 countries.

<sup>11</sup> GDP per person, according to purchasing power standards, including 28 EU Member States (EU28 =100), ranging from countries exhibiting the greatest growth.

<sup>12</sup> Eurostat data (accessed October 2014).

It is nearly impossible to precisely measure the impact of the EU on Latvia's development. However, upon examination of economic data, one can conclude that from 2004 to 2013 Latvia experienced significant economic progress, the second largest rate of GDP per person growth among the 12 new EU member states. GDP per person has grown from 47% in 2004 to 67% of the EU average in 2013 (calculating for all 28 current EU member states). In comparison, Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013, had a GDP per person measurement in 2004 of 58%, far ahead of Latvia, but by 2013 Croatia had reached only 61% of the EU average.

A report on Latvia's 10 years within the EU, prepared by experts from a number of think tanks and non-governmental organizations in Latvia, documents that over these years crime rates have significantly fallen, exports have risen, the share of individuals with higher education has expanded.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, other indicators, such as unemployment rates, do not exhibit a positive trend.

Compared to other EU Member States, Latvia has a high level of dissatisfaction with life and the standard of living.<sup>14</sup> Residents feel at risk for poverty, and consider hard work not to be a precondition of success. It is especially unsettling that, in comparison to all other EU Member States, Latvian residents experience the most discriminatory attitudes due to low income levels, or their occupations.

EU opinion polls suggest that Latvians are comparatively optimistic about future EU integration – on issues such as a single currency or future enlargement, they are more supportive than the average European.

**Support for closer EU integration: a comparison of Latvian opinions with opinions in other EU member states**

Issues on the future of Europe	How Latvian opinions differ from average EU opinions <sup>15</sup>
<i>Single currency and economic union</i>	High support (EU - 55%, LV – 68%)
<i>Common foreign policy</i>	Medium support (EU – 62%, LV – 71%)
<i>Future enlargement</i>	High support (EU – 37%, LV – 49%)
<i>Common defence policy</i>	Medium support (EU – 72%, LV – 81%)
<i>European federation</i>	Medium support (EU – 41%, LV – 36%)
<i>Increased decision-making at the EU level</i>	Medium support (EU – 48%, LV – 45%)
<i>Optimism about the future of the EU</i>	Medium support (EU– 56%, LV – 66%)

Source: Standard Eurobarometer<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Latvia after 10 years in the European Union – a different Latvia? Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Eurostat data (accessed October 2014).

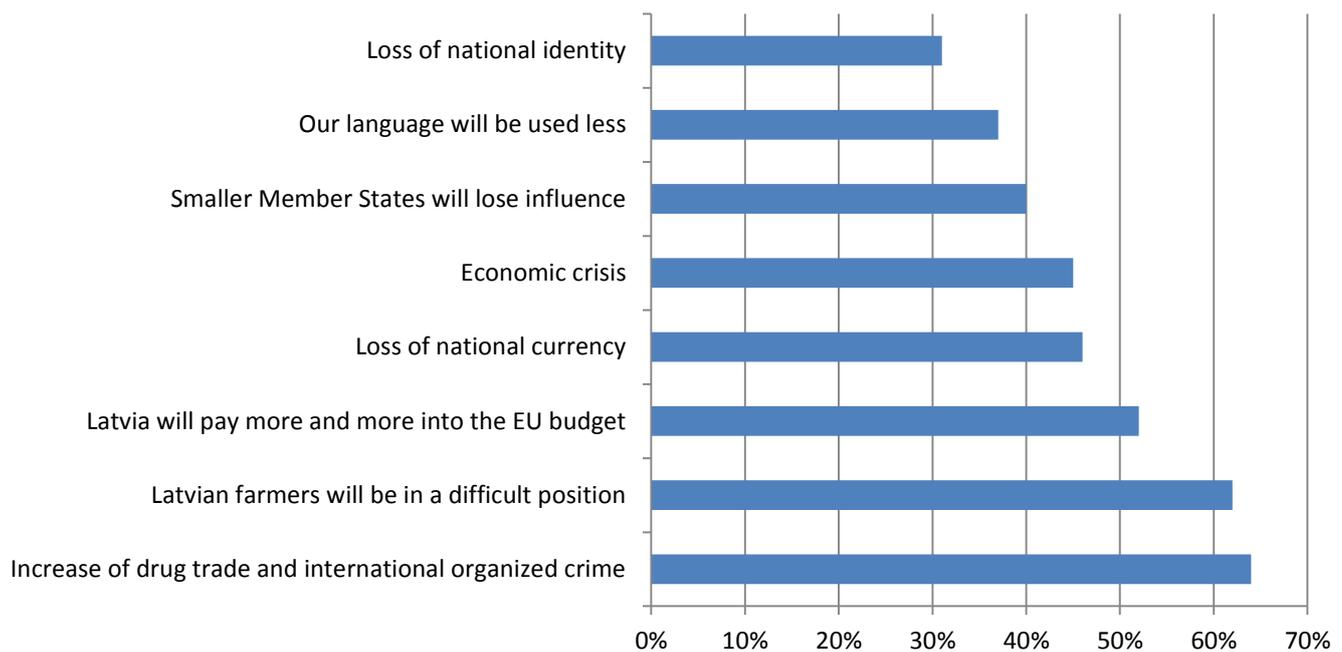
<sup>15</sup> In this report "medium support" refers to cases in which the divergence from the EU average is less than 10 percentage points. For example, if the EU average is 28%, medium support would be within the interval 18% to 38%. If the indicator is lower, it would be considered low support, if higher – high support.

<sup>16</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 81. Springwave, 2014.

## Attitudes in Latvia towards Latvia's Membership in the European Union

In 2004, Latvia's attitude towards the European Union could be characterized as cautiously optimistic.<sup>17</sup> Even though only 33% had a positive attitude towards accession to the EU, even less – 22% - exhibited a negative attitude.<sup>18</sup>

The Eurobarometer survey showed that in 2004, within the context of accession to the EU, Latvian residents were most concerned with a rising crime rate, difficulties foreseen for Latvia's farmers, and high contributions to the EU budget.<sup>19</sup>



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 81. Springwave

Currently, in comparison with other EU Member States, Latvian residents have a high opinion of the European Union.<sup>20</sup> Latvian opinions of national parties, their government, parliament and local governments are middling, but trust in the European Union is high. In comparison to other EU residents, Latvian residents are satisfied with democracy in the EU and take the view that the EU is moving in the right direction.

However, some of Latvia's residents consider accession to the EU to be a mistake. In 2014 28% of Latvian residents considered that Latvia would fare better outside the EU (57% are of the opposite opinion).<sup>21</sup> A significant proportion (33%) feels that EU integration has had more costs than benefits.<sup>22</sup> Some population groups are more optimistic about Latvia's 10 years in the European Union:

<sup>17</sup> Source: Eurobarometer 2004.1. Public Opinion in Candidate States. Interviews February – March 2004. Latvian National Report.

<sup>18</sup> Other respondents had no opinion, or they considered that accession to the EU will have neither costs nor benefits.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 81. Springwave, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

- Young people aged 18-24;
- People, who identify themselves as Latvian (as opposed to national minorities);
- Latvian citizens (as opposed to non-citizens);
- Representatives of high income groups.<sup>23</sup>

Upon closer examination of regular public opinion polls in all EU member states,<sup>24</sup> one can conclude that Latvia's inhabitants have a unique understanding of the purpose and goals of the European Union:

- Compared to the "average" EU resident, a resident of Latvia sees the EU more as a geographic description, less as a union of nations based on common values.
- Latvia's residents' attitudes towards the EU are focused on individual freedoms and consumer needs. For example, respondents from Latvia refer more often to improvements in the standard of living as one of the purposes of the EU, to freedom of movement as one of the basic values of the EU and one of the most positive results of the EU. Latvians are also very focused on the economic benefits of EU membership.
- Latvia's residents are comparatively unappreciative of the EU's significance and achievements in peace-keeping, democracy promotion and strengthening the international role of Europe. Latvia's residents are less aware of the EU's common values and role in history fostering a European sense of community.

The Eurobarometer conclusions were echoed in the March 2014 Latvian focus group, in which 20 individuals discussed Latvia's 10 years within the European Union. The participants displayed a very locally focused understanding of their place as citizens of the European Union and Latvia's role in the EU. The average Latvian thinks of the EU as an organization either cooperating or conflicting with Latvia's national interests. The average Latvian almost never considers the European Union to be a community of like-minded peers, jointly engaged in solving global problems.

The level of knowledge about EU issues in Latvia does not significantly differ from that of other EU countries.<sup>25</sup> A resident of Latvia has the same awareness of being a European citizen as residents of other EU Member States.

### **Benefits of EU Membership**

In a September 2014 opinion poll commissioned for this report<sup>26</sup> Latvian respondents were asked to name the most significant benefit of accession to the EU. Freedom of movement for travel, education,

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<sup>22</sup> Public opinion poll conducted for this report. Polling took place 19 September 2014 – 2 October 2014 (see footnote Nr. 5).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 81. Springwave, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> In accordance with Eurobarometer's regular three question measurements about the institutional system of the EU.

and work was the most often cited benefit. The second most often cited benefit was EU funding. A negligible number of respondents cited such benefits as strengthening European common values or the increased global role of the European Union.

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents naming this benefit as the most significant</b>
Freedom of movement (Schengen area, choice of jobs, education)	32.7%
EU financial support(Latvia's 15.4% for infrastructure, development, agriculture, social sector improvements)	15.4%
Security	6.8%
Common market, investments, quality of services, development	5.2%
Euro	3.0%
Freedom and opportunity	1.6%
Other	1.5%
European values, multiculturalism, democracy	1.4%
Greater Latvian confidence, prestige and influence	1.1%
Cooperation in Europe	0.8%
No benefits	15.9%
No response	14.6%

Source: SKDS opinion poll<sup>27</sup>

The focus on freedom of movement or economic gains does not mean that Latvia's residents consider the European Union to be a borderless geographic area, or a pot of gold for Latvia's development needs. In 2010 the Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS organized 12 regional debates on EU issues, where it was possible to observe that Latvia's citizens, when encouraged to contemplate all of the positives of membership in the EU, are capable of identifying and appreciating the importance of being in a common union of values with other European countries.<sup>28</sup>

The results of the public opinion poll are consistent with the March 2014 focus group, organized under the auspices of this project. Focus group participants were encouraged to list as many benefits as possible of EU integration. These benefits included:

- free movement without visas across borders,
- the right to live and work in the Member States of the EU,
- a longer guarantee period for consumer goods (consumer rights),
- a larger market,
- diploma recognition,
- more economic security and attractiveness to investors,
- student exchange programs,

<sup>26</sup> SKDS public opinion poll Nr.2. Implementer: Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS. Polling took place 19 September – 2 October 2014. Question: "What, in your opinion, is the most significant benefit for Latvia from accession to the European Union?" (see footnote Nr. 5.).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Es, Latvija un ES. Noslēguma zinojums (Debates – concluding report). Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS, 2012.

- human rights guarantees,
- European funds for energy efficiency (insulation) and other,
- improved capacity to stand up to big corporate cartels (for example, Microsoft),
- common banking regulations,
- pre-accession (2004) reforms, to create strong public institutions.

## Costs of EU Membership

A comparatively large percentage of Latvia's inhabitants (22%-35%) believe that Latvia's integration into the EU has brought more costs than benefits. However, these are not majority views.

The effects of EU integration on:	More benefits	Equal costs and benefits	More costs	Hard to say
Latvia, overall	18%	40.8%	32.5%	8.6%
Democracy in Latvia	21%	35.4%	29.7%	13.9%
Quality of life in Latvia	21.3%	35.3%	34.3%	9.1%
Quality of public services in Latvia	27.6%	35.4%	22.1%	14.8%
Latvia's international role	38%	29.3%	19.6%	13.1%

Source: SKDS public opinion poll <sup>29</sup>

In September 2014, Latvia's residents were asked to name the most significant cost of Latvia's accession to the EU. A large proportion of residents are concerned about the adoption of the euro, the challenges of competition in a single EU market, and a loss of independence in decision-making.

Cost	Percentage of respondents naming this cost as most significant
Loss of Lat with adoption of Euro	19.3%
Competition (manufacturing companies cannot compete, limits of quotas, bankruptcies)	16.9%
Independence in decision-making (sovereignty, independence)	16.9%
Economic crisis, unemployment, drop in standard of living, inflation	11.2%
Emigration	6.4%
Other	4.2%
Higher standards (for manufacturers, legislation)	2.4%
Identity, authenticity, values	1.5%
Immigrants	0.8%
Payments into the EU budget	0.5%
Quality of products	0.5%
No costs	5.5%
No answer	13.8%

<sup>29</sup> SKDS public opinion poll Nr.2. Implementer: Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS. Polling took place 19 September – 2 October 2014. Question: "What, in your opinion, is the most significant benefit for Latvia of accession to the European Union?" (see footnote Nr. 5.).

A more detailed view of the costs of EU accession as seen by Latvia’s residents is available from the concluding report of 12 regional debates on EU issues in Latvia, conducted by the Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS in 2010.<sup>30</sup>

## Citizen Engagement in EU Decision-Making

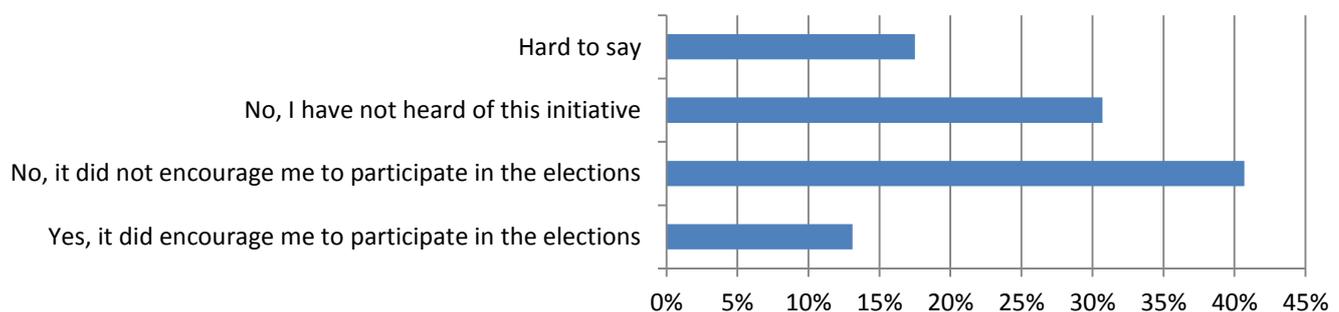
Only 19% of Latvia’s residents believe that they can influence EU decision-making.<sup>31</sup> That is the lowest percentage (alongside Italy) in the European Union. On average 42% of EU citizens believe that their voice is heard. Latvia’s percentage is critically low, even in comparison to only the new EU Member States, where citizens feel on the whole less engaged with EU decision-making than citizens of older Member States.<sup>32</sup>

## Elections

Latvia’s inhabitants rarely try to influence EU decision-making. One indicator of this is the level of participation in elections. For example, in May 2014 only 30% of Latvian citizens participated in the European Parliament elections. An even lower rate of participation was observed in five other new Member States: Slovakia (13%), Czech Republic (18%), Poland (24%), Slovenia (25%), Hungary (29%).

Participation rates were not improved by the new European party campaigns, which announced candidates for the President of the European Commission. However, 13% of Latvia’s citizens acknowledged that they had noticed this campaign, and it was one of the factors in their decision to participate in the elections.

***Did the timely announcement of candidates for the President of the European Commission contribute to your decision to participate in the European Parliament elections?<sup>33</sup>***



Source: SKDS public opinion poll <sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Es, Latvija un ES. Noslēguma ziņojums* (Debates – concluding report). Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> *Standard Eurobarometer 81. Springwave* (2014) Question: Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. “My voice counts in the EU”.

<sup>32</sup> Kazoka, I. *A Baseline Study on Indicators for EU New Member States’ Level of Integration and Engagement*. PASOS, October 2013.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> SKDS public opinion poll Nr.2. Implementer: Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS. Polling took place 19 September – 2 October 2014 (see footnote Nr.5.).

## European Citizens' Initiative

One million European Union citizens have the right to submit to the European Commission a European Citizens' Initiative – a description of a legislative idea – and receive a substantive response. In 2014 the European Commission received a number of such initiatives. Unfortunately, Latvian citizens rarely engage in this process. According to a public opinion poll conducted in 2013:

- 3% of respondents indicated that they have signed such an initiative,<sup>35</sup>
- 14% indicated that they have heard of such initiatives (a similar percentage as in Poland, Bulgaria, Czech Republic),
- 23% expressed their desire to sign a European Citizens' Initiative.<sup>36</sup>

## Other Forms of Participation in EU Decision-Making

In order to identify the most appropriate forms of participation in EU decision-making, in October of 2014, an opinion poll included the following question:<sup>37</sup> „If you needed to influence a decision at the European Union level, which of these methods would you choose?”

I would choose to communicate with the Latvian Parliament (Saeima) or government at the moment, when they are taking decisions on Latvia's position in the EU on my issue of concern	9.1%
I would choose to communicate with the Latvian members of the European Parliament	16.0%
I would participate in public consultations organized by European institutions, for example the European Commission or European Parliament.	8.7%
I, together with likeminded individuals in other countries, would choose to sign a petition to European Union decision-makers (European Citizens' Initiative)	13.8%
I would choose another form of influence	6.6%
I would not choose any of these forms, because I do not want to participate in EU decision-making.	32.5%
Hard to say/ No answer	21.8%

Source: SKDS public opinion poll <sup>38</sup>

There is no single participation method that Latvian residents consider the most desirable or most effective. There is comparatively high support for methods that do not require institutional knowledge, for example placing a call to a Latvian Member of the European Parliament, or signing a petition. It is concerning to see such a high percentage of Latvian residents having no desire to participate in EU decision-making. It must be noted, however, that the same levels can be observed in Bulgaria and Poland.

<sup>35</sup> This result is considered to be too high, i.e. not reflecting reality. In all likelihood, respondents were confusing European Citizens' Initiatives with Latvian petitions.

<sup>36</sup> SKDS public opinion poll Nr.1. Implementer: Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS. Polling took place 12-26 September 2013 (see footnote Nr. 4).

<sup>37</sup> SKDS public opinion poll Nr.2. Implementer: Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS. Polling took place 19 September – 2 October 2014 (see footnote Nr.5).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

## Representing Latvia's National Interests in the European Union

After 10 years of EU membership, can one still refer to Latvia as a “new Member State”? Interviews conducted for this report<sup>39</sup> suggest that neither Latvians nor other citizens of EU Member States consider those countries acceding to the EU in 2004 or 2007 to be “new”. Other classifications have taken precedence:

Parameters	Latvia
Small or large EU Member State?	Small Member State
Rich or poor EU Member State?	Poor Member State
Working style – pragmatic and results-oriented (Northern) or emotional and personalized (Southern)?	Interviewees adamantly placed Latvia among those countries exhibiting a decidedly Northern working style

Almost all new Member State interviewees, who had worked with EU issues during the pre-accession period, confirm that the first years in the EU have been difficult: „It has been as if entering a theatre performance during the third act. This club has rules that regulate everything, even how people converse with each other.”<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, when looking back on how their own understanding has changed over the years, interviewees focus on the huge gains made: a greater understanding of how EU institutions work; increased self-confidence and skills in defending national interests.<sup>41</sup> These skills have been honed by one's own experiences as well as by observing actions of other countries, and learning from those.<sup>42</sup>

But everything is far from ideal. In part, this is because Latvia is a small country with limited resources to pursue national interests. Equally important, however, is the fact that not all Latvian officials are adept at working at the EU level: they are reticent to express opinions, seek alliances, forge compromises. Many officials lack deeper knowledge and experience in the issue areas for which they are responsible.<sup>43</sup> Latvia suffers from the same handicaps experienced by other newer Member States – EU institutions have few high office-holders from Latvia, Latvian civil servants are not as skilled in preparing convincing arguments, Latvian officials do not have very nuanced knowledge of EU procedures and key players.<sup>44</sup> This chapter looks into detail at ten issues that present a picture of the quality of representation of Latvia's national interests at the EU level, starting with success stories and concluding with an assessment of the capabilities of Latvian civil servants, politicians and non-governmental organizations in engaging in the EU decision-making process.

<sup>39</sup> For example, interviews with a high official in the EU Council's Secretariat (on 3 October 2013); a member of the European Economic and Social Affairs Committee, who has been working with EU issues since 1990 (on 30 September 2013); a high-level official in the administration of the Economic and Social Affairs Committee (on 2 October 2013); the chairperson of the European Affairs Committee of Latvia's Parliament (on 11 August 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Interview with a high official at the Bulgarian Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels, 2 October 2013.

<sup>41</sup> For example, the interview with the chairperson of the European Affairs Committee of the Latvian Parliament, 11 August 2014, or the interview with a high official at the Latvian Local Government Association, 6 August 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, working with EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with a high official at the Latvian Local Government Association, 6 August 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with high level official in the EU Council Secretariat, 3 October 2013.

## Does Latvia have Success Stories of Influencing EU Decision-Making?

Latvia's confidence in having its national interests respected in the European Union is very low. This harsh conclusion is drawn from two public opinion polls,<sup>45</sup> conducted in 2013 and 2014 in four new Member States: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland. Among these four, Latvian respondents were least confident.<sup>46</sup>

	2013	2014
The European Union has enough respect for the interests of Latvian citizens	21%	15%
Latvian Members of the European Parliament effectively defend Latvian citizens' interests at the EU level	17%	18%
The government of Latvia effectively defends the interests of Latvian citizens at the EU level	12%	14%

Is this lack of confidence exaggerated? None of the interviewees for this report, either in Latvia or in other countries, had observed a low level of abilities in Latvia to defend national interests, as compared to other countries' abilities. In a 2009 report on new EU Member States as agenda setters, Latvia was portrayed as a middling agenda-setter – not very active, but not overly passive.<sup>47</sup>

One cannot identify a success story that can be attributed to Latvia's actions alone. However, such a success story would be improbable given the nature of the EU as a union of 28 Member States, where compromise is the prevailing *modus operandi*.

At the same time, one can identify EU decisions, where the contributions of Latvian officials have been significant. Most often interviewees cited Latvia's attempt to negotiate a better package in the EU 2014-2020 budget:

- Latvia took a leadership role in pushing for a more level playing field in agricultural subsidies<sup>48</sup> - farmers' organizations consider the work of the Latvian government, Latvia's Permanent Representation to the EU and the Latvian Members of the European Parliament to have been well managed and coordinated.<sup>49</sup>
- Latvia worked closely with the other Baltic States and produced proposals for Cohesion Funds, achieving a positive result. Despite the fact that Cohesion Funds were severely curtailed, the availability of funds to the Baltic States increased.<sup>50</sup>

Interviews highlighted other episodes, when Latvia's performance could be described as highly professional (for example, when Latvian citizens in the European Commission were "mobilized" to

<sup>45</sup> See footnotes Nr.4 and Nr.5.

<sup>46</sup> Results regarding other countries can be found at: Kazoka, I. Comparative Study on EU New Member States' Level of Integration in EU Decision-Making. PASOS, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Akule, D. Country Report: Latvia. The EU New Member States as Agenda Setters in the Enlarged European Union. European Policies Initiative. Open Society Institute – Sofia, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, who has been working with EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with the Board Chair of a Latvian agricultural organization, who as worked on EU issues since 2002, 15 August 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with a high level official at Latvia's Permanent Representation to the EU, 2 October 2013.

support euro adoption issues), or when Latvians proved that with an investment of effort, a result can be achieved (for example, when Latvia's representative to the European Economic and Social Affairs Committee Andris Gobiņš was the initiator and main advocate for naming 2015 the Year of Development). Opposition parties in Latvia also cite as a positive example Latvia's success in ensuring that Latvia's non-citizens also have freedom of movement within the Schengen system.<sup>51</sup>

Interviews were conducted in 2013 and 2014, therefore most examples given were recent examples. Older examples include:

- a successful effort during negotiation of the first climate package, where Latvia was one of the few Member States that did not have to radically reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions,
- a successful effort in 2005 and 2006 to put energy security on the EU agenda (this has led to a recent success of 450 million euro investments into securing energy independence in the Baltic States),
- the sitting of the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC) offices in Riga.<sup>52</sup>

Interviewees repeatedly cited Latvia's efforts to focus awareness on Latvia's history, including symbolic activities, for example, having one of the main hallways in the European Parliament named after the Baltic Way.<sup>53</sup>

### **Does Latvia have a Strategic Approach to Defending National Interests in the European Union?**

Interviewees identified the most significant problem for Latvia in defending national interests at the EU level as a lack of definition of Latvia's strategic interests in the European Union.<sup>54</sup>

Latvia has not adopted any strategic document that would clarify Latvia's medium or long term aspirations within the European Union, or provide a vision on the future of the European Union itself. In 2006 the Foreign Ministry produced an informative report: "Latvia's Membership in the European Union – Basic Principles, Goals, Priorities and Activities 2007 – 2013", but the time frame covered by this report has expired.<sup>55</sup> The content of this six year plan focused more on actions needed at the national level,<sup>56</sup> not on creating a strategic approach to the future of the European Union or EU policies. A lack of

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with an opposition party parliamentarian, a long-serving member of the European Affairs Committee in the Latvian Parliament, 15 August 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, who has been working with EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a high level official at the European Parliament, who has been working since 2003, 16 August 2014; interview with a Latvian journalist specializing in EU issues, 7 August 2014.

<sup>54</sup> For example, an interview with the head of a Latvian non-governmental association, that works with EU issues, on 31 July 2014; an interview with the Board Chair of a Latvian agricultural association, that has been working with EU issues since 2002, on 15 August 2014; a [comment](#) by a representative of a social partner organization during a public discussion on evidence-based policy-making in EU issues.

<sup>55</sup> „Latvia's Participation in the European Union – Basic Principles, Goals, Priorities and Activities 2007-2013”

<sup>56</sup> For example, demographic issues must be addressed, youth policy formulated, EU good practices in better regulation need to be applied nationally, improved efficiency in the use of EU financial instruments is needed, consumer protections need to be strengthened.

clarity about Latvia's views on the future of the EU hampers Latvia's ability to formulate its positions on EU issues in a timely and substantively sound manner.

Some concrete actions outlined in this report are aimed at the EU level.<sup>57</sup> The Foreign Ministry should assess Latvia's performance against the goals and actions outlined in this report and delineate a new strategy which focuses particularly on development of national positions and actions at the EU level.

Lack of a clear strategic vision hampers Latvia's ability to defend its national interests, to develop strong arguments, to coordinate representation, to initiate instead of react to policy proposals proposed by others at the EU level.<sup>58</sup> As a result Latvia exhibits the same behaviours as other small EU Member States, attempting to provide a superficial reaction to everything coming from Brussels, instead of focusing in depth on priority issues.<sup>59</sup>

Lack of clarity on strategic goals is one reason why Latvia finds it difficult to formulate positions in the early stages of decision-making. This difficulty exists not only regarding new issues, but also on those issues in which the Latvian government and parliament have already had a lengthy engagement.<sup>60</sup> The lack of strategic clarity is compensated by an ad hoc scramble to declare priorities (each ministry carries the responsibility for their issue areas, and defines interests within those areas). This approach can backfire even within the confines of a single ministry, especially given the fact that internal communications within ministries are often poor, resulting in civil servants at the expert level remaining unaware of priorities set by high level ministry officials.<sup>61</sup>

The lack of clarity on strategic issues is not confined to the EU level, but extends to the relationship between the EU level and national planning, especially Latvia's National Development Plan.<sup>62</sup>

The lack of strategic clarity makes it impossible to evaluate why Latvia is one of the Member States that almost always votes with the majority at EU Council meetings.<sup>63</sup> Two interpretations are possible: either Latvia's national interests are well integrated with EU policies or Latvia's interests are poorly defined, and therefore extremely elastic.

### **How Well do Latvian Officials Defend Latvia's National Interests at the European Union Level?**

Over the past 10 years, great strides have been observed in the knowledge and skills of Latvian public officials in influencing EU decisions. This observation was made by practically every EU expert

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<sup>57</sup> For example: „Latvia as an EU Member State will continue to steadfastly oppose the harmonization of the corporate tax base, because this would reduce the competitiveness of Latvia's enterprises and complicate the application of tax law.”

<sup>58</sup> Interview with the Board chair of a Latvian agricultural organization, working with EU issues since 2002, 15 August 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with a high official at Latvia's Permanent Representation to the EU, 2 October 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Comment made by a member of an opposition party in a public discussion on evidence-based policy-making in EU issues.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with an official at the Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre, working with EU issues, 19 August 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Comment made by a member of a social partner organization in a public discussion on evidence-based policy-making in EU issues.

<sup>63</sup> It must be noted, that Latvia does not differ from most other EU Member States. Voting in the Council is very rare. See Kazoka, I. A Baseline Study on Indicators for EU New Member States' Level of Integration and Engagement (PASOS, October 2013), p. 6, and Kazoka, I. Comparative on EU New Member States' Level of Integration in EU Decision-Making (PASOS, October 2014).

interviewed. Observations included the following new skills, which were more prevalent today than in 2004:

- an understanding of the factors, which determine an effective representation of Latvia's national interests at the EU level – for example, identification of key public officials, understanding of the most appropriate channels of influence, the ability to “summon the courage to pick up the phone and make a call”;<sup>64</sup>
- the ability to successfully influence a decision before it has become an official EU legislative initiative – usually via timely communication with responsible EU officials;<sup>65</sup>
- taking advantage of informal networking opportunities (for example, informal chats, dinners) to ascertain if key EU officials truly understand Latvia's position on a particular issue;<sup>66</sup>
- moving from a reactive mode (in relation to policy proposals from other EU Member States or the European Commission) to a proactive mode of offering one's own competing proposals. This tactical change has brought better results.<sup>67</sup>

Interviewees noted one example of best practice by Latvian officials. In the negotiations about the EU multi-annual budget, Latvia exhibited a high level of coordination, a specific lobbying plan (with concrete activities and deadlines), excellent cooperation between public officials (for example, ministries, members of parliament, members of the European Parliament, officials in the Permanent Representation to the EU) and agricultural nongovernmental organizations.<sup>68</sup>

In other areas there is room for improvement:

- Latvian national positions are agreed upon rather late in the game, when the EU has already prepared a draft proposal, in spite of the fact that the idea may have already been discussed at an EU level for years;<sup>69</sup>
- Currently there is little experience with ensuring timely cooperation with those members of the European Parliament not elected from Latvia. One hopes for progress in this area in the context of Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which will require much closer contacts between representatives of the Presidency and the European Parliament committees and political groupings;<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Board Chair of a Latvian agricultural organization, working with EU issues since 2002, 15 August 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with the Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Latvian Parliament, 11 August 2014; Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, who has been working on EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with the Chair of the European Affairs Committee of Parliament, 11 August 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, who has worked on EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, who has worked on EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014; interview with the director of an NGO working on EU issues, 31 July 2014; interview with the Board Chair of a farmers' NGO, that has been working with EU issues since 2002, 15 August 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with a public official of an EU Commissioner's staff, 22 August 2014; opinion voiced by a consultant to the European Affairs Committee of Parliament during a public discussion on evidence-based policy making in EU issues.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with the Chairperson of the European Affairs Committee of Parliament, 11 August 2014; interview with a Foreign Ministry official, who has worked with EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

- Public officials responsible for defending Latvia’s national interests at the EU level still possess only fragmentary knowledge of the nuances of the decision-making process.<sup>71</sup> Significant improvements are also expected as a result of Latvia’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union;
- Only rarely can one observe the implementation of a strategy for defending Latvia’s interests. Powerful lobbying of Latvia’s interests is still the exception, rather than the rule.<sup>72</sup>

Latvia is not the only country with these issues, as shown in the reports on Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Poland prepared under the auspices of this project. All new Member States have experienced these difficulties, especially those, who have not yet taken a turn at the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. It would be beneficial to deal with these problems directly, instead of simply excusing them as inevitable for “small and poor” Member States. The EU institutional structure is very favourable to small countries – if they are active enough, then their voices (for example, in working groups and meetings) can be clearly heard in Brussels institutions.<sup>73</sup>

### **How Effective are Arguments made in Defence of Latvia’s National Interests?**

The capacity of the national civil service determines the strength of arguments made by an EU Member State on behalf of its national interests at the EU level. New, small, comparatively poor Member States find it difficult to compete with some of the best civil services in Europe (for example, Germany, Great Britain, France, Belgium), who also have many more years of experience in EU issues, including a robust institutional memory about past EU debates and decisions on every significant issue.

New Member States can reap benefits from the work of these high capacity European civil servants by simply stepping onto the bandwagon, if national interests coincide.<sup>74</sup> Problems arise, however, when a Member State has very specific interests, and must negotiate for itself at the EU level.

Latvia has not suffered much from this lack of capacity. If Latvia’s national interests are clearly delineated and important, then the necessary information is collected, albeit slowly, and the national positions are well developed and reasoned.<sup>75</sup> This is the case for high priority issues. Interviews show, however, that on a day to day working level, many improvements are needed:

- Latvia’s national positions are comparatively weakly reasoned and make a poor use of facts and analysis. At times, it is even difficult to ascertain the ministry’s position from the text.<sup>76</sup> This is a

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<sup>71</sup> Opinion voiced by a consultant to the European Affairs Committee of Parliament during a public discussion on evidence-based policy making in EU issues.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with a high- level official at the European Parliament, who has been working in the EP since 2003, 16 August 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Quotas that dictate distribution of offices, and opportunities to voice opinions, etc. Interview with a member of the European Economic and Social Affairs Committee, who has been working on EU issues since 1982. 30 September 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with a high level official at the Polish Permanent Representation to the EU, 4 October 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Opinion offered by the head of Latvia’s Permanent Representation to the EU during a public discussion on evidence based policy-making on EU issues.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with a representative of the office of an EU Commissioner, 22 August 2014.

particularly daunting problem in cases, where Latvia must prove that there has been a mistake in calculations made by other countries.<sup>77</sup> Not all ministries suffer from this capacity issue. But these “problem” ministries are the same ones, who exhibit difficulties in developing national positions.<sup>78</sup> At the same time individual ministries are characterized as “centres of excellence” – they have an effective internal structure, precisely defined priorities, competent management.<sup>79</sup> The Ministries of Environment, Agriculture and Transport are among those with the best developed resources and competence to prepare highly professional national positions on EU issues.<sup>80</sup>

- In order for a position to be convincing, the reasoning must include a formulation of why it is in Europe’s interests – not simply in Latvia’s national interests. It must be grounded in principles of importance for all Europeans.<sup>81</sup> Not many Latvian ministries are capable of offering these types of arguments.
- Latvia does not have many experts not only capable of reacting to proposals put forth by others, but capable of formulating one’s own compromise proposals. These capabilities are expected to increase as a result of Latvia’s Presidency.<sup>82</sup>

Has the quality of Latvia’s national positions improved in recent years? Unfortunately, there have been no comprehensive quality assessments. Only individual opinions, based on individual experiences, are available. Two opinions, representative of the polarity of views, were voiced during a public discussion organized by PROVIDUS in February 2014:

*„My 11 years of experience tells me that national positions are becoming more straightforward and easier to understand. It used to be difficult to even discern Latvia’s overall position from these documents. Now we have clarity in the first sentence: do we agree or not? High priority positions are well-reasoned. But does this reasoning rely on intuition or evidence? That depends on the civil servant and the issue. Some issues have available research, NGO expertise. Others do not. In this case, the civil servant often relies on the documented experiences of other countries, for example, if we know that a similar reform failed in some other country.”<sup>83</sup>*

*„I do not agree that Latvia’s national positions have improved much since 2008. I think they have gotten worse, they are more general, and they do not give a clear understanding of where we have drawn our red lines, and where there is room to manoeuvre. But there is a problem in the process itself: we focus on reacting to proposals that have already been prepared, and we do that at the last minute, at a time when the responsible civil servant can tear him or herself away from everyday tasks.”<sup>84</sup>*

<sup>77</sup> Interview with a representative of management of the Latvian Local Government Association, 6 August 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Opinion voiced by the head of Latvia’s Permanent Representation to the EU during a public discussion on evidence-based policy –making on EU issues.

<sup>79</sup> Japiņa, Guna. “Coordination of EU issues in Latvia - looking ahead to the Latvian Presidency in 2015.” (in Latvian). *Latvijas intereses Eiropas Savienībā*. Issue 1, 2012, p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> Opinion voiced by a representative of the State Chancellery during a public discussion on evidence-based policy-making on EU issues.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, who has worked on EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with a high level official at the Latvian Permanent Representation to the EU, 2 October 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Opinion offered by a representative of the State Chancellery during a public discussion on evidence based policy-making on EU issues.

In 2013 – 2014 PROVIDUS prepared an assessment of NGO engagement in developing national positions on EU issues.<sup>85</sup> This assessment concluded that the legal framework guarantees a broad right of participation, however in reality deadlines are so tight that very few organizations are able to participate, preventing Latvia from fully benefiting from expertise outside of government in the preparation of the national positions.

Expectations of improved capacity in preparing well-reasoned arguments lie with those civil servants that will be involved in Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the EU.<sup>86</sup> During the first half of 2015 they will have to coordinate the work of colleagues in 27 countries, search for and propose compromise positions on the issues before the European Parliament and European Commission. At the conclusion of the Presidency, it is expected that an increased number of civil servants will be better able to formulate Latvia's national interests and compromise proposals in a way that would lead to acceptance by other Member States.

The Presidency attests to the maturity of the new EU Member State. It improves understanding within the civil service of how the EU functions, as evidenced by the experiences of other new Member States (for example, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary). After completing their first Presidency, Member States become much more professional defenders of their national interests – they exhibit a surge in competence. Unfortunately, this Presidency effect subsides over time, with personnel turnover in the civil service.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, it is key to make plans even before the Presidency, on how to use this increased capacity post-Presidency to consolidate long-term capacity in defending Latvia's national interests in the EU.

### **How Effectively Does Latvia Coordinate the Defence of National Interests in the EU?**

Coordination in representing one's national interests is the key to success at the EU level. One must be adept at establishing coalitions of the like-minded, and then engage in targeted lobbying, utilizing all available resources. One can move forward in the EU without strong, evidence based proposals, if one can rely on the capacity and preparedness of one of the other 27 Member States, and interests are aligned. However, in this scenario, a lack of capacity to create and use networks and coalitions will lead to marginalization.<sup>88</sup>

Latvia's experience lobbying for a more favourable package in the 2014 – 2020 budget illustrates how crucial effective coordination can be. The Latvian Foreign Ministry created an ad hoc informal

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<sup>84</sup> Opinion offered by an advisor to the EU Affairs Committee of Parliament during a public discussion on evidence based policy-making on EU issues.

<sup>85</sup> Opportunities for the Organized Civil Society to influence EU Decision-Making via National Positions. Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS, 2014.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with a high official in the EU Council Secretariat, 3 October 2013; Interview with a high official in Latvia's Permanent Representation to the EU, 2 October 2013; Interview with the head of an NGO, that works with EU issues, 31 July 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with a high official in the EU Council Secretariat, 3 October 2013.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with a high level official at the Polish Permanent Representation to the EU, 4 October 2013.

mechanism (a task force) to develop an EU lobbying plan and divide up responsibilities. Similar mechanisms have been created for other high priority issues – such as lobbying for the euro and the European Semester process.<sup>89</sup>

But these mechanisms focus on particular issues. Can the system created to coordinate the defence of Latvia's national interests at the EU level be considered optimal? Coordination mechanisms for EU issues in other EU Member States differ; every state decides its own appropriate mechanism.<sup>90</sup> EU expert Ivo Rollis characterizes Latvian EU policy formulation as decentralized (first responses to new EU initiatives come from the ministries), reactive and coordinated by the Latvian Foreign Ministry.<sup>91</sup>

Interviews highlighted six factors leading to the conclusion that the coordination system in Latvia should be strengthened, or, possibly, reformed:

*1. The current coordination system does not have a "centre", where all Latvia's EU knowledge could flow together, and where a strategic, cross-sectoral view could emerge of Latvia's interests at the EU level.*

Latvia's Permanent Representation to the EU has become a *de facto* centre, and is considered by interviewees to be highly professional. However, some interviewees noted that this type of expertise needs to accumulate somewhere in Riga, at a high level of political accountability.

Several years ago, Latvia had a Senior Officials Committee on EU issues (convened by the Foreign Ministry). The Committee – consisting of deputy state secretary level representatives – accumulated EU expertise and enabled a strategic discussion of Latvia's national interests. Currently, while the Committee still exists, it is no longer attended by such high level officials. EU issues are not discussed at the regular State Secretary meetings, because EU issues are invariably placed on a fast-track procedure to the Cabinet, bypassing the State Secretary level discussions. Currently, there is no appropriate forum in which to engage in regular high level discussions on EU issues, or in which one can coordinate actions among agencies.<sup>92</sup> For example, one of the EU experts interviewed elaborated a list of factors, which would characterize an ideal defence of Latvia's national interests, noting serious deficiencies in each factor:

- A perfect professional familiarity with the internal procedures and decision-makers of the EU. The Latvian civil service overall does not exhibit this familiarity.
- The ability to see the big picture, not only in one's field, but across the board. Latvia's capacity is weak in this area vis a vis EU issues, which is why *de facto* national positions are developed with a high level of support from the Permanent Representation to the EU.

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, who has been working on EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

<sup>90</sup> The following paper provides an overview of the Czech, Polish and Latvian systems: EU Decision-Making: How NGOs can Influence Member State National Positions. Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS, 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Rollis, Ivo. The National Coordination of EU Policy in Latvia. *Latvijas intereses Eiropas Savienībā 2014/2*, p.80

<sup>92</sup> Interview with an official at the Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre, who works on EU issues, 19 August 2014.

- Capability to be proactive, not just to react to events at the EU level. Latvia is often unable to offer strong, realistic and well-reasoned proposals.
- Superb diplomacy skills, when Latvia's national interests are at stake. High level officials at the ministries are not always highly skilled diplomats, and are unable to win over their colleagues in other Member States.<sup>93</sup>

## *2. Latvia cooperates little with Latvian citizens in various EU institutions.*

EU Member States differ in their success in achieving good cooperation with their citizens working in EU institutions, exchanging information on current issues. Officially, such cooperation is contrary to the goals of the EU, but in reality, even in those EU institutions charged with representing the interests of Europe as a whole, informal "clubs" of citizens from particular Member States communicate with their compatriots in other institutions. Some Member States prioritize this type of networking, others do not. For example, the German and French Permanent Representations have a system in place for networking with their nationals working in EU institutions, with regular meetings.<sup>94</sup> These nationals exchange information and lend a hand when national interests must be defended.<sup>95</sup> Latvia has only just begun to pursue this type of networking. Latvia's Permanent Representation to the EU, in the context of the Presidency, has begun organizing "Friends of the Presidency" consultations, which include Latvian citizens working in other EU institutions. The Representation also communicates with those Members of the European Parliament elected from Latvia.<sup>96</sup>

## *3. Latvia has no strategy regarding EU level personnel policy.*

Another unofficial reality of the EU, which officials are loathe to discuss publicly, is the fact that in spite of the lofty goals of the EU, Member States still try to ensure that their own citizens fill the jobs at the EU. Larger Member States (for example Germany, France, Poland) include lobbying for their citizens for high level appointments as part of their strategic approach to EU issues and coordination.<sup>97</sup> In theory, Latvia should also consider this to be of national interest – to ensure that high officeholders of the EU are people thoroughly familiar with Latvia.<sup>98</sup> An initiative to compile information on potential candidates was verbalized, but never implemented.<sup>99</sup>

Publicly accessible data on employees of the European Commission indicate that, thanks to the privileged position of small Member States in the hiring practices of the EC, there is a comparatively large group of Latvian citizens that have withstood competition to gain positions, even without lobbying

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<sup>93</sup> Interview with the head of an NGO that works with EU issues, 31 July 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with a high level official at the European Parliament, who has been working at the EP since 2003, 16 August 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with an official in the Office of an EU Commissioner, 22 August 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with an advisor to the European Parliament Group of the Greens, 1 October 2013.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with a high level official at Poland's Permanent Representation to the EU, 4 October 2013.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with a high level official at the European Parliament, who has worked at the EP since 2003, 16 August, 2013.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with an official at the Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre, working with EU issues, 19 August 2014.

efforts by the government of Latvia.<sup>100</sup> It is possible, however, that there could have been more individuals, in more important positions, aligning with Latvia's priorities, if only Latvia had targeted its efforts towards such a goal.<sup>101</sup>

#### *4. There is a lack of confidence in the appropriateness of a decentralized EU issues coordination system in Latvia.*

The EU coordination system in Latvia places a great strain on ministries, provides few opportunities for quality control, and few opportunities to gain a cross-sectoral perspective. The system has a number of faults, which in Latvia's case, come into public view when:

- a ministry lacks the capacity to develop policies in issues, which are cross-sectoral by nature,<sup>102</sup>
- high officials at the ministry lack professional competence, but they undertake to represent Latvia's interests at the EU level, and no one is available to take over for them,<sup>103</sup>
- when there is an emergency situation in the EU, which requires a cross-sectoral solution, but it is unclear, who to deal with in Riga.<sup>104</sup>

#### *5. Cumbersome procedures for coordination of policy positions in Latvia*

Officials defending Latvia's interests at the EU level spend an inordinate amount of time struggling with Latvian internal bureaucracy,<sup>105</sup> due to inelastic procedures for developing, coordinating and defending national positions.

### **How Knowledgeable about EU Issues are Latvian Civil Servants?**

Almost all EU experts interviewed for this paper have noted huge gains in the level of knowledge about the EU of civil servants, and in their abilities to defend Latvia's interests. In 2004 knowledge was minimal, and one could observe "total failures".<sup>106</sup> The outlook is different today.<sup>107</sup> Latvia's civil servants are encouraged to initiate communications with the European Committee during the proposal development stages, to cultivate informal contacts with representatives of EU institutions.<sup>108</sup> An ideal

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<sup>100</sup> A per inhabitant ratio. See Kazoka, I. A Baseline Study on Indicators for EU New Member States' Level of Integration and Engagement, PASOS, 2013.

<sup>101</sup> For example, interview with the chair of the European Affairs Committee of Parliament, 11 August 2014; interview with a high level official of the Latvian Local Government Association, 6 August 2014; interview with a Latvian journalist, working with foreign affairs issues, including EU issues, 7 August 2014.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with the chair of the European Affairs Committee of Parliament, 11 August 2014.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with the head of a Latvian NGO, working with EU issues, 31 July 2014.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with an official in the Office of an European Commission Commissioner, 22 August 2014.

<sup>105</sup> Opinion voiced by the Head of Latvia's Permanent Representation to the EU in a public discussion on evidence-based policy-making on EU issues.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with the head of a Latvian NGO, working with EU issues, 31 July 2014.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with the Board Chair of a Latvian Farmers' Association, working with EU issues since 2002, 15 August 2014; interview with an opposition member of the Latvian Parliament, who has been a longstanding member of the European Affairs Committee, 15 August 2014.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, working with EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

civil servant should not only possess substantive knowledge of his issue area and follow the policy discussions at the EU level, but he needs to understand Latvia's priorities and be able to formulate proposals acceptable to other EU Member States.<sup>109</sup>

Unfortunately, during the economic crisis there was virtually no training available on EU issues. This was detrimental to the civil servants' abilities to do their jobs, and to their ability to prepare for the EU Presidency in the Council of the European Union. In order to prepare for the Presidency, formal training programs, staffed by foreign trainers, were conducted in 2013 and 2014, covering the nitty-gritty of EU decision-making, formal and informal negotiating techniques, documentation practices and other topics. Over 1000 civil servants participated. In comparison to other Member States, participation rates in Latvia were very high, possibly due to the Prime Minister's designation of these training programs as obligatory.<sup>110</sup> A survey of participants conducted by the School of Public Administration concluded that the trainings were helpful to civil servants, increasing their understanding of how the EU functions overall, not only in the context of their particular issues, and of how the different institutions of the EU interact. The government still has an acute human resource capacity problem, therefore it would be important to ensure that this type of training continues even after the Presidency has concluded.<sup>111</sup>

The Presidency could aggravate an issue that has long bedevilled the civil service in Latvia – high turnover. The Presidency will offer civil servants deep knowledge about how the EU functions, but there is a risk that the Latvian civil service will have little use for this new knowledge, and that these highly knowledgeable civil servants will leave after the conclusion of the Presidency.<sup>112</sup> Consideration should also be given to increasing opportunities for Latvian civil servants to be seconded to other civil services, to the Permanent Representation to the EU, and to EU institutions.<sup>113</sup>

### **How Knowledgeable about EU Issues are Latvian Politicians?**

The civil servants have made remarkable progress over the course of Latvia's 10 years in the European Union. Ministers and Members of Parliament are, however, a different story.<sup>114</sup>

In comparison to other countries,<sup>115</sup> the Parliament of Latvia rarely takes advantage of the possibility to warn the EU institutions about new initiatives which violate the principle of subsidiarity (i.e., that this issue should be regulated at the national level). The knowledge base on EU issues of the average Member of Parliament has not improved over time for two objective reasons:<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Interview with a high level official of the Latvian Local Government Association, 6 August 2014.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with a public official of the Latvian Presidency, responsible for civil servant training, 12 August 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Opinion voiced by an official of the State Chancellery during a public discussion on evidence based policy-making on EU issues.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with a Foreign Ministry official, who has been working with EU issues for over 10 years, 1 August 2014.

<sup>113</sup> Rollis, Ivo. The National Coordination of EU Policy in Latvia. *Latvijas intereses Eiropas Savienībā 2014/2*, p.80

<sup>114</sup> Interview with a Latvian journalist specializing in EU issues, 7 August 2014.

<sup>115</sup> See Kazoka, I. *A Baseline Study on Indicators for EU New Member States' Level of Integration and Engagement*, PASOS, 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with an opposition Member of Parliament, who is a longstanding member of the European Affairs Committee, 15 August 2014.

- European issues are dealt with by the European Affairs Committee, which means that the members of this Committee need to have detailed knowledge of all issues before the EU. It is impossible for an individual member of parliament to gain such broad knowledge, so they specialize in particular issues. The total basket of these specializations does not, however, cover all issues before the EU.<sup>117</sup> Other Members of Parliament not on the European Affairs Committee have little knowledge of EU issues. When formulating national positions, there is poor communication between the European Affairs Committee and other Parliamentary Committees.
- There is a lack of capacity in Latvia's Parliament – Members of Parliament do not have access to analytical capacity, there is no financing available for training, political parties are underfunded and cannot hire professional consultants.<sup>118</sup> The European Affairs Committee has been trying to address this issue during the 11<sup>th</sup> Saeima by hiring more consultants to follow EU level initiatives, in some cases this has resulted in quicker response times than the ministries.<sup>119</sup>

Members of Parliament from both the majority and opposition parties admit that the 11<sup>th</sup> Saeima European Affairs Committee working style has improved in efficiency and focus due to a constructive and professional Committee chairperson. For example, relationships with NGOs have improved, highly professional consultants have been retained, Members of Parliament have access to draft national positions prepared by ministries at an earlier stage of deliberations.<sup>120</sup>

### **How Effective are Members of the European Parliament Elected From Latvia?**

In an assessment of the performance of the 2009 – 2014 European Parliament, the Members of European Parliament from Latvia, in comparison to their colleagues from other Member States, exhibit poor performance across all indicators. For example, Latvia's MEPs rarely draft reports, submit proposals, pose questions, sign on to proposals. Only in measures of participation do they reach an average level.<sup>121</sup> MEPs from Latvia do not hold many offices.<sup>122</sup>

Does this indicate that MEPs from Latvia are performing poorly? According to interviews done for this report, such a conclusion would be premature. MEPs performance would be better measured during the next period (2014 – 2018) for a number of reasons:

- In order for an MEP to prove his ability to take responsibility for important reports, and be able to compete with his colleagues, a certain amount of time must pass. Just as other MEPs from

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<sup>117</sup> Interview with an opposition Member of Parliament, who was a member of the European Affairs Committee in the 10th and 11th Saeima, 27 August 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with a high level official at the Latvian Local Government Association, 6 August 2014.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with the Chair of the European Affairs Committee, 11 August 2014.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with an opposition member of Parliament, who was on the European Affairs Committee of the 10th and 11th Saeima, 27 August 2014.

<sup>121</sup> Statistics from: End of term scorecard: the activity records of MEPs analysed by Member State. VoteWatch Europe special policy brief 2/2014.

<sup>122</sup> See Kazoka, I. A Baseline Study on Indicators for EU New Member States' Level of Integration and Engagement, PASOS, 2013.

new Member States, Latvian MEPs are gradually gaining ground and building a reputation at the European Parliament.<sup>123</sup>

- Time has also been a factor for Latvian MEPs in reorienting their working style from that appropriate to the Latvian political scene, to one appropriate for the European Parliament. Working at the EU level does not mean taking strong positions and freezing out the opposition; it means searching for compromises among multi-faceted interests and building broad coalitions. Initially, performance was hampered by a lack of experience, low networking skills, and a polarizing working style.<sup>124</sup>

MEPs from Latvia have learned the importance of networking, seeking support and coordinating actions. They are now able to gain support through their networks in political groupings or informal MEP groups (for example, an informal group of MEPs from the Baltic Sea region); they have raised their profile as experts in particular issue areas.<sup>125</sup> According to one MEP: “The only way is to build your authority and garner respect in one, at most two issue areas, because more is simply not possible. When you have built up your reputation and a network of experts and lobbyists, you can concentrate on those issues, where you can make a case for Latvia’s interests. And if these interests do not clash with German, French or other large Member States’ interests, then you can succeed.”<sup>126</sup>

### **How Influential are Latvia’s Private Sector Lobbyists?**

Latvia has an average number of lobbyists (number per inhabitant) registered in the European Parliament Register of Lobbyists. In absolute numbers, however, this means only 13 lobbyists in 2013.<sup>127</sup> In comparison, lobbyists from large Member States number in the hundreds (for example, Great Britain – 599, Germany 715). This is an issue for all new Member States (except Poland). Two of the advisors to the European Parliament political groups interviewed for this report had never met a lobbyist from a new Member State.

EU experts interviewed for this report were of divided opinions about whether or not the defence of Latvia’s interests suffers due to a lack of Latvian lobbyists in Brussels. But all agree that small countries cannot hope to have a large lobbying presence in Brussels due to a lack of resources and due to the fact that few large European level industries are headquartered in the new Member States. These industry leaders are the ones that employ lobbyists to follow EU decision-making. Instead, Latvia should focus on the following:

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<sup>123</sup> Interview with a high official at the European Parliament, who has been working at the EP since 2003, 16 August 2014.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with an advisor to the EP Socialist political group, 1 October 2013.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with a high official at the European Parliament, who has been working at the EP since 2003, 16 August 2014.

<sup>126</sup> Ina Strazdiņa. „Getting to Results with Well-Reasoned Arguments” (in Latvian: Ar argumentiem ir jāpanāk rezultāts). Interview with MEP Roberts Zile. *Latvijas intereses Eiropas Savienībā*, 2011/2.

<sup>127</sup> See Kazoka, I. *A Baseline Study on Indicators for EU New Member States’ Level of Integration and Engagement*, PASOS, 2013.

- how can Latvia's NGOs be supported in their efforts to be influential in umbrella type NGO coalitions, which are represented in Brussels, and defend Latvia's NGO interests in these fora;<sup>128</sup>
- how to maintain close contacts with MEPs in European Parliament Committees of interest, so that one does not miss emerging issues of interest to the NGO;<sup>129</sup>
- how to more effectively engage with NGOs in the development of Latvia's national positions, and keep them engaged regarding developments at the EU level;<sup>130</sup>
- how to provide more training opportunities on how the EU functions, and how to influence EU decision-making to NGOs, including private sector industry lobbyists;<sup>131</sup>
- how to support Latvia's experts in finding secondments or employment opportunities in Brussels-based think tanks. These type of placements can help foreign journalists interpret EU issues and lobbying activities from the point of view of Latvia.<sup>132</sup>

### How Knowledgeable on EU Issues is Latvian Media?

The level of expertise in the media is the only area where EU experts interviewed for this report noted a deterioration over the past 10 years. For example, in 2003 there were 4 Latvian correspondents based in Brussels, but in 2014 – only one. This creates an enduring capacity problem because daily media coverage in Brussels is what creates a depth of knowledge for the journalist on EU affairs.<sup>133</sup> Ten years ago there were also more training opportunities for journalists on EU affairs.<sup>134</sup>

Latvia is not the only country facing media capacity issues. The inability to analyze complex EU issues, the inability to reach the audience by localizing these issues, inattention to detail, buzzwords with no explanations – these are all issues in many countries, and are often a result of severely overextended journalists.<sup>135</sup> Journalists, who are rarely assigned to cover EU issues, cannot gain a deep understanding of EU decision-making and policy discussions.<sup>136</sup> Editors don't recognize the importance of EU issues, are tempted to take the path of least resistance by not covering EU policy discussions at all, or marginalizing them negating their priority.<sup>137</sup> Civil servants, Members of Parliament, lobbyists, journalists and editors working with EU issues would all benefit from regular discussions and training on how EU decision-making works, and how Latvia can defend its interests within this framework.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Interview with a high official from the Latvian Local Government Association, 6 August 2014.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with a high level European Parliament official, working at the EP since 2003, 16 August 2014.

<sup>130</sup> See. EU Decision-Making: How NGOs can Influence Member States' National Positions. Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS, 2014.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with a high level official of the European Parliament, who has been working in the EP since 2003, 16 August 2014.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with a Latvian journalist, specializing in EU affairs, 7 August 2014.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with a high level official of the European Parliament, who has been working in the EP since 2003, 16 August 2014.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with an opposition Member of Parliament, who has been a longstanding member of the European Affairs Committee, 15 August 2014.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with a high level official of the European Parliament, who has been working in the EP since 2003, 16 August 2014.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with a Latvian journalist, working on foreign affairs, including European affairs, 7 August 2014; interview with a Latvian journalist specializing in EU affairs, 7 August 2014.

<sup>137</sup> Artjoms Konohovs. Latvia's Journalists and EU News (in Latvian: [Latvijas žurnālisti un Eiropas Savienības ziņas.](#)). Latvijas intereses Eiropas Savienībā 2013/3.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with a high level official of the European Parliament, who has worked in the EP since 2003, 16 August 2014.

The choice to report little on EU issues not only reduces opportunities for the general public to be informed about them, but it also lessens the motivation of politicians to engage in the defence of Latvia's interests at the EU level. For example, if the media and civil society does not demand accountability for EU level decisions, ministers can feel comfortable in not attending Council of the European Union meetings.<sup>139</sup> The media has not taken on board the view that EU issues are not foreign affairs, but rather issues which have a significant impact on life, opportunities and rights of the people of Latvia, and therefore should be treated as issues of equal importance to those before the Latvian parliament.

One of the interviewees made an observation of positive trends in the media – a greater interest on covering the EU multi-annual budget for 2014 – 2020 (compared with minimal interest in the 2007-2013 budget) and more professional pre-election debates during the European Parliament election campaign May 2014.<sup>140</sup>

## Conclusions

- Latvia is one of the new Member States more closely integrated into the EU. For example, not all new Member States have joined the Schengen zone, or adopted the euro.
- In comparison with other EU Member States, Latvia's inhabitants are optimistic about the closer integration of the EU, and the future of the EU. Latvia's inhabitants think highly of the EU and consider it to be developing in the right direction.
- Approximately 28 – 33% of Latvia's inhabitants are "deeply euro sceptic". They consider accession to the EU to have been a mistake, or that integration into the EU has had more costs than benefits. Latvia's young people, ethnic Latvians, Latvian citizens, as well as high-income individuals are most supportive of the EU.
- Since acceding to the EU, Latvia has had a significant rise in GDP (per person), as measured by purchasing power parity from 47% to 67% of average EU indicators. This is the second highest level of growth among 12 new Member States. For some new Member States, these indicators have not risen, but have actually fallen.
- The average Latvian views the European Union as focused on individual freedoms and consumer needs. Accordingly, Latvians consider the main achievements of the EU to be freedom of movement and the availability of resources for Latvia's development. In comparison to other EU Member State citizens, Latvia's inhabitants are less appreciative of European Union

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with the Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Latvian Parliament, 11 August 2014.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with an official at the Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre, who works with EU issues, 19 August 2014.

achievements in peace-keeping and the spread of democracy, or in strengthening the role of Europe in world affairs. Latvia's inhabitants are not focused on common EU values, or on history as a creator of a common European identity.

- Only 19% of Latvia's inhabitants believe that they can influence EU decision-making. This is the lowest percentage (along with Italy) in the European Union. Comparatively few Latvian citizens participate in European Parliament elections or sign European Citizens' Initiatives.
- Latvia's inhabitants have a low level of trust in the European Union taking their interests into account – much lower than in Bulgaria, Czech Republic or Poland. Latvia's inhabitants do not believe that the government of Latvia, or the MEPs from Latvia are successful at defending their interests.
- At the same time, however, interviewees pointed to success stories of Latvia influencing EU decision-making, and to increasing capacity of public officials to defend Latvia's interests in the EU. In contrast to the situation in 2004, Latvian officials in 2014 (both civil servants and politicians):
  - Have a better understanding of the factors leading to a successful defence of Latvia's interests at the EU level;
  - Are able to influence decisions even before they have become official European Commission legislative proposals;
  - Are more skilled at creating informal contacts, coalitions and networks useful for defending Latvia's interests.

## Recommendations

Latvia's ability to defend its interests is dependent on how quickly Latvian officials can identify which EU policy proposals impact Latvia's interests, and which EU issues are prioritized. Latvian officials also need to be skilled at influencing decision-making, and possess in depth knowledge about how the EU functions, not only at the civil servant level, but also at the political level and in the NGO community.

1. Latvia needs to take the following actions to define its strategic vision of its national interests in the EU:
  - Evaluate implementation of the 2007 – 2013 strategic document on Latvia's membership in the European Union;
  - Create a new strategy, focusing on actions to be taken at the EU level, and policy positions on the future of the European Union;
  - Link Latvia's strategy on EU issues with the national policy planning system;
  - Using the strategy, prioritize those interests, whose defence at the European level will require the most resources (time, well-reasoned arguments, staff).

2. In order to improve Latvia's defence of its national interests in the EU, the following actions should be taken:
  - Attempts should be made to impact those issues in EU policy-making of the highest importance to Latvia while they are still in the idea stages, i.e. when EU proposals are still under preparation;
  - Taking advantage of the increased capacity and contacts from the 2015 Presidency, Latvia should focus on developing cooperation with European Parliament Committees and political groups, so that proposals prepared by the European Parliament can better reflect Latvia's national interests.
  
3. In order to develop stronger arguments in defence of Latvia's national interests in the EU, the following actions should be taken:
  - Ministries should exchange best practices. Those ministries that are „centres of excellence” should help develop capacity in those ministries struggling with the preparation of national positions;
  - Latvia should conduct more civil servant trainings on how to draft Latvia's national positions so that they reflect European common interests, and can serve as a tool for gaining support of other EU Member States;
  - Latvia should conduct more civil servant trainings on how to formulate compromise proposals, utilizing Latvia's own experiences during the EU Presidency;
  - Latvia needs to find ways how to better take advantage of independent experts and the expertise of the Latvian NGO sector in the preparation of national positions. For example:
    - Invite sector specific NGOs and other experts to submit comments on particular issues;
    - Organize seminars for NGOs and other experts on how to engage in the development of national positions; publish a list of issues, for which national positions are under development;
    - Ensure that NGOs and other experts receive feedback on their participation, indicating if their comments were taken on board in the final document, and supplying the final text of the national position.
  
4. In order to improve coordination on EU affairs, Latvia should:
  - Create a forum for high level officials, where it would be possible to regularly discuss significant EU issues and ensure inter-agency coordination of efforts;
  - Focus on improving networking with those Latvian citizens working in EU institutions;
  - Consider developing a lobbying strategy for Latvian citizens seeking important EU posts;
  - Evaluate the effectiveness of the decentralized coordination system for EU issues, and make changes as appropriate.
  
5. In order to build capacity of the civil service in EU issues, Latvia should:

- Continue civil servant training on EU decision-making, negotiation and other skills, using the experiences gained during the EU Presidency.
  - Take prompt action to develop a strategy on how to retain those civil servants, who will have built significant capacity on EU issues during the Presidency;
  - Offer a broader range of opportunities for civil servants to be seconded to civil service assignments in other countries, to Latvia's Permanent Representation to the EU and to EU institutions.
6. To increase the EU competencies and skills of Latvia's ministers and parliamentarians, Latvia should:
- Offer in depth training to Ministers and Members of Parliament, as well as to civil servants;
  - Continue to build capacity of the European Affairs Committee of Parliament to react quickly and competently to EU level issues and proposals.
7. Latvia should support private sector organizations and individuals who are interested in contributing to the defence of Latvia's national interests in the EU by:
- Supporting Latvian NGOs in their efforts to gain an influential voice in international NGO coalitions (for example, provide assistance in paying membership dues);
  - Increase the engagement of NGOs in the development of Latvia's national positions, and inform them of developments on the issues at the EU level;
  - Conduct more trainings for Latvian NGOs, including private sector industry lobbyists, on how the EU works, and how to influence EU decision-making;
  - Support efforts of Latvian academics or NGO experts seeking secondments or employment opportunities in Brussels based think tanks.
8. In order to improve EU competence in the media, which would in turn create demand for EU competence among public officials, media leaders must be encouraged to develop an interest in EU affairs. Regular events – discussions and trainings – should be offered to journalists and editors on the EU decision-making process, and how Latvia's interests can be defended within this framework.