



**Attitude of Latvia's residents
towards European values
promoted by
Members of the European
Parliament**

Results of the research executed by the Latvian Marketing
and Public opinion Research Centre SKDS
by the request of the "Greens/European Free Alliance" group
in the European Parliament

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Report of the Research executed
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Main research topics:

- the relationship between the state and society
- problems of ethnic identity
- the fight against corruption
- emigration from Latvia
- climate change
- the situation with human rights

To conduct of the study the of staff SKDS was organized in October in Riga debate were split for four different focus groups: the young respondents (18-23 years) whose native language is Latvian; separately for Russian-speaking residents of the same age; for Latvian native speakers of 35-50 years; for respondents of the same age whose native language is Russian. The different professions and social status opinions were part of the representative.

The research centre staff after discussions taken more than two hours each, including studying all the materials made the following conclusions.

The crack in the relationship amid society and the state

The main topic of the discussions was the assessment of the most critical problems of the relations amid society and the state. Sociologists got concluded that residents of Riga have different points of view on these problems, and young people are more optimistic. At once, young people admitted they are not interested in and ignore the politics.

However, the majority of participants in the consultations expressed dissatisfaction and criticism of what is happening in the state. A vital problem, according to several respondents, is low wages.

The concerns of the discussion participants about taxes changes, based on the opinion of the respondents, worsening the already difficult financial situation of both entrepreneurs and employees.

The lack of professionalism and wise state Executive power were pointed by some of the respondents as evidenced by the inability for many years to sort out significant problems for the population moreover made decisions favorable for residents. One of the problematic areas is the pension system and raising the retirement age.

The growth of public debt, according to respondents, indicates an ill-conceived state policy, the inability to manage. There argued that the situation worsened by the lack of responsibility for the decisions made by officials.

Residents of Riga (young people and middle-aged) consider the most urgent problem to be the imperfection of the health care system — the lack of doctors, long queues to meet doctor, the high cost of medical services and medicines, that significantly reduces the availability of treatment.

Considering problems with the quality of education, lack of teachers, queues in kindergartens, the participants of the discussion attributed the reasons for the issues of insufficient wages and the stagnation of the education system itself.

Business activity in Latvia, according to respondents, is problematic because of the thoughtless and sometimes unfriendly legislation and of the enormous tax burden that generates increasing discontent among entrepreneurs.

Thus, the General opinion of respondents is the current situation in the country with put on hold problems, and the inability to make thoughtful decisions is associated with a lack of professionalism in public administration.

Several Russian-speaking respondents expressed resentment during the discussion: because of feeling that their interests not protected. It applies particularly to the language reform in Russian secondary schools. Some respondents pointed out that the authorities have a lack of dialogue with residents and ignoring the point of view of a part of society; the reform is too strict and hasty. According to Russian-speaking respondents, the requirements for knowledge of the state language are too high. In their opinion, without providing exceptional cases in the legislation, Latvia becomes unattractive for studying at universities or working for foreigners. Thus, the potential economic profit of the state reduces.

Youth discussion groups expressed the opinion the state is apathy and lack of development — "nothing changes for years" in contrast to other European countries, where there are enough opportunities for entertainment and education.

In General, speaking about the collaboration between the state and residents, the responses provided show the level of young people knowledge is lower than in the group of middle-aged respondents. The majority of young people do not have enough interest in political processes and what's happening in the country. They get information about current events, mostly indirectly from other people.

Most of the respondents' responses indicate that the concept of "state" is associated with power and Executive power, without associating themselves as part of the state. Some participants in the discussions took the position of passive observers, especially in youth groups.

In the opinions expressed in all discussion groups, dissatisfaction and distrust of the state authorities are evidence indicating the existence of a crack between the state and society.

The negative respondents' impression makes the distribution of unfulfilled promises to the people by political forces during the pre-election period is associated with the power struggle, and not with a real desire to work for the good of society. The researchers concluded that respondents are increasingly disappointed with the activities of politicians related to the failure to implement promises show pessimism and scepticism in the ability of residents to control the processes taking place in the state.

Summarizing the responses of respondents is clear that from the state authorities are expecting to make decisions relevant to the respondents currently, and affecting their future. Largest of the reactions mentioned problems related to health care, education, and the pension system.

So, here's what the respondents want from the government:

- tax relief for entrepreneurs and residents;
- road maintenance, speed limits to reduce the number of accidents;
- wage increase;
- improving the healthcare system, reducing waiting lists, and making medicine accessible to all residents;
- education system optimization and increase teachers' salaries;
- student support and job opportunities, higher pay;
- the improvement of parks;
- reduction of the bureaucracy;
- corruption reduce;
- resolution of employment problems, reduction of unemployment;
- determining the needs of national minorities;
- more active communication of state institutions with residents; authorities have to be interested in problematic issues, consult with people and listen to entrepreneurs.

The protection of ethnic identity

The researchers noted different views on issues of ethnic identity in various age groups. In the youth groups, it was clear that there is a lack of understanding of the term "ethnic identity". This concept even perceived by some participants of the discussion as patriotism or nationalism.

During the discussion in the Latvian youth group about the issue of ethnic identity, mentioned that nationalism can be met in Latvia. Participants expressed, in their view, that Latvians about Russians or Russian about Latvians can say "some bad words".

At the same time, generally, a moderate mood registered in both youth discussion groups at discussing issues of ethnic identity. **Young people admitted that they are proud of their ethnicity. Still, they noted that because of their identity, they do not feel that they are better than others, and do not evaluate people based on their ethnic belonging. In their opinion, the state should create equal conditions for all ethnic groups.**

By researchers, there is a tolerance of young people towards other ethnic groups. According to young people, ethnic identity can be kept with the peaceful coexistence of representatives of different ethnic groups. They believe that such coexistence not only does not threaten anyone but also even enriches individuals because of an opportunity to discover other cultures and languages.

Russian-speaking young people, as well as Latvian speakers, pointed out that the language and traditions are essential and should be nurtured and preserved. At the same time, they do not believe to lose ethnic identity since it is a fundamental part of individuality. Moreover, among young people, the prevailing point of view is that the separation of residents by nationality is outdated and typical for older generations. In general, they believe in the importance of ethnicity in society is decreasing. Young people have described themselves as open European people, considering the knowledge of languages and culture as acquisition, not a burden or a threat to their ethnic identity.

At the same time, some young people pointed out that they see a crack in society among different ethnic groups. This situation is related not only the legacy of the past but also the result of the media activities, actualizing sensitive issue to a piece of society.

In a discussion group of middle-aged people speaking Latvian, respondents emphasized their Latvian identity, which is essential for them to preserve. According to these respondents, modern globalization creates specific risks for the preservation of ethnic identity, connected to departure abroad, mixed marriages.

Latvian speaking middle-aged respondents perceive their ethnicity as an exceptional value that must be preserved and preserved. These respondents' concerns reinforced by observations that the importance of ethnic origin among young people is decreasing. For them, this is still an important issue.

According to the researchers, some of the people in the discussion group of middle-aged Russian speakers had a neutral attitude: the responses of many respondents indicate that national issues not addressed in every day's life, and people are not divided by ethnicity. In turn, other answers show that the actualization of the issue is associated with external factors that "provoke, irritate, hurt" national identity, thus causing a protest reaction, the need to preserve, protect one's ethnicity and fight for it.

Some respondents indicated different attitudes of the state on the issue of ethnicity. In their opinion, the government sorts residents by nationality, putting the interests of the titular nation as a priority.

Most of the Russian-speaking respondents do not feel that they belong to the Russian people in Russia. The study claims that Russian speaking residents of Riga feel significant differences, consider themselves Europeans, linking their future with Latvia. In their opinion, ethnicity can be preserved where you were born and live, and not only in the place of historical origin.

Corruption and attitude to it

Describing the situation with corruption in the country, respondents convinced that corruption definitely exists. **At the same time, respondents' answers indicate a low level of awareness about corruption. Observed in all discussion groups: respondents' points of view were more based on assumptions than on facts.**

Often, there were reports of abuse at the individual level, such as bribery (in the field of medicine, construction, road police, customs) and complicity in tax evasion, which also was equated to corruption by respondents. Although corruption was generally considered a reprehensible act, recognized that the part of society that is involved in such actions "accepts these conditions of the game".

According to the study, distrust of state institutions dominates among respondents, and there is a belief that corruption exists at all levels of authorities.

Some respondents were pessimistic in their outlook and forecasts for the future, pointed to the systemic character of corruption, not seeing the possibility of solutions to eliminate corruption.

During the discussion, noted that corruption is a problem not only of the existing authorities but also of the entire society. Was postulated that the tolerant society attitude, reflecting the level of morality of the population, supports corruption.

According to respondents, the fight against large-scale corruption is also tricky due to insufficient legal protection of those who sound the alarm, up to the possible threat to human life and security.

Individual respondents in youth discussion groups were comparatively more optimistic in their assessments of the situation with corruption. In their view, even though corruption still exists, significant improvements have been made in many areas, such as road police and customs, due to stricter supervision and increased responsibility of the parties involved.

The activities of the Riga City Council are also clearly associated with the risks of corruption. The respondents justified this by publicly speaking information about the identified cases in the information space. According to the study, following all-new corruption scandals, respondents, in general, were disappointed and lost confidence in municipal institutions, and do not believe in the possibility of completely eradicating corruption.

Emigration from Latvia

The study notes: in general, the responses of the majority of respondents indicate that the existing desire of a part of the population to leave Latvia has decreased compared to the mass departure in previous years, but emigration will continue.

The decrease in the number of residents of Latvia who want to leave is associated with the experience of other people who already left, after visiting foreign countries, were disappointed because they faced difficulties living and working abroad.

However, in general, the desire to leave some people has not entirely disappeared, but the residents' motivation to leave Latvia has changed. Moreover, there are differences in opinions on the problem among respondents from different age groups. In youth discussion groups, the reasons for leaving Latvia often mentioned: better educational opportunities, opportunities for specialists to find well-paid jobs. In turn, the discussion groups of the middle generation most often cited the unsatisfactory welfare, low remuneration for employees, and high taxes. One of the middle-aged respondents categorically stated that the flow of people leaving Latvia would not decrease because people do not see any prospects here.

Some respondents feel uneasy. They are concerned, in particular, about the situation with Covid-19, which may affect employment opportunities in Latvia, and therefore actualizes the issue of departure. In addition, the point of leaving is still relevant for people living in small towns and villages, where limited employment opportunities encourage them to go abroad to seek their fortune.

Why do residents leave and not stay here to change the situation in Latvia? The study states that respondents do not believe that individuals can influence political decisions.

Climate change

The answers of respondents in all discussion groups were similar: they noticed changes in the climate. Most frequently, the observed changes in temperature in winter time — the lack of snow in recent years.

According to the researchers, there were no convincing statements about the causes of climate change in the discussion groups. According to the majority of respondents, human activity is not a determining factor in climate change, because natural processes inevitably occur, which cyclically observed throughout the history of the Earth's existence.

Panelists recognized that engaging society in problem-solving is vital for protecting nature, i.e. for choosing solutions that affect the environment and for changing their behavior (for example, introducing waste sorting, more frequent walking, and packaging choices). However, respondents do not believe that changing the habits of individuals can stop climate change, because, in their opinion, the more significant impact on the climate has the increasing volume of industrial production in the world.

Speaking about whether residents and the state should do something to reduce or stop climate change, respondents were pessimistic in their opinions, because they did not see a solution to prevent such global problems. In their view, people's hunger for comfort would not decrease, but only increase, which will further affect the climate.

Moreover, the respondents themselves admitted that they are not ready to give up comfort in everyday life, which has become part of the usual way of life. At the same time, the respondents' answers indicate that in everyday life they think little about environmental and climate issues, are poorly informed about personal opportunities to reduce the negative impact on the environment and see the role of the individual mainly in sorting waste.

Human rights

During the discussions, respondents requested to express their opinion on the country's respect for EU values such as human dignity, human freedom, human rights, democracy, equality, minority rights and respect for the law. Analyzing the replies of respondents, it turned out, the researchers note, that some of the respondents, especially young people, do not understand the meaning of these concepts. The conclusions of several respondents are based mainly on their own experience or the experience of others. Some of the participants in the discussion found it challenging to express their opinion because, in everyday life, they do not think about such questions.

Respect for human dignity

After discussing in discussion groups how much human dignity respected in the country, the researchers concluded that there was no unity in the opinions of the respondents. Several people pointed out the lack of respect for a person in society. They drew attention that respect of one person to another determined by an upbringing in the family and the influence of others.

Young people mostly associated the term "human dignity and respect" with the attitude of society towards each other at the individual level. In their opinion, respect for human dignity in society depends on financial security and status. In this way, wealthier individuals receive more respect, as opposed to the low-income and lower-status ones, which creates inequality and a split in society.

The lack of respect for a person among young people is more associated with casual situations, with the lack of manners of people, the lack of basic politeness to each other. In the middle-generation groups, respect for human dignity more valued at the level of the individual's relationship with the state and its institutions.

Respect for human freedoms

Young and middle-aged Latvians were comparatively more positive in their assessments of whether human freedoms respected in Latvia. In their opinion, human freedoms respected in the state, and they characterize themselves as free citizens. By freedoms, they mean the ability to express their views, the right to free movement, freedom of religion, and so on.

Respondents whose home spoken language is Russian respect for human freedoms in the state find out relatively optimistic. At the same time, was noted there are some cases when people's rights are still restricted.

Respect for human rights

When it came to respect for human rights, as stated in the SKDS study, the difference in opinions of Riga residents manifested depending on the language used in their families. Respondents whose spoken language in the family is Latvian generally admitted they have not experienced human rights violations themselves and do not think about this problem in their everyday lives. In their opinion, less socially protected groups of society are subject to human rights violations. In other words, respondents believe that low pensions, low wages, and small benefits limit the right to a decent life.

During the discussions, it was also clear that most young people do not understand the meaning of the term "human rights" at all.

The SKDS study indicates, respondents who have Russian as the spoken language in their families, face human rights violations due to the school reform. Reform deprives children of the opportunity to study in their native language in secondary school, thus limiting the rights of Russian speakers.

According to the study, some respondents noted discrimination in the ban on same-sex marriage. In their opinion, this ban highlights the prejudices of society and the inability to "think outside the typical framework" while in several other countries such marriages allowed.

About democracy in the country

The authors of the study concluded that speaking about democracy in the country, the majority of respondents assessed the situation positively. Moreover, they associated the term "democracy" with the time of elections, when citizens have the opportunity to express their position voting.

Some respondents (mainly in discussion groups where the respondents' spoken language in the family is Russian) opposed this point of view. Their discontent connected, in particular, with the situation when the formation of the ruling coalition does not always correspond to the results of elections: the party that won a small percentage of the vote can get into the government, while the party that won the most votes remains in opposition. Thus, as voters, they feel disillusioned and also doubt the very existence of democracy in the country.

During the discussion, it was clear that some young people are poorly oriented in terms and do not understand the meaning of the word "democracy".

Respect for equal rights

Conflicting opinions expressed when discussing the issue of whether equality in the rights has observed in the country. The majority of respondents recognized that this value respected in the state. But in the course of discussions, as noted in the study, respondents pointed out, for example, gender inequality in the labour market, which manifested in the difference in wages between men and women. The problem of age discrimination in the labour market, when employers prefer younger applicants, is also relevant for the middle generation.

Researchers believe that the discussion revealed that some respondents do not understand the term "equal rights", for example, some young people associated equality in the rights with the material aspects of each individual's life. They believed that the financially better off people more equal.

Attitude to respect for the rights of minorities

During the debates, discussed whether the rights of national minorities, sexual minorities and persons with disabilities respected in Latvia.

When discussing the national minorities' rights issue, diversity of opinions identified, based on the language used in the family. While middle-generation respondents who have Latvian as the spoken language in their families believed that the state generally respects the rights of ethnic

minorities, the respondents who have Russian as their spoken language were critical in their assessments. There was dissatisfaction among such respondents, as they believe that the aspirations of Russian speakers are not listened to, and their rights are not respected (the issue of non-citizens, the reform of Russian schools).

Speaking about respect for the rights of persons with disabilities, the respondents were consistent: although this group is still socially unprotected, there are positive trends, as evidenced by the increased accessibility of the environment and the integration of people with disabilities into the labor market.

When discussing the issue of respect for the rights of sexual minorities, various opinions expressed. **Some respondents were sure that the rights of sexual minorities are respected, justifying this by the freedom to choose relationships. Others pointed to the ban on marriage, which they considered to be a discriminatory factor.**

About law-abiding population

When assessing whether residents of Latvia comply with the laws, the majority of participants in the discussions were unanimous. In general, the situation in the country considered as relatively good — most of the residents, according to respondents, are law-abiding. Violations of laws occur, but this is not a characteristic of Latvian society as a whole. Instead, these are individual cases. Most often, respondents associated violations of the law with everyday situations, such as non-compliance with traffic rules, petty theft, waste disposal in unauthorized places, and data protection violations. **In general, the respondents did not notice any significant problems in connection with compliance with the laws in the state.**