



The Latvian Dream

The seeds of freedom in a
divided society

Authors

Nelliya Ločmele has been an active voice in Latvian journalism for more than 30 years, and since 2010 editor-in-chief of the renowned weekly magazine *IR*. In the past, she has managed the publishing house *Dienas Mediji* and the website *Politika.lv*, and in the 1990s she worked as a political reporter for the leading Latvian newspaper *Diena*. Nelliya holds academic degrees in journalism, political science, and philosophy.

Valdis Zatlers was elected as President of Latvia in 2007 for one term until 2011. After completing his medical studies, Mr Zatlers became a traumatologist-orthopedist and was employed as a doctor in Chernobyl following the failure of the nuclear power plant in 1986. He then continued to be an active member of the Popular Front of Latvia and took part in the national movements of the Baltic states, which gathered people for the history-changing Baltic Way. After his presidency Mr Zatlers formed a political party and served as a deputy in the Parliament, where he chaired the National Security Committee. He frequently comments on current political developments in the national and international media.

Dr Reinhard Krumm headed the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office for the Baltic States (Riga) from 2021 to 2024. From 1991 to 1998 he worked as a journalist in Eastern Europe, as the Baltic correspondent for Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) in Riga and later serving as the Moscow correspondent of *Der Spiegel* magazine. For the FES he directed the offices in the Russian Federation (Moscow), the Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (Vienna), and the Department of Central and Eastern Europe (Berlin).

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Introduction

Do the people of Latvia have a dream? A dream for their personal life, for their country? And are they able to follow that dream? Is it the state that fulfils the citizen's dream, or are the citizens the ones responsible for making their own dreams come true? And are there different dreams among the elderly and the youth? Is there a common Latvian dream, or does each region have its own?

These are the main questions the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) wanted to ask the Latvian, but also, in two other studies, the Estonian and Lithuanian people. To find answers, the FES worked together with the Estonian polling institute Turu/Uuringute, the Latvian polling Institute SKDS and the Lithuanian polling institute Baltijos Tyrimai. Over three workshops and with the support of focus groups it was possible to draft a common questionnaire for the three Baltic states, consolidating the core questions and adding specific questions for each country.

The time for such an endeavour is right. Latvia has been a member of the EU and NATO for 20 years. Despite the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, Latvians feel secure in the knowledge that they are an integral part of both organisations. The Baltic countries no longer want to be referred to as former Soviet republics. And rightly so. More than thirty years after its second independence (the first period of independence was from 1918 to 1940), Latvia is a stable, democratic, and prosperous country.

But what is next? What are people aiming for, what is the guiding motive for the next decades? Their dream could be close to the American Dream, which came into existence only about a hundred years ago. This conjures up the good life: freedom, stability and the opportunity for everyone to move up – financially and socially. And this ideal still remains very popular around the world. If you type the words 'American' and 'dream' into Google, you get over 1 billion hits.

But that dream is also about the understanding that Americans did not inherit their nation but earned it. A new state, new citizens, new goals. This can be said to a certain extent about Latvia, as well. The citizens actively worked to make independence happen, in 1990/1991 as well as in 1918. It is a nation and people that completely set itself apart from the Russian Empire, and certainly different than the Soviet Union.

And now it is up to the Latvians themselves to create a guiding compass for their future. A dream alone is clearly not enough, but it helps. It is a vision, a description of the national character and a way to present itself abroad. These are also some of the reasons that the American Dream was born. But whereas that dream was articulated in the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s, Latvians can define their dream in an economically less critical time – despite sharing a border with a currently nightmarish neighbour, the Russian Federation.

Dr Reinhard Krumm

Director of the FES Regional Office for the Baltic States

The Latvian Dream: The known and the unknown

We tend to call people who imagine and portray the future 'dreamers', assuming that they are few in number and extraordinary; that they are different from the majority. Both national leaders and society at large often accuse their fellow citizens of not thinking about their country enough. The citizens' response to such criticism is often frustration with the politicians and public administration as a whole – this is perhaps the main reason behind the rift between those in power and the public. It is a vicious circle from which one can escape only by disrupting it. By disrupting it at a decisive moment for the entire nation, because any national threat acts as a quick and powerful unifying force. For Latvians in particular, this is a most distinguishing feature.

A great many things would change if every person in Latvia said out loud that they thought about Latvia, their Latvia, every single day. It is a truth, but one unspoken. As demonstrated by this study, 4 in 5 Latvians have dreams and goals. Yet there are no goals without dreams, which is why much comfort can be found in the fact that 3 in 4 of the respondents feel ready to fulfil their dreams themselves, and 3 in 5 have already made plans on how to do it. Such is the tremendous spiritual and productive potential within the Latvian nation.

What is the source of this imperceptible national strength? I was asked once by a politician, a foreigner, about the key to Latvia's success. I was puzzled at first, because I had never given it much thought. While I was searching for an answer, the politician provided me with theirs: "The Protestant ethic, perhaps?" The Latvian way of life, however, has far deeper roots, most accurately reflected in the trilogy "Dievs, Daba, Darbs" (God, Nature, Work) written by Anna Brigadere in the early days of the Latvian state, when Latvian wordsmiths were searching for spiritual grounds to justify the need for an independent Latvia.

Of course, not everyone in Latvia is Protestant. Today, Latvia is an ecumenical state and the Constitution ensures total religious freedom.

And yet, following the congregations of the Moravian (Herrnhuter) Brethren during the first half of the 19th century, education, responsibility, and modesty became the guiding principles of the lives of Latvian peasants. Every person is the architect of their own fortune; one must stand ready to be in competition with others; family and labour lead to success and happiness. These are values worth living for. With Catholic Latgale uniting with the Protestant Vidzeme and Kurzeme to form the Republic of Latvia, the fundamental ethical guidelines of the nation remained constant. And they remained so even with the increase in the number of Eastern Orthodox Christians under the Soviet occupation, for the Communists were mostly non-believers.

The Christian faith has been unable to eradicate the pagan roots in the Latvian consciousness. We are governed by our god (dievs), often referred to in our folk songs in the affectionate diminutive Dieviņš. We are a part of nature, watched over by the Mothers of the Earth (Zemes māte), sea (Jūras māte), and forest (Meža māte) – and we are their children. Our fate is in the hands of the goddess Laima; we are protected by Māra, the Great Mother, and Pērkons, the pagan god of thunder. These are the roots that ground us. Earth – and owning if but a tiny plot of it – is important for every Latvian. There is a powerful, vertical connection from Earth to heaven, channeled through ourselves and our work, one which not only brings us prosperity but also spiritual fulfilment. This is how each of us sends down our roots deep into the Latvian soil. God, Nature, Work – this is how the Latvian ethos is created. Latvia is one of the few countries in Europe where the summer solstice – Līgo – is a public holiday. We are a nation that is small and strong, and we've set our hearts on remaining that way forever.

Latvia is the homeland where one can be happy and lead an exciting, eventful life – such is the opinion not only of Latvians, but also of other ethnic groups living in the country. The majority of the Latvian population want their children to live in Latvia. They are rooted here. But what is it that makes Latvia so alluring to people beyond our borders?

The answer is simple. Freedom and democracy. Freedom is a feeling that can be born only within oneself, and it cannot be instilled by anyone else; and it is a feeling that works wonders. With it, a person can enjoy freedom in their private life, economic growth, and creative endeavours. It is therefore absolutely out of the question to even consider introducing any restriction on freedom of thought, speech, politics, or religion in Latvia. It is our values that make it possible to live and manage the intricate society of today's Latvia without suffering any tragic conflicts. Although about half of Latvia's population are uncertain about their future and fear the possibility of military conflict, our people feel a strong sense of belonging to Latvia and Europe. People do not shy away from holding a multi-level identity – belonging to their communities, to Latvia, to the Baltics, to the European Union. Freedom also gives the opportunity to identify as a citizen of the world with global responsibility. Identity therefore means taking responsibility for the community you belong to. While a fifth of the Latvian population feel concerned about a possible ethnic conflict due to the growing mistrust among ethnic groups after Russia's attack on Ukraine, the majority are confident that Latvia will not experience such a clash. For more than 30 years, we have been building the political nation of Latvia where each social and ethnic group is mutually influential and marked by a democratic and civic attitude towards one another. We are all united by a common goal – peace, happiness, and unity. The people of Latvia hold personal freedom and social equality in equal esteem. The perfect ideal may be unattainable, but it is thanks to its people that Latvia as a country is constantly evolving.

Healing the wounds of the 50 years of Soviet occupation will take many years. Every Latvian shares the dream of the Latvian language one day no longer being challenged as a symbol of identity and nationhood. Language is the code of life, and the Latvian language is the code of the Latvian nation, describing events and things in its own special way. It allows us to understand other people's feelings and emotions, and creates a deep-rooted sense of belonging to Latvia. Ethnic and cultural differences will persist; being part of the Latvian state and speaking its language will stand above them until the end of time.

People will always criticise their governments and external influences; it is a part of human nature that will never change. And people will always want to live in a safer and better world, yet there will always be other people with ill intentions around. As recent events have shown, there will also always be neighbouring countries with such ill intentions. Today, Latvia's membership in the EU and NATO is neither a dream nor a goal; we have already recognised the benefits of membership. Our dream and goal is to enrich the EU and

strengthen NATO in order to ensure our prosperity and security. We look forward to what the EU may become so that we may cherish it even more; we foresee the EU growing its global economic and financial influence. Yet the world is changing, and Latvia has to play its part in influencing the direction of the EU and keep Europe from getting preoccupied with its own troubles; from turning into a mere spectator of world events. It is essential for a small country such as ours to uphold its core values. If the values are neglected for the sake of the interests or arrogance of the larger countries, the existence of the smaller country is compromised. Latvia's task is to stand guard over its national and European values.

Latvia's sense of self is based on the Latvian values of nature and culture. Being Latvian means being close to nature, and our concern for nature preservation is self-evident; ours is a belief system based on tradition and a certain view of the world. The man-made environmental laws enforced in urban settings often contradict the laws of nature, whereas a Latvian would never dare think that humans are stronger than nature or in control of it. Latvians see the future as a harmonious coexistence of man and nature, each respecting the other. Legend has it that once, long ago, God was dividing the Earth among all its peoples, and Latvians had no time to claim any because they were so busy working. When they finally arrived, there was nothing left. And so with a sigh, God said: 'I did have one small plot of land saved for myself. Oh, well! If you're such hard workers, may it be yours.' We love this land and will always protect it – however the wind may blow, whatever the days may bring, and no matter what strangers may covet it. This land is ours for as long as the sun may shine.

Valdis Zatlers

President of Latvia 2007-2011

The Latvian Dream

The seeds of freedom in a divided society

Nellija Ločmele

Founder and editor-in-chief of the Latvian weekly magazine *IR*

There is a Buddhist parable about some blind men who set out to learn about elephants and each come back with a completely different story. One examined the feet, another the legs, another the elephant's side. All were convinced of the accuracy of their experience, but it was only by combining the different accounts that they could obtain an accurate picture of the whole. This applies tenfold to Latvian society, which is far more complicated than studying an elephant, even if we have the sharpest eye and use modern sociological methods.

Although the title of this survey is The Latvian Dream, in reality the country's inhabitants share no singular, common dream about Latvia's future. The younger generation has a very different outlook from previous generations; Latvians and ethnic Russians have long held opposing views on important issues; and the less well off by no means think the same as the rich. We are hardly a homogeneous group.

What does unite Latvians are human values. For 98 per cent of the respondents, for example, family is the most important aspect of life. Latvians also strongly value leisure time. An absolute majority are also convinced that achieving one's dreams is a personal responsibility and very few (8 per cent) regard it as the task of the state. Friends and work also matter. What Latvians do with their lives generally feels worthwhile to them. There is also a strong agreement across societal groups that competition is a virtue that motivates people to work hard and develop new ideas.

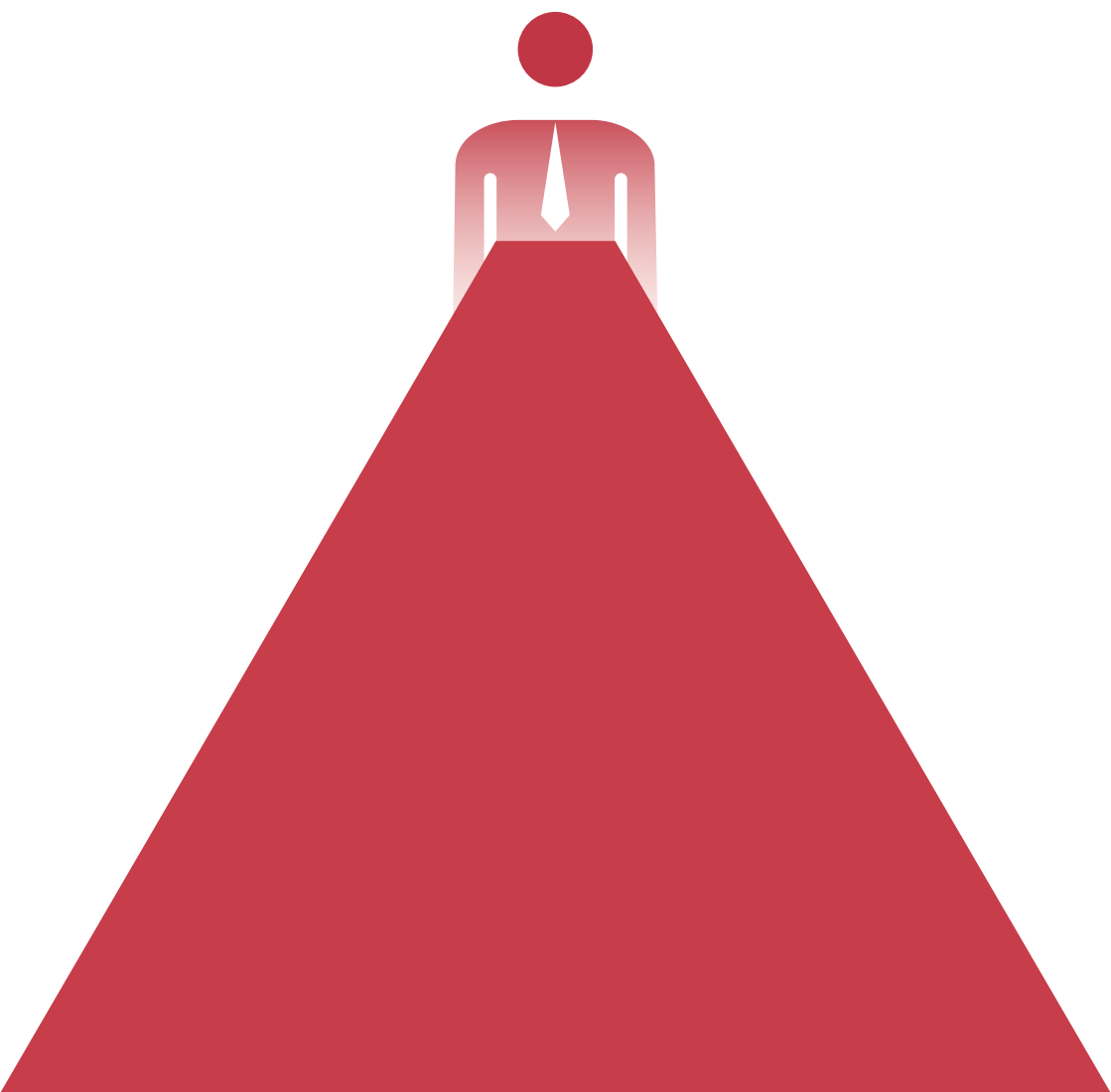
Political views on democracy, external national threats, and the 'ideal Latvia' are mixed, however. On many key issues, the general public opinion

is a simple average of starkly different or even opposing views. This is nothing new. It is worth noting that in the three decades of Latvia's restored independence, the rifts caused by ethnic and economic inequality have not been mended.

This poses a further risk to Latvia's security, especially now that neighbouring Russia's imperialist aggression has escalated into a full-scale military assault on Ukraine and, for the third year running, the worst European war since the monstrous crimes against humanity perpetrated under Stalin and Hitler. The outcome of this war crucially depends on the Western democracies' collective support for Ukraine, which, in turn, is of direct relevance to Latvia. Member States are jointly responsible for successfully enforcing the EU's policy of collective support, but if it should fail, Latvia may well become the aggressor's next victim.

What are Latvian society's fundamental values, what path do we want to take, and what kind of country do we want to build moving forward? By asking questions like these, the present survey, conducted in spring 2024, provides valuable insights and food for thought for voters, as well as for politicians and experts.

We will examine the main findings in terms of four thematic clusters: freedom, the economy, strategic direction, and the ideal Latvia, taking a closer look at the attitudes of the young people born after the restoration of independence. This is the generation that will shape Latvia's future.



Freedom: Keepers of democracy against the longing for a strongman

Satversme, the Constitution of Latvia, proclaims it to be an independent democratic republic in the very first article. But a country's basic law is just a piece of paper if its people are unable to defend their fundamental values through the tempests of history. We have already paid dearly for this lesson. The year 2024 marks 90 years since the authoritarian coup d'état of Kārlis Ulmanis, who suspended the Satversme and, when facing the superior force of the Soviet military six years later, made an uncontested sacrifice of national independence, which was regained only after half a century of occupation.

Today, the majority of Latvians (52%) believe that their country must never give up its political freedom and democracy. But more than a third would like a strong leader able to bring order to the country and care for its people. About one in eight respondents are unsure.

Public opinion is deeply divided on this fundamental issue. At its core is an ethnic divide: support for democracy is twice as high among ethnic Latvians as among members of Russian-speaking households. Alongside that, there is a clear wealth divide: only one third of the low-income people surveyed support the continuation of democracy, while in other income groups the proportion is well over half and rising.

A preference for the 'steady hand of a leader' over democracy is expressed by more than half of the respondents across three demographic groups, namely, non-citizens, members of Russian-speaking households, and people on low incomes.

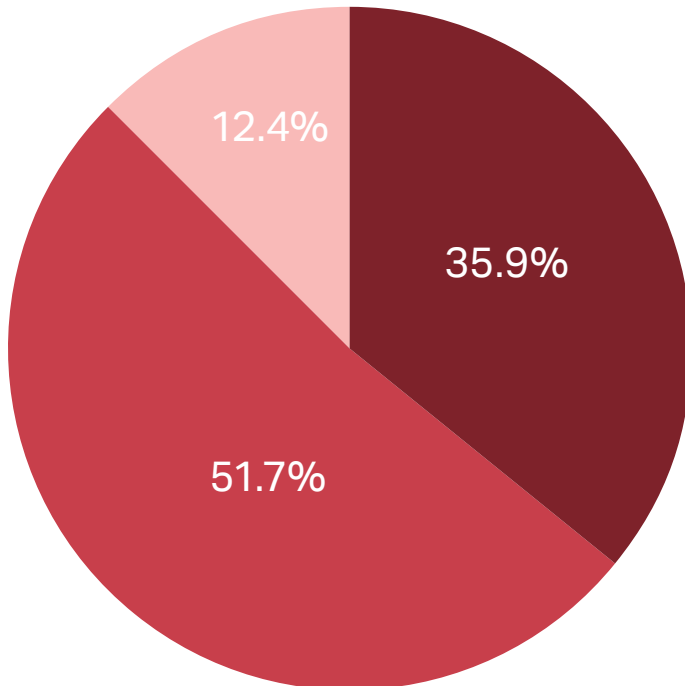
Of Latvia's five historical regions, Latgale is the only one to express higher hopes of a single authority figure than of democracy, but none of the answers gained majority support, as one in five respondents were unable to decide.

The strongest supporters of political freedom are the younger generation born in an independent Latvia: support for democracy is 50% higher in this group than the population average. Young people have both the lowest rate of undecideds and the lowest level of support for a single leader among all the demographic cross-sections of the survey.

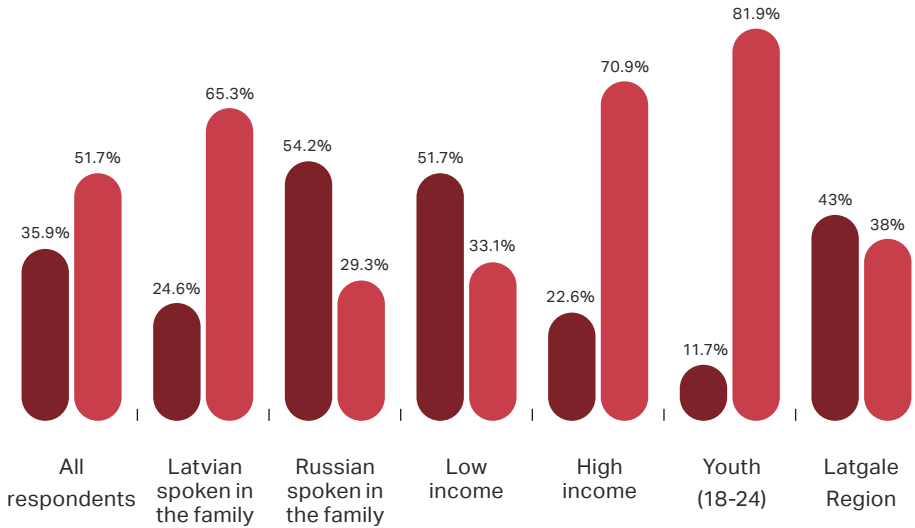
This is not an issue on which differences of opinion have a strong correlation with gender – around a third of respondents favour a strong leader among both men and women. Nonetheless, the majority of men advocate maintaining democracy, while women tend to be less certain.

Which model of state structure and governance do you think is better for your country?

- The country needs a strong leader in power, who can bring order to the country and take care of the people
- Political freedom and democracy are things that can never be sacrificed
- DK/NA



● Strong leader ● Democracy



Another survey question – a modern rewording of the Third Awakening motto 'Kaut pastalās, bet brīvi!' ('even though we're wearing a poor man's shoes, we are free') – lets us gauge the importance of freedom in people's lives. How does the nation feel about it today, 34 years after the restoration of independence? As it turns out, the majority still feel the same way.

Two thirds of respondents believe that freedom is more important than material well-being, agreeing that without it human life loses its meaning. The generation of young people born in an independent Latvia are once again at the forefront here, with support for freedom 28% higher than the population average.

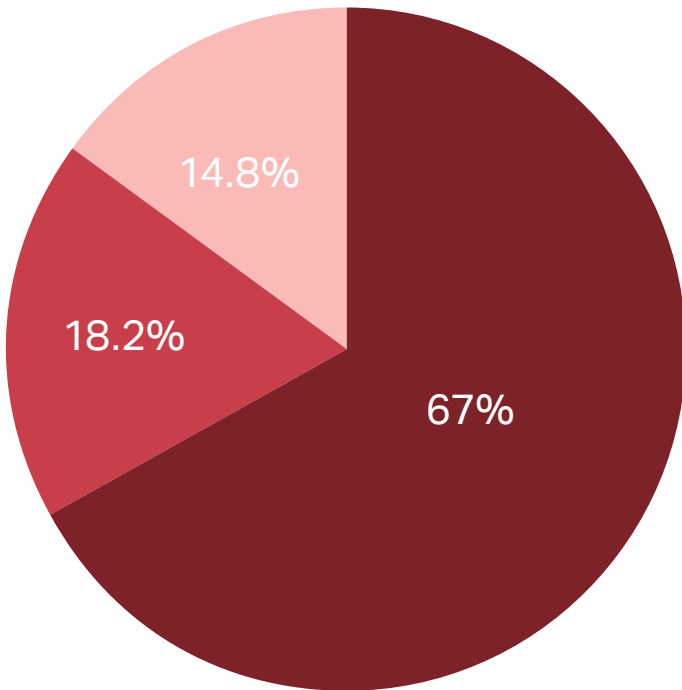
As with the previous question, this one also reveals the two main societal divides.

The majority of respondents from Russian-speaking households either expressed a preference for material well-being or were unable to decide, while in the case of Latvians, four out of five respondents put freedom first. Income disparity is less stark in this instance – resisting to the allure of the strong leader, the majority of low earners did not put material well-being above freedom.

Once again, Latgale stands out from the other regions. Freedom was prioritised by less than half of respondents from there and many found making a choice much more difficult than their counterparts in the rest of Latvia.

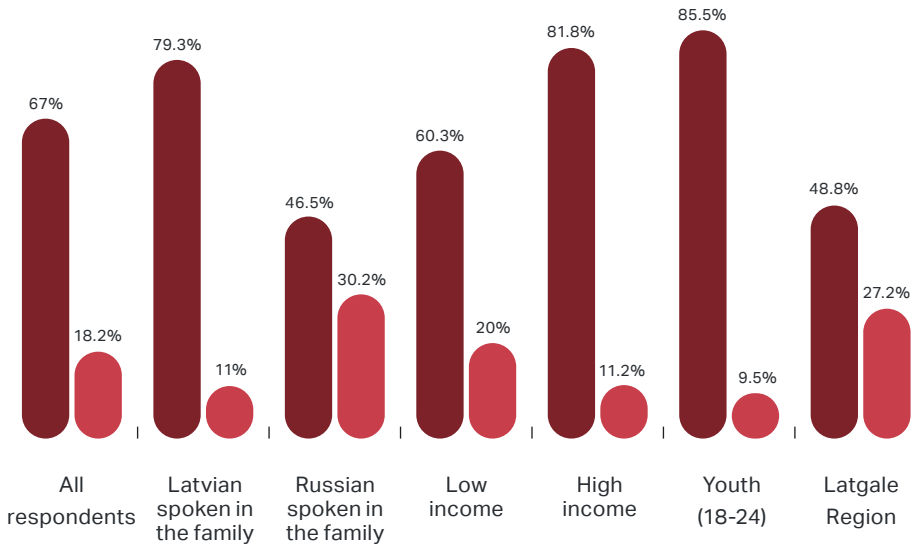
Which of these do you think is more important?

- Freedom – because without it, life loses its meaning
- The main thing in life is material well-being. Freedom is secondary
- DK/NA



Freedom

Material well-being



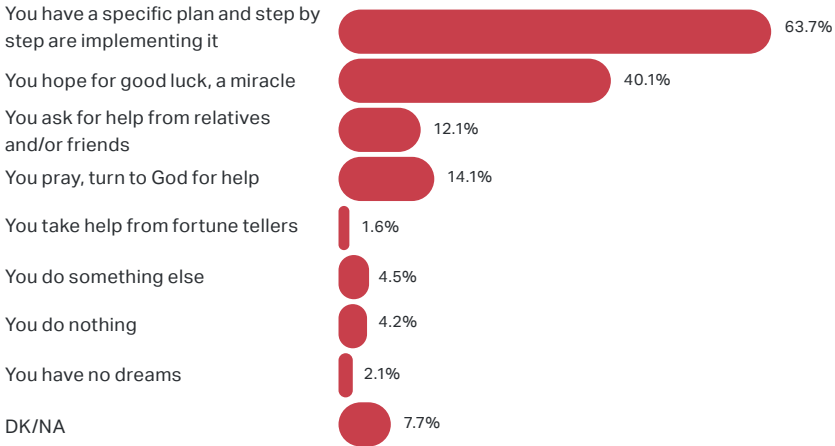
On a number of other issues, people showed support for individual responsibility and self-sufficiency. Nearly nine out of ten respondents believe that individuals are responsible for fulfilling their dreams, not the state. This sentiment is very strongly endorsed across population groups by respondents of all ages, genders, nationalities, income levels, and regions.

Moreover, the majority of the population attest to having already taken action on fulfilling their dreams – almost two-thirds of respondents have definite plans and are taking steps towards pursuing them. This does not rule out the element of chance, however, as shown by the wide range of responses to this survey question.

Two people in a hundred have turned to fortune-tellers, astrologers, or amulets, with the younger generation (6%) admitting to doing so most often, and women three times more frequently than men. Latvians turn to God for help almost as seldom as they turn to their family or friends, but the Russian-speaking population are twice as likely to turn to religion as a resource than to their loved ones.

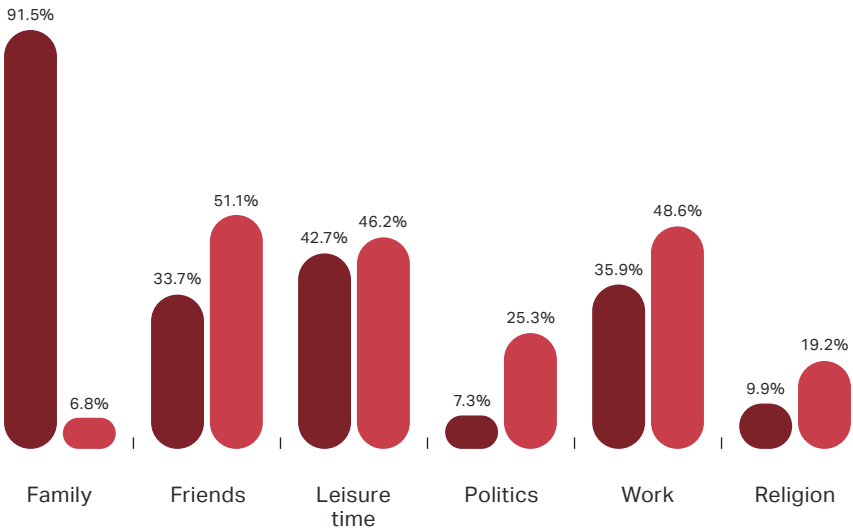
On the subject of religion, 22% of Latvians consider it an important part of their lives. The percentage is almost twice as high for Russian speakers, rising to almost 50% for Latgalians, and falling to a low of 10% among young people.

What do you do to make your dream/dreams come true?

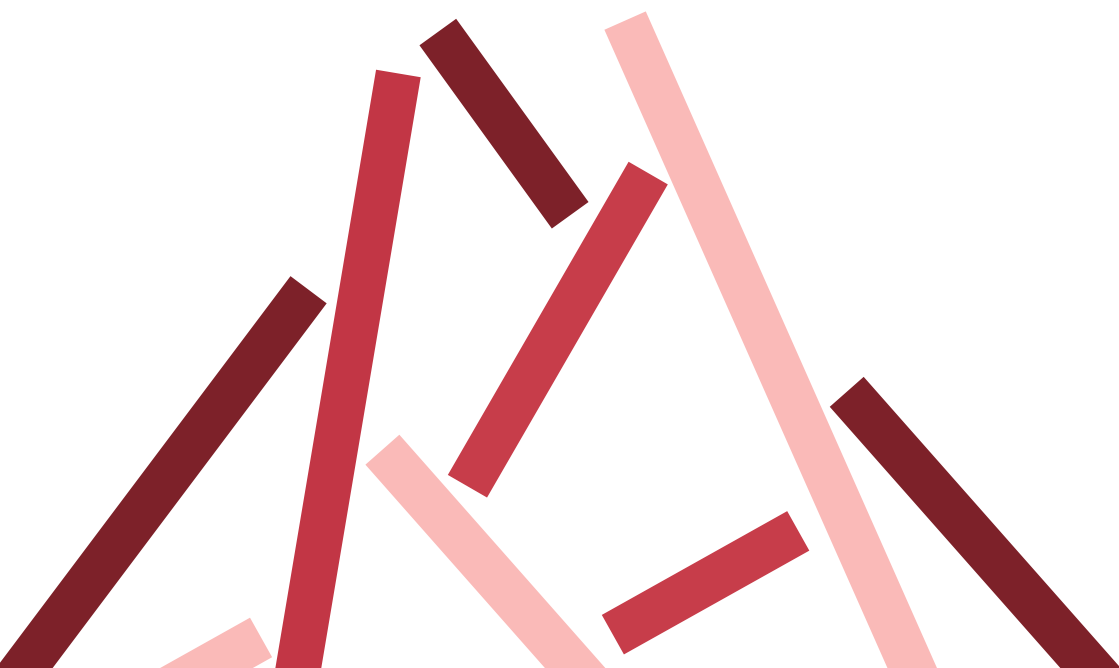


For each of the following, indicate how important it is in your life

Very important
 Rather important







The economy:

Part threat, part unifying hope

As regards the future, the main threat to Latvia is attributed to military conflicts, a cause of worry acknowledged by almost half the surveyed population. But within this landscape of threats and opportunities, the decisive factor is the economy, which is a source both of concern and of hope.

Economic growth is cited most frequently and commonly as the best means of securing the country's future development, as expressed by two thirds of the people surveyed. This is understandable given that Latvia's GDP per capita, despite having almost doubled over the past two decades, still amounts to only 71% of the EU average. More than that, Latvia is lagging behind its two Baltic neighbours, who have been able to achieve much more: Lithuanians have attained 87% and Estonians 81% of the EU average.

Although most of the Latvian population are generally quite satisfied with life (79%), the current standard of living leaves a lot to be desired – a third of respondents said they are not satisfied with it.

Moreover, the lower the income, the less optimistic people are on both these issues,

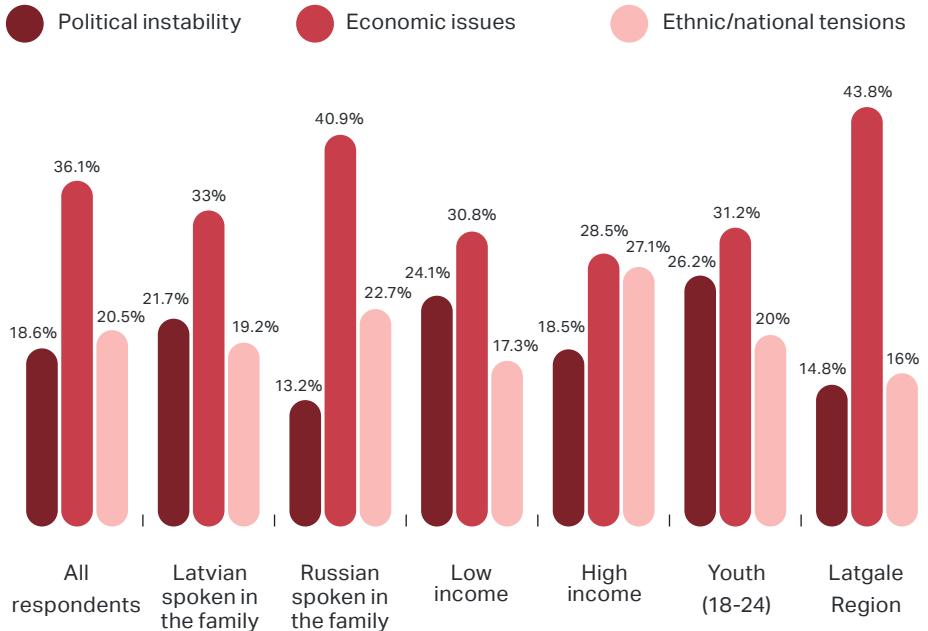
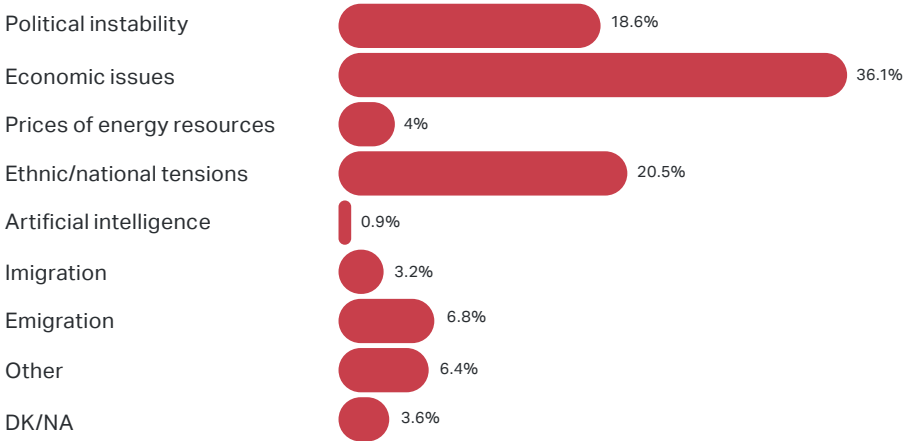
as well as in other areas of life. More than half of those in the low-income group are dissatisfied with their health, and, compared with the highest income earners, are three times as likely to feel unhappy about their life and overall achievements.

They are twice as likely to feel disconnected from their community, believing that the prevailing sentiment of the Latvian population is one of utter disillusionment and a lack of conviction about possible improvements.

But it is not only the underprivileged who are concerned about their well-being. People across all demographic groups have identified economic problems as the most serious internal threat to Latvia.

Russian speakers are more likely than average to attest to this, although this is one of the rare instances in which there is a relatively strong consensus among the various income groups. Economic threats rank well ahead of ethnic tensions and political instability, causing distress to around one in five people. Interestingly, Latgalians are less worried about the two latter risks than the Latvian average, but more worried about economic problems.

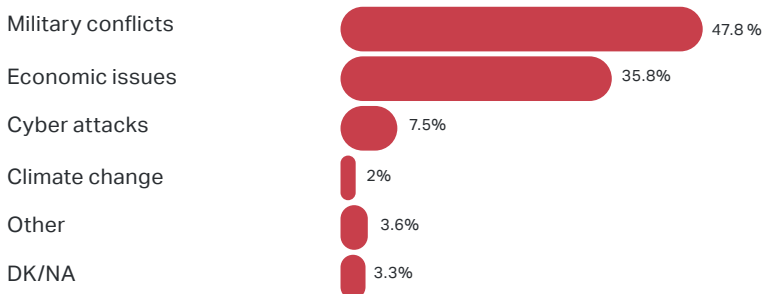
In your opinion, what is the most relevant internal threat for your country?



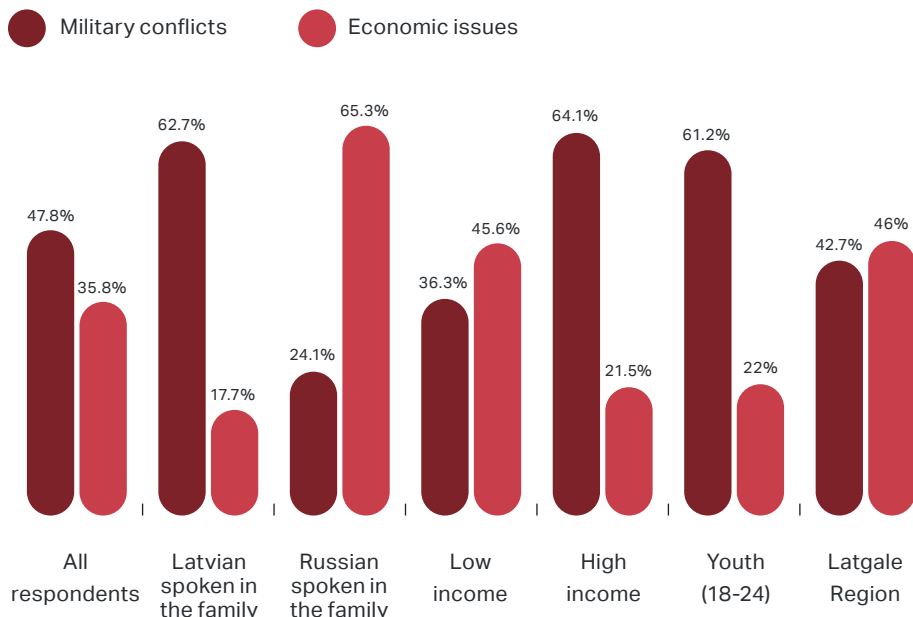
People view economic instability as another external threat to Latvia, surpassed only by war. Here, however, opinions are split along the divide of ethnicity and income: an overwhelming majority of Latvians and high-income earners see military conflict as the main external threat, while the majority of Russian speakers and nearly half of the underprivileged place economic problems at the top of their list. In Latgale, on the eastern border, economic instability is also found to be more daunting than war.

What about other dangers? Seven people out of a hundred feel concerned about cyber-attacks, but climate change is a source of worry for only two out of a hundred. Only young people express more concern about the environment than cyber threats.

In your opinion, what is the most relevant external threat for your country?



In your opinion, what is the most relevant external threat for your country?



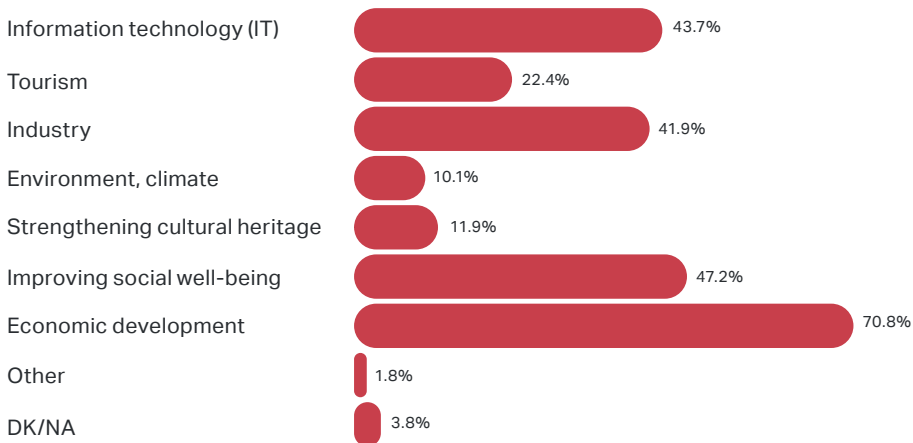
It is therefore understandable that when it comes to discussing the direction of Latvia's future development, there is a strong call for economic growth. This is the consensus view of both Latvians and Russians and the poor and the rich, but above all among pensioners (83%).

More specifically, young people see growth of the IT sector as most important (67%), as do people with higher incomes. For the underprivileged population, the top priority

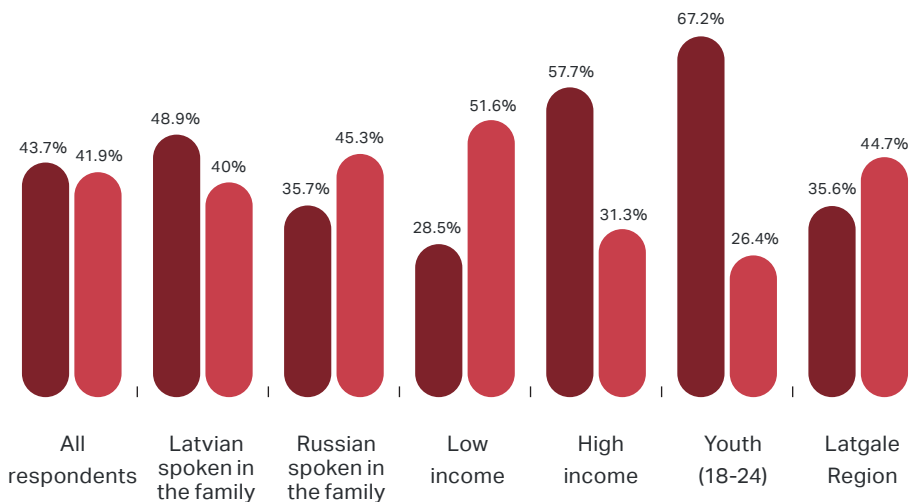
is the improvement of social welfare. This is also cited more than average by young people and Russian speakers.

In the context of their hometowns and villages, the top three improvements in quality of life wished for by the population are better health care (especially in Latgale), more affordable housing, and better education.

In your opinion, in which direction should your country develop?



● Information technology (IT)
 ● Industry



Proposals on how to generate further economic growth are beyond the scope of this survey, but we may draw some general conclusions. The survey asked the respondents to choose between diverging value statements. The responses point to a majority in favour of greater solidarity and increased governmental concern for the people's well-being, while also revealing a strong preference for private initiative in business.

A significant proportion of the public wants greater social equality, though the level of support fluctuates depending on the formulation of the alternative.

On the question of whether one would prefer to live in a society that is socially equal or one in which personal freedom is more important, neither statement is supported by a majority, with both choices coming out at 44 per cent. The underlying reason is once again divided opinions: while young people, Latvians, and high-income earners prefer personal freedom, pensioners, Russian speakers, and the low-income group, as well as people living in Latgale, tend to opt for equality.

However, in a survey question framed somewhat differently – concerning whether people's incomes should be more equal or whether we need a wider income gap as an incentive for individual effort – the vast majority favour equality. Here, there is a broad consensus across all of society, with support dipping a little below the halfway mark only among the high-income group.

A similar pattern can be seen regarding the question of whether the government should take more responsibility for ensuring

everyone is provided for: the majority are in agreement, and only in the more affluent group is there stronger support for the counter-view that people should take more personal responsibility in providing for themselves.

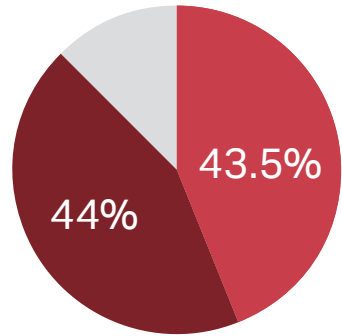
However, advocating for greater solidarity and increased social protection from the government does not imply ceding business incentives to the state. In fact, just the opposite appears to be true. A majority of the public – four out of five people – are strong supporters of business competition. Only one fifth of respondents think that the proportion of state-owned enterprises in Latvia should be increased. A majority also believe that in the long term, hard work leads to a better life. Twice as many people agree that wealth can be accumulated while leaving enough for everyone else, as opposed to believing that wealth can be gained only at the expense of others.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that currently the predominant view among Latvians is that public service is a better career path than the private sector. There is a clear generational gap on this matter: the majority of people in their twenties and thirties, born in a free Latvia, favour the private sector, while the older generation, especially pensioners, prefer the public sector. Support for public service is strongest in Latgale (two thirds of the population), and in the low-income group.

With regard to expanding their professional skills, the most popular choices are technology, business management, and further advancement in one's current area.

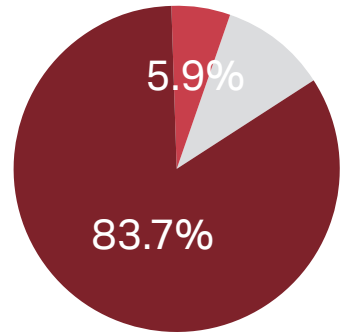
In what society would you rather live?

- One where there is social equality
- One where personal freedom is more important
- DK/NA



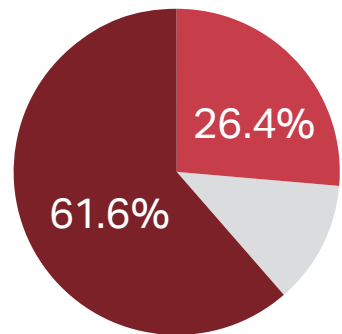
Which statement do you agree or rather agree with?

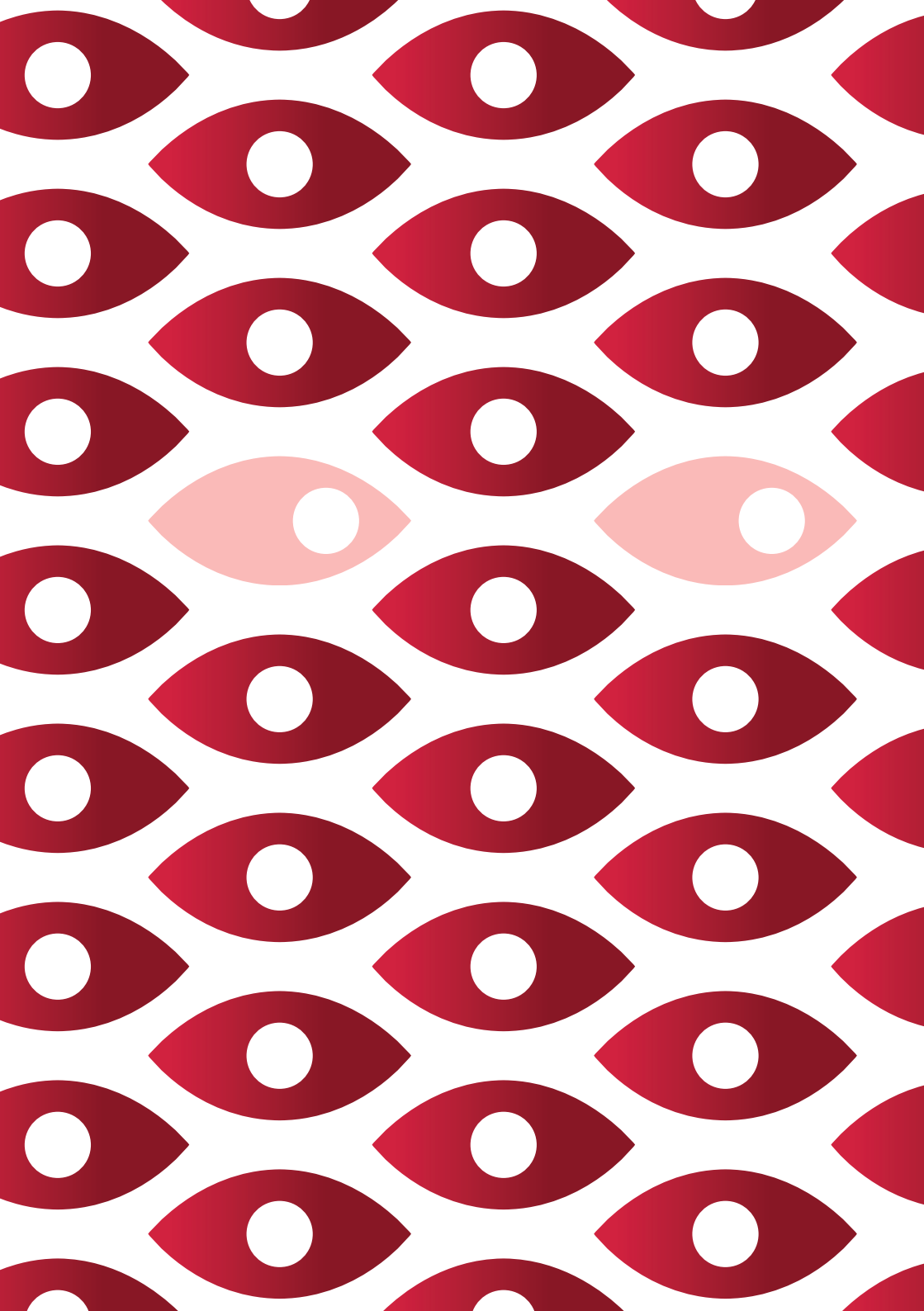
- Competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas
- Competition is harmful. It brings out the worst in people
- DK/NA



Which statement do you agree of rather agree with?

- Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everybody is provided for
- People should take more responsibility to provided for themselves
- DK/NA





Strategic direction: Fixed on Europe or skewed towards Russia?

This year, Latvia celebrated the twentieth anniversary of its accession to the European Union and NATO. Joining the world's largest trading bloc and its most powerful military alliance gave our nation an historically unprecedented opportunity for economic growth and security guarantees. This is all the more evident following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Nevertheless, if you ask people of different generations and ethnicities about how they view this strategic choice for Latvia, and its benefits, you will get very different answers.

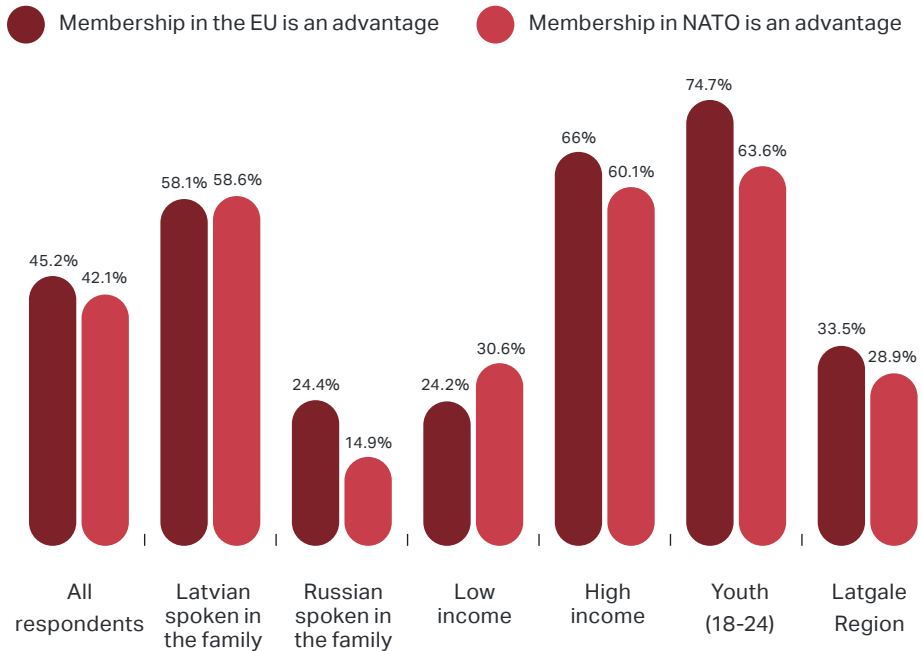
Six out of ten Latvians believe that Latvia's accession to the EU has had a positive impact on their dreams. Two thirds of high-income earners and more than half of residents of the Vidzeme region share the same opinion. But it is young people – who were too young to vote in the referendum (or not yet born) – who feel they have the most to gain from Latvia's EU membership. Some 75% expressed a positive attitude,

with only a few seeing the EU as an obstacle to fulfilling their dreams. This enthusiasm among the younger generation surpasses that of any other demographic group and is 65% higher than that of the population as a whole.

The mood is the opposite among Russian speakers and the underprivileged: only a quarter of respondents in these groups affirmed they had seen any benefit, while the majority considered the EU to be neither a help nor a hindrance. By region, the lowest share of EU supporters is found in Latgale.

A similar picture emerges on the question of whether Latvia's NATO membership might be seen as an asset or an obstacle to achieving one's dreams. In this case, the Russian-speaking population is even more sceptical: they are only half as likely as Latvians to have a positive view of Latvia's EU membership, and when it comes to NATO, the figure is only a quarter.

Is the membership of your country in the EU and NATO an advantage or an obstacle for the fulfilment of your dreams?



However, not all respondents had a dream or life goal in mind at the time of the survey. Six out of a hundred respondents revealed they did not have one, and one in ten found it difficult to say. The lowest share of positive answers was among the unemployed (70%), pensioners (73%) and Latgalians (75%).

The reason for such low support for NATO among the Russian-speaking public is illuminated by another survey question on the future of Latvia's international relations.

When asked to name one or two countries with which it would be most important for Latvia to build relations, the majority of

respondents chose the European Union. This was the most common answer across all demographic groups, except for the Russian-speakers, the majority of whom put Russia first, with the EU coming second.

Meanwhile, among Latvians, only five out of a hundred people consider Russia to be important for the future, the same level of priority given to Poland and Ukraine. For Latvians, the second most important role is granted to the Baltic neighbours and the United States, each mentioned by a third, with Scandinavia not too far behind.

The United States and the Baltic states are cited much less frequently by Russian speakers, with Scandinavia regarded as even less important than Belarus. By contrast, Russian speakers were four times as likely as Latvians to rank China as important. Young people and high-income earners were significantly more likely than the general population to list the EU and the United States as the most important. The only country on which Latvians and Russian speakers do not have significant differences, is Germany – less than 3% consider it important.

A vivid example of Latvia's social divide can be seen in relation to the survey question concerning the country's future direction. When asked to project their expectations about the country's political, economic, and social development and to choose one of three directions, only certain demographic groups show clear majority support for any of the options, while the general public opinion is torn between reality and make-believe.

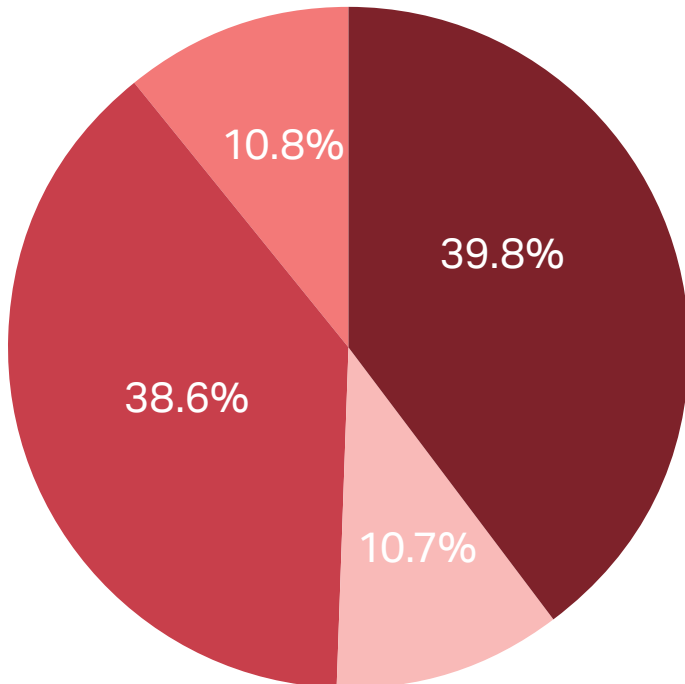
The majority of Latvians support further EU integration, even if it entailed a loss of sovereignty. High-income earners are of a similar opinion, and there is particularly strong support for the EU trajectory among young people. Meanwhile, support for

the EU-bound direction is lowest among Russian speakers, with more respondents advocating closer cooperation with Russia. This is the opinion of nearly one in four Russian speakers, while among Latvians only a very small percentage favour this option.

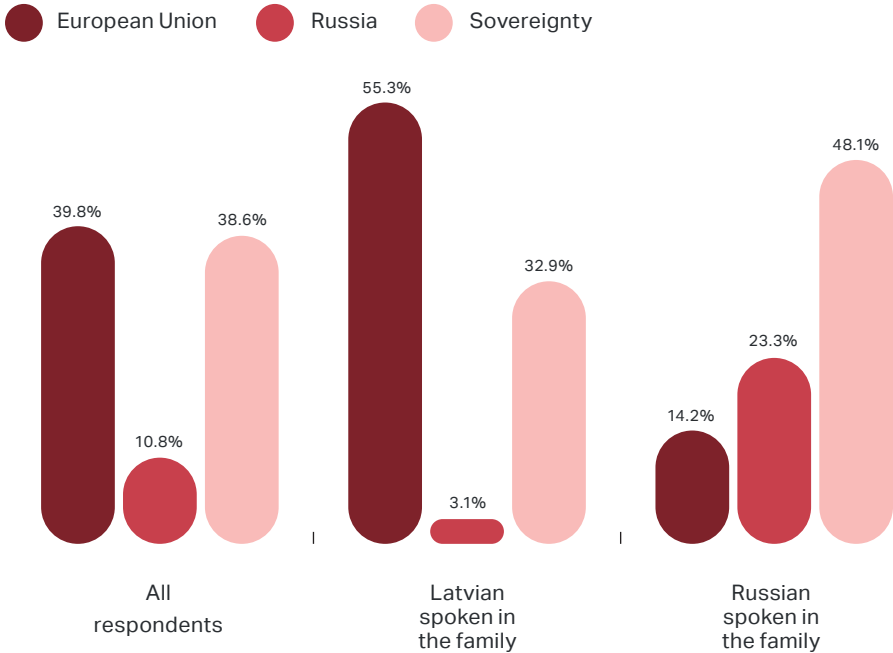
The most popular answer among Russian speakers, those on low incomes, and older working people is the third, halfway, option, that of 'strengthening sovereignty' without any particular focus on neither the West nor Russia. Such a course of action was on the political agenda in the 1990s, prior to Latvia joining the EU and NATO. Reintroducing it now would represent a radical reversal of the country's strategy, and is currently not being offered by any of the leading political forces. Nevertheless, this is the preferred option for almost half of the Russian speakers. It is also the most popular answer in Latgale, where the pro-EU direction has only around half the support it enjoys in the rest of the country.

Thinking about your country's future political, economic and social development, what direction do you think, country should focus on?

- Further and deeper integration into the European Union, even if this means a reduction of the country's political and economic sovereignty
- Closer cooperation and friendly relations with Russia, even if this means weakening ties with the European Union and other Western countries
- Strengthening the country's independence and sovereignty, without any particular focus on either the West or Russia
- DK/NA



Country Direction:

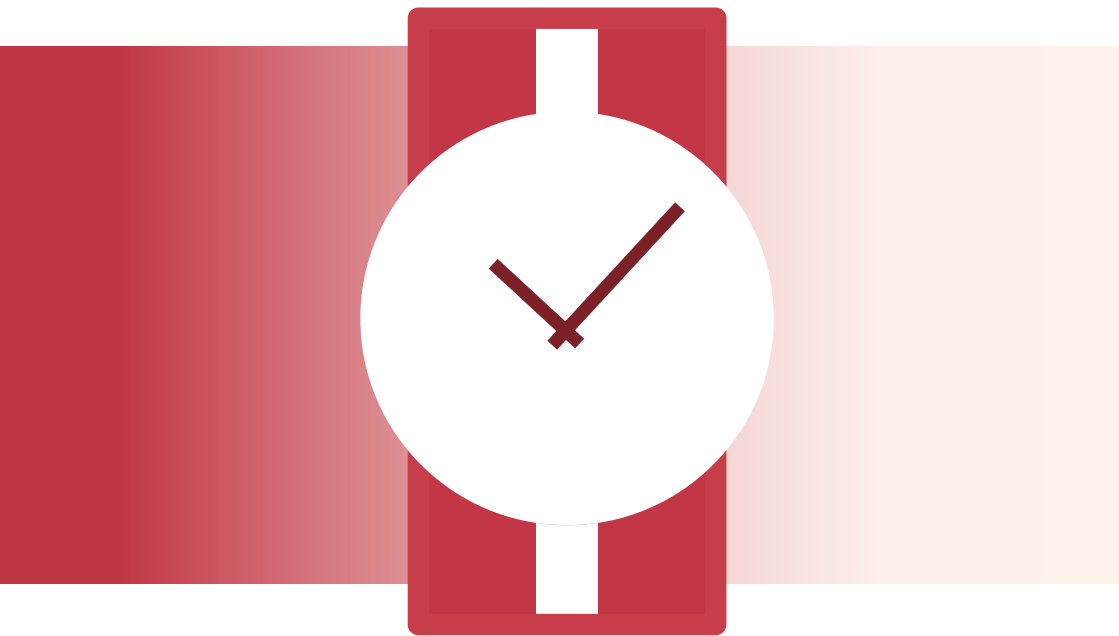


The responses to the survey question about support for Latvia's current course of development are somewhat puzzling – a little over a half of the respondents said it was wrong. Russian speakers are the most sceptical, with three quarters predicting that the current path of development will not lead to a good outcome. The majority of the low-income group and people in Latgale also expect a negative outcome.

Among Latvians, a positive outlook is more widely professed than a negative one, yet many respondents found themselves unable to give a straight answer to such a broad question. A similar divide is noticeable among high-income earners.

Young people are the most optimistic, but even in their group, there is no majority with a positive outlook.

What can we make of this result? In all probability, this rather broad question represents the sum of both the population's concerns about economic development and the consistently low trust in public administration and politicians. It is also a reflection of ethnic and income disparities in relation to public values, which can already be detected in the abovementioned questions on freedom and will be revealed further in the section dealing with the ideal nation.



The ideal Latvia: The younger generation embraces the present

The Latvian nation started out as a dream. The story of our national anthem, *Dievs, svētī Latviju!* (God Bless Latvia!), is a strong reminder of this. It was composed by Kārlis Baumanis for the first national Song Festival in 1873, and banned by the Tsarist censors. The composer did not live to see the birth of the Republic of Latvia in 1918, but for a hundred and fifty years now, the proverbial daughters and sons of Latvia have been 'singing' and 'blossoming' in the words of our national prayer.

What are the dreams that will shape the future of Latvia? What kind of country do we want to live in, and what is the legacy we want to leave for future generations? These are not easy questions, and their gravity is starkly underlined by the country's undercurrent of societal contradictions.

There is no other topic in this survey on which the differences of opinion between Latvians and Russian speakers are as drastic as on their views of the ideal Latvia. While the majority of Latvians see a purely national state as the ideal, one in which

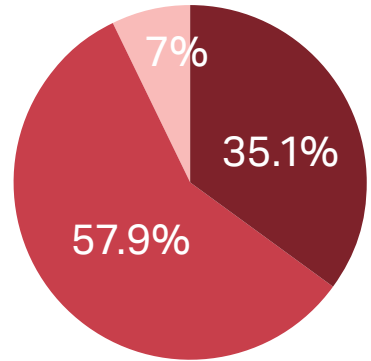
all aspects of the state are governed by the Latvian language and culture, among Russian speakers this vision is shared by only five people out of a hundred.

Nine out of ten Russian speakers consider the ideal Latvia to be a multinational country in which the Latvian language and culture exist and develop alongside other languages and cultures. A third of Latvian respondents opted for such a multicultural model. In Latvia, it is supported by two thirds of the population; the idea of a multinational state is also favoured by low-income respondents.

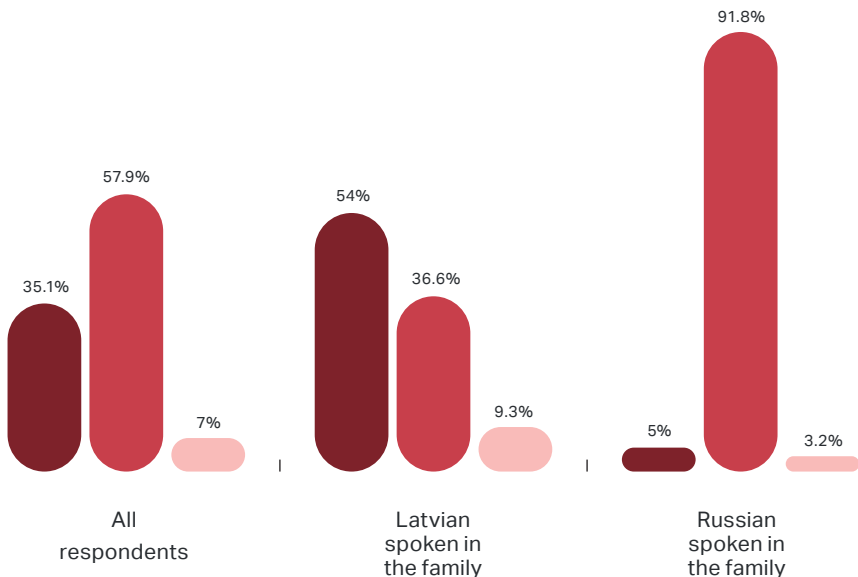
Ultimately, the overall average of public opinion on this issue seems inconsistent with nearly all the demographic groups individually. The respondents showing some consistency with the combined survey figures are those on average incomes and the generation born in the 1980s during the decline of Soviet rule, just before the restoration of Latvian statehood. The younger generation born into independence prefers a national state.

What, in your opinion, should be the ideal Latvia?

- Pure national (as national as possible) – i.e. where the Latvian language and culture are dominant everywhere and in all areas
- Multinational – i.e. where other languages and cultures coexist and develop alongside the Latvian language and culture
- DK/NA



- Pure national
- Multinational
- DK/NA



Particularly interesting are the answers to the question about which period of the country's history most closely corresponds to the ideal Latvia the respondents would like to live in.

The choices are wide-ranging, from the times of the ancient Baltic tribes to today's independent Latvia (both before and after accession to the European Union).

Young people are the only demographic group for whom current reality matches the ideal: more than half the younger generation consider the country they live in today to be the best. For the absolute majority of the population, however, there is no such peace of mind; they either seek the ideal Latvia in the past or are unable to find it at all.

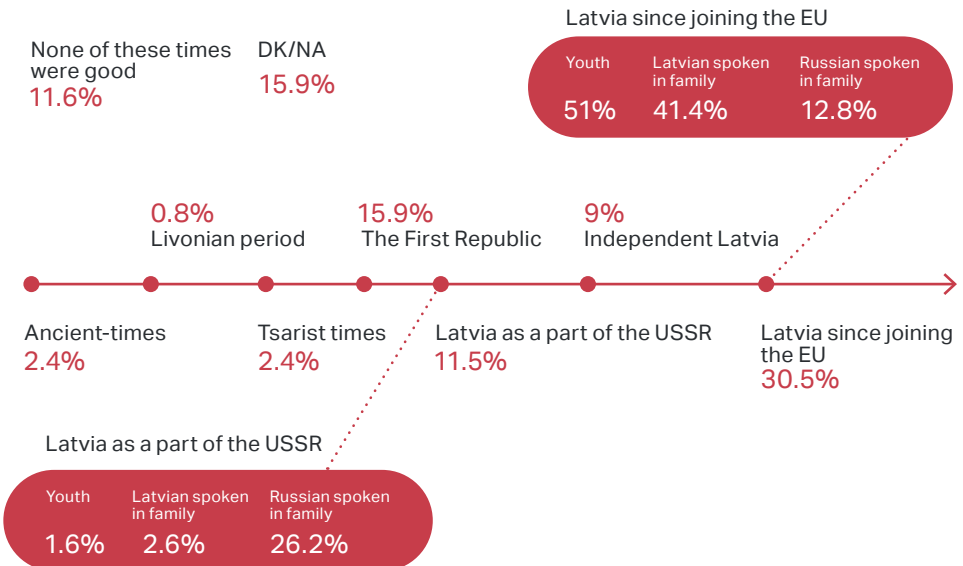
For Russian speakers, Soviet Latvia is the most commonly recognised ideal, with one in four respondents expressing this opinion. They are only half as likely to favour the Latvia of today. Even when aggregating the two periods of restored independence (before and after EU membership), the Soviet era is still the clear winner.

Soviet Latvia is also the most frequently cited ideal for the low-income population – one in

five people – however, just as many people in this group have no clear opinion on the topic. Nevertheless, an independent Latvia is ranked as the top choice and considered a favourable option by one in four people, if the period of Latvia’s restored independence is taken as a whole. A very similar balance of opinion is also observed in Latgale.

The most prevalent state ideal among Latvians is the Latvia of today – taking the period of restored independence as a whole, it is regarded as the ideal by half of respondents. The second most popular choice is the newly founded republic of the interwar period, considered the ideal by one in five people. For Latvians, the Soviet era represents a nightmare rather than a dream: only three people in a hundred expressed a wish to go back to the days of Soviet rule.

What is the ideal Latvia, the Latvia in which you would like to live?



When, after the arduous quest for the ideal nation, we come to the question of personal identity, most people see themselves as residents of Latvia – this applies to more than half of the surveyed Latvians and a third of the Russian speakers.

The low-income group for once falls in line with Latvians on this issue. For Russian speakers, being an autonomous individual is almost as popular; for Latvians, however, the second most popular choice is identity as an EU citizen, which is twice as prevalent as identity as an autonomous individual.

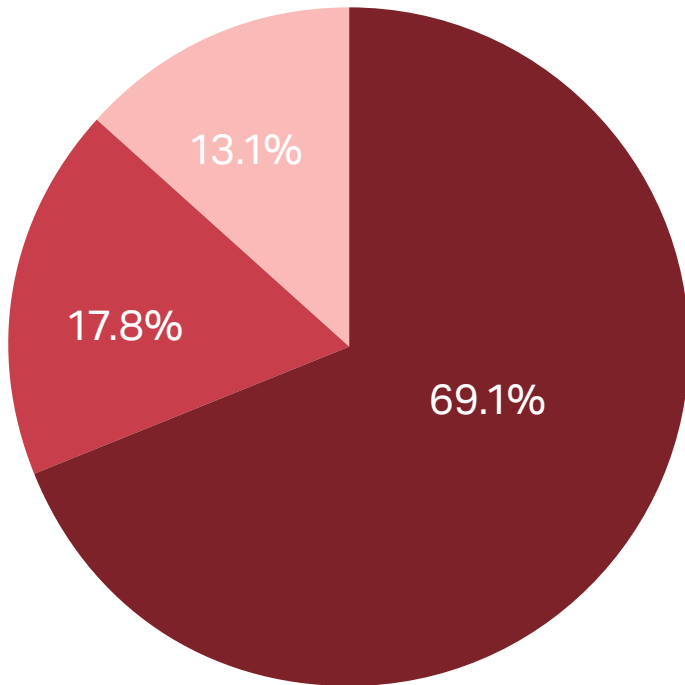
An even greater sense of relief can be found in deliberations on Latvia's strengths with regard to what might set it apart now as well as in the future, and what might put it on the global map. For the most part, Latvians' aspirations are linked to science, the beauty of our nature, sporting achievements, and cultural excellence. But what does the new, independence-era generation think? Their opinions clearly favour science and sport. Remarkably, for Russian speakers, the country's main asset is nature.

Finally, the closing question of the survey not only stands as a symbolic bridge to the future, but also highlights the notion of belonging as something deeply personal. 'Would you like your children to live in Latvia?' was a question asked of everyone, even respondents without children. Here, across all demographic groups, the majority answer is 'yes'. Four out of five Latvians gave this answer, together with just over half of the Russian speakers. High- and low-income earners are also in agreement on this question, with two thirds answering in the affirmative. For once, there were no major regional disparities.

Finally, on a more hopeful note, the younger generation are the most optimistic: 86% of them would like their children to live in Latvia. Another item of good news is that this is also true of parents who are already raising as many as three children.

Would you like your children to live in Latvia?

- Yes
- No
- DK/NA



Youth profile: What do Laura and Artūrs* think?

**Popular baby names in 2000; data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia*

All residents

Young people

87.5%	It is the individual, not the state, who is responsible for fulfilling one's dreams	95.2%
63.7%	They have a specific plan to fulfil their dream, are moving towards it step by step	73%
1.6%	Seek help from fortune tellers, astrologers, amulets, etc. to fulfil their dreams	6%
98.3%	Family is important in my life	92.2%
32.6%	Politics is important in my life	54.9%
29.2%	Religion is important in my life	10.5%
51.3%	It is key that Latvia maintains future relations with the EU	62.5%
24%	It is key that Latvia maintains future relations with the US	39.6%
23.5%	It is key that Latvia maintains future relations with Russia	11.4%
45.2%	Latvia's EU membership is an asset that enables people to fulfil their dreams	74.7%
42.1%	Latvia's NATO membership is an asset that enables people to fulfil their dreams	63.6%
47.8%	The main external threat to Latvia is military conflict	61.2%
64.9%	I am happy with the sense of belonging I have in my community	78%
69%	I am happy with my personal relationships	48.2%
21.9%	I am happy with Latvia's political system/government	39.5%

Young people aged 18–24 born in an independent Latvia at the dawn of the new millennium are the next generation and are already starting to make decisions about Latvia's present and ways of shaping the country's future. The young people who participated in this survey are all Latvian citizens, 77% of them living in Latvian-speaking households.

More than half are still at school or at university, almost half are employed. One sixth have already started a family or are living with a partner.

The views of young people are often very different from those of the rest of society and are therefore worth exploring in greater detail.

All residents

Young people

3.9%	The current sentiment of the Latvian people is best described in terms of the conviction that things will definitely get better in the future	9.8%
67%	Freedom is more important than material well-being as without it human life is meaningless	85.5%
51.7%	The state must never give up political freedom and democracy under any circumstances	81.9%
30.5%	Of all periods of history, present-day Latvia (post-EU accession), is closest to the ideal in which I would like to live	51%
11.5%	Of all periods of history, the Latvian SSR is the closest to the ideal in which I would like to live	1.6%
35.1%	The ideal Latvia should be purely national, and Latvian language and culture should prevail in all areas	50.4%
39.8%	I support further and deeper EU integration (as opposed to closer cooperation with Russia or 'a strengthening of sovereignty' directed neither towards the West nor Russia)	68.5%
47.7%	Wealth can be accumulated in such a way as to be enough for everybody	59.3%
36.9%	It is better to work in the private sector than in public service	52.1%
43.7%	Latvia should develop the fields of IT and technology, and become a market leader	67.2%
69.1%	I would like my children to live in Latvia	85.5%

Conclusion

Dreams can be an extremely powerful driver of change, but they can also become a false refuge from the challenges of the real world. At a time when European security is under threat from neighbouring Russia's imperialist aggression, Latvian society must stand guard and set its future goals with a clear understanding of both threats and opportunities.

This opinion poll on the Latvian dream proves that freedom and democracy are important values to our nation, values we do not want to lose under any circumstances. It is especially heartening to see that the younger generation – brought up in the restored, independent Latvia – is most determined to defend these values.

However, our support for freedom and democracy is not homogeneous. Even thirty years after the restoration of independence, Latvia's social safety net is torn by differences of ethnicity and income – the opinions of Latvians versus Russian speakers and of the poor versus the rich are starkly divided. People living in Russian-speaking households and the low-income group feel a strong pull towards the idea of being led by a single strong leader; many of them would prefer to go back in time to the Soviet days or build future relations with Russia rather than the EU.

Although the vast majority of the public overall feel happy and content with their lives, when assessing the prevailing sentiment of the population as a whole, only a minority are convinced or hopeful of a better future. Uncertainty, worrying about tomorrow, or

even disappointment are far more common reactions. People see military conflict as the main external threat to Latvia, and economic issues as the main internal threat.

The majority of the public are strong supporters of competition and private enterprise. At the same time, there is a call for the state to be more socially responsible. Meanwhile, an overwhelming majority consider economic growth to be the country's top development priority, with a strong consensus across all demographic groups.

Tackling the economy presents both a risk and an opportunity: economic growth and reducing inequality can lead to an increase in the standard of living, bringing it ever closer to the EU average and closing the gap in opinion between the country's poor and rich.

It is highly unlikely that we will be able to bridge the ethnic divide in our society by changing the deeply embedded views of the Soviet generations. The hope lies with the younger generation. It is precisely the young who value political freedoms the most, who feel that they benefit most from Latvia's membership in the EU and NATO, and who are passionate advocates for the continuation of the current strategic direction. Most young people see modern Latvia as the ideal period of the country's history and would also like their children to live here. This is perhaps Latvia's most cherished dream for its future, that the generation born in freedom and democracy will raise their children in accordance with their values – in their Latvia.

Research Design

Technical characteristics of survey

Population: permanent residents of Latvia aged 18 – 75.

Time of survey: The data for this study was collected from 25 to 28 March, 2024.

Sample size: For the needs of the survey, 1005 respondents aged 18 to 75 were interviewed, using a web survey (WAPI).

For access to the entire dataset, please contact Toms Zariņš: toms.zarins@fes.de

The structure of the resulting raw sample was adjusted to official data from Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (www.csb.lv) by weighting. Gender, age and region were used as weighting variables.

Survey method: internet survey (WAPI).

Sampling methods: quota sampling; (respondent quotas on gender, age, ethnicity and place of residence (regions of Latvia), were proportional to the actual composition of the population), with the purpose to emulate a nationally representative sample.

The sample was created from the population of Latvia registered in the research centre's SKDS WebPanel (~ 20,000 participants/potential respondents).

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Coordinator of the project and publication in all the three Baltic states: Kristis Šukevičs (FES Latvia).

Jolanta Steikūnaitė-Babarské was responsible for Lithuania (FES Lithuania).

Toms Zariņš and Kristis Šukevičs were responsible for Latvia (FES Latvia).

Ülle Kesküla as well as Toms Zariņš and Kristis Šukevičs were responsible for Estonia (FES Estonia and Latvia).

Dr Reinhard Krumm was the initiator of this project and was responsible for the final editing of the publications for all three Baltic states.

Notes

Notes



