

Report Part Title: Latvia:

Report Title: KEEPING EUROPEANS TOGETHER

Report Subtitle: ASSESSING THE STATE OF EU COHESION

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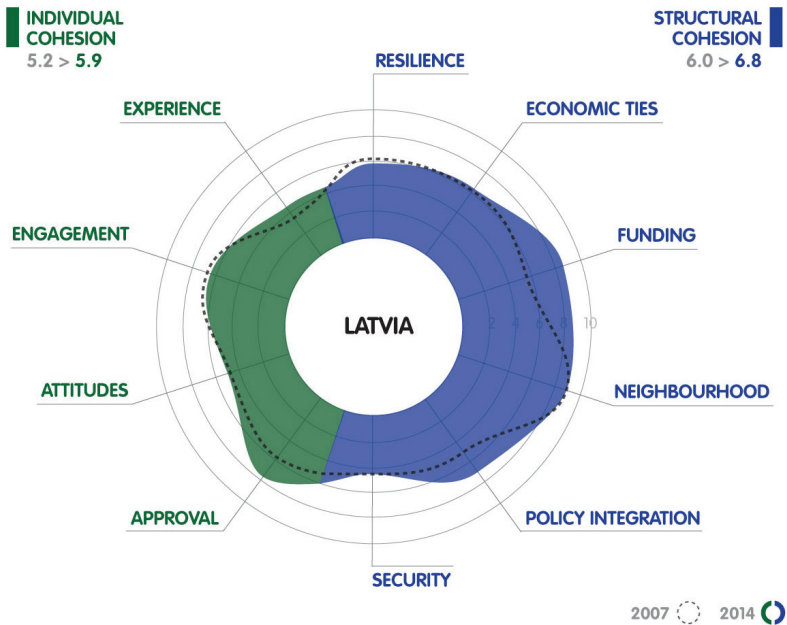
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Latvia: Becoming European

Latvia is one of only a few countries that have shown progress in both the individual and structural cohesion indicators of the EU Cohesion Monitor. First and foremost, this can be explained by the fact that in 2007 both the European Union and Latvia saw the country as a new member of the Union. The country lagged behind in many structural reforms and in implementation of EU norms, and it was new to the benefits that the EU offered, such as funds, administrative capacity building, and so on. Only a small share of society had experienced the individual benefits that the EU offers – free travelling, studying, and working in any of the EU member states.¹ The seven years between 2007 and 2014 were not only a period of economic crisis, but also a steep learning curve in adjustment to EU norms and practices. Hence, the positive development in most aspects of Latvia's EU cohesion strongly correlates with the fact that in 2014, ten years after accession to the EU, Latvia and Latvians were finally feeling and acting as fully committed members of the Union.

Cohesion out of crisis

The EU's supervision of Latvian economic and political reforms after the 2008 financial crisis left a positive impact on cohesion not only at the official level, but also among society at large. Despite the harsh austerity measures and society's anger towards the "rules imposed by Brussels" (especially when similar rules were not applied in other, better-off countries, such as Greece), the public began to rely on EU institutions. Additionally, many Latvians were pushed to seek economic opportunities abroad during and after the financial crisis. A large number of Latvians left the country to search for opportunities elsewhere. Although this was a very negative trend for Latvian society, it dramatically increased direct and indirect contact with people from other EU countries, and contributed to fostering open-mindedness towards



other societies and cultures. Another impact of crisis was more positive: an increasing number of individual entrepreneurs in Latvia are relying on EU support for their businesses, especially because of the much stronger regulation of the Latvian banks after the crisis. This dependency is likely to spill over from individual to structural cohesion.

The Latvian government could be criticised for often ignoring public opinion, especially on unpopular decisions on increasing taxes and cutting social benefits as part of austerity measures. But these actions have steered the country towards a relatively clear and constant path of deeper integration in the Union and adjustment to its norms. In the long term, this has also resulted in strong support for the EU. As shown by the data gathered in the Monitor, although the direct impact of austerity is negative public attitudes, it has also resulted in an increase in trust in the Union and its institutions. I would argue that this small increase is much harder to obtain, but considerably easier to maintain than negative attitudes. It is important to keep in mind here that, when asked if they “support membership in the EU” or “if they believe their country should leave the EU”, people more often than not give conflicting answers. In Latvia, although there is some negativity towards Brussels, it is targeted at the bureaucracy there rather than at the EU as such.

The absence of Euroscepticism

Latvia at a political level is typically a very “law-abiding” EU member state. It usually chooses to side with Germany, which it sees as the leader of the Union. Hence, Latvia also usually agrees with and supports EU policies. An important exception recently has been the refugee crisis. However, unlike in other Central and Eastern European countries (such as Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia), the negative and populist attitude in the society and media towards the refugees and the German “open door” policy has not resulted in a considerable increase in anti-European sentiments. And it is highly unlikely that any anti-European populists will gain considerable support in the upcoming elections.

There are a few possible explanations for this lack of Euroscepticism, but the most plausible is the so-called Russia factor, especially as the situation is similar in all three Baltic States. It is no news that Russia is seen as a threat by all three states, and the EU (along with other international organisations, of course) is seen as a guarantor of security against potential Russian aggression. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas are seen as a clear warning from Russia, and, although this is often portrayed differently in the populist media, it is generally seen as a much graver threat to the Latvian statehood than the influx of refugees. The fact that the EU sided with the Baltic States and Poland on the issue of Ukraine (with the implementation of Minsk agreements and the imposition of sanctions) has demonstrated to these countries that the Union can be counted on for a guarantee of their statehood.

Furthermore, the importance of the EU in Latvian society is strongly reflected in the current discussion regarding the United Kingdom. The UK is seen as the strongest military ally in the EU, and Brexit has frightened not only the government, but also the public. The vast majority of Latvians are very concerned about the risks that Brexit will bring to society at both individual and structural levels, through limitations on free movement and in the potential weakening of the EU as a basis for Latvia’s economic and military security.² There is also some fear in Latvia that following the large differences in votes in Scotland and Northern Ireland as compared to England and Wales, Brexit might result in the dissolution of the UK itself, which would bring further economic and security risks to the European continent.

² According to Eurobarometer research from 2015, 65 percent of Latvians considered freedom of movement as the central benefit of the EU. See Eurobarometer 84, European Commission, December 2015, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2098>.