

Readiness of Latvian Society for EU-Accession: 1995 – 2002

Liene Jeruma, *liene.jeruma@bszi.lv*
Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, Riga

Latvia is one of the 10 Central and Eastern Europe states, which participate in the accession negotiations with European Commission and hope for integration in European Union. The conclusion of negotiations is expected by the end of 2002 with the candidate countries that fulfill all criteria for membership. And the next step will be the referendum of the population of the invited countries that will show the actual wish of the people – to join EU or not – and that will be the decisive answer of the candidate states to the accession invitation.

The worry and tension are increasing in the candidate states by the emergence of the question if societies are ready for such serious political and economical step, if all politicians' efforts of negotiations were worth. These questions are especially significant in the Baltic States because of public opinion surveys that show the decreasing number of euro supporters. In this work the problem of arising euro skepticism will be analyzed hoping to find answers and explanations, which social groups of Latvian society are in opposition of EU accession, what are the main tendencies in public opinion from 1995 to 2002 by social demographic parameters.

Observing the results of public opinion surveys from 1995 to 2002 the tendency similar to Estonia and Lithuania situation is approved: the nearer the accession invitation for Latvia in EU, the more critical view of the Latvian society on the state's incorporation into it (see *Figure 1*). The number of "euro enthusiasts" has decreased from 69% in 1995 to 52% in 2002. Simultaneously the number of euro skeptics has reached its maximum – 34% in 2002.

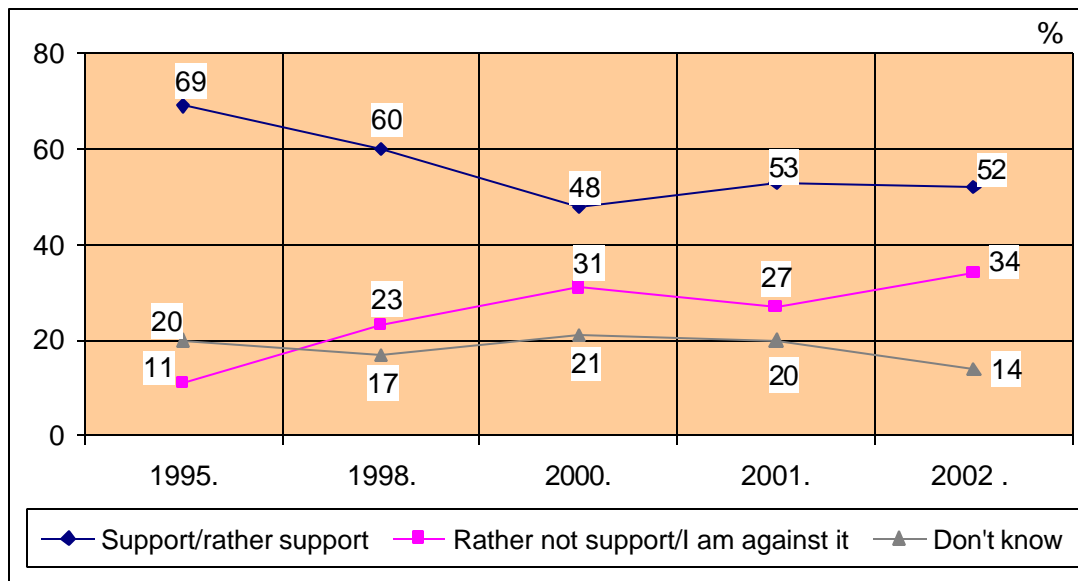
Why is it so? One reason is people's increasing interest and competence on the EU issues. In 2002 just 14% could not state their attitude towards Latvia integration in EU. It is one of the smallest numbers during last 7 years of respondents who have no their opinion on this question. People are concerned about enlargement of EU, do not avoid of talking and discussing and receiving information on these questions. But with the increase of information people awaken the negative consequences of this union, which force to start to doubt or even to deny the Latvia accession in EU. Wherewith since 1998 the "unconscious" respondents mostly have been joining the skeptically thinking part of the society.

To understand the other reasons of increasing euro scepticism we must identify the social groups that mostly support/ do not support Latvia accession in EU. Therefore social – demographic parameters such as *age, professional status, education, citizenship, living place, and level of income* are taken into consideration. In *Figure 2* the largest differences in the answers on Latvia accession in EU have emerged by age, professional status, and education.

Figure 1. Support of participation of Latvia in EU, 1995 – 2002

What is your attitude towards Latvia accession in the EU?

(Answers “support” and “rather support”, as well as “rather not support” and “I am against it” are summarized)



Source: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences;

stratified many - stage selection which is representative for the total population of Latvia;

base: % of all Latvian inhabitants; N(1995)=1025; N(1998)=1038; N(2000)=1030; N(2001)=510; N(2002)=513

The social - demographic portrait of euro optimists forms up as:

- young person (up to 24 years), student at school or university;
- self-employed,
- person with higher education and the highest level of income – more than 70 LVL per each family member,
- living in Riga or other city,
- has LR citizenship.

In other words, euro optimists are people with the highest income and higher education who feel most safely about themselves and perceive integration in EU as new opportunities in economical, social – cultural and political development for both the state and people living there. For young people it certainly associates with wider resources for education and career opportunities, while for self-employed, high level officials, specialists and managers these are possibilities for economical upswing of the enterprises, new partnerships and co-operations, also economical assistance to newly accessed countries, their companies.

It must be added that the groups of euro optimists have been holding constant since 1995 – they have been well-disposed all the time although their support has been diminished like support of the entire society.

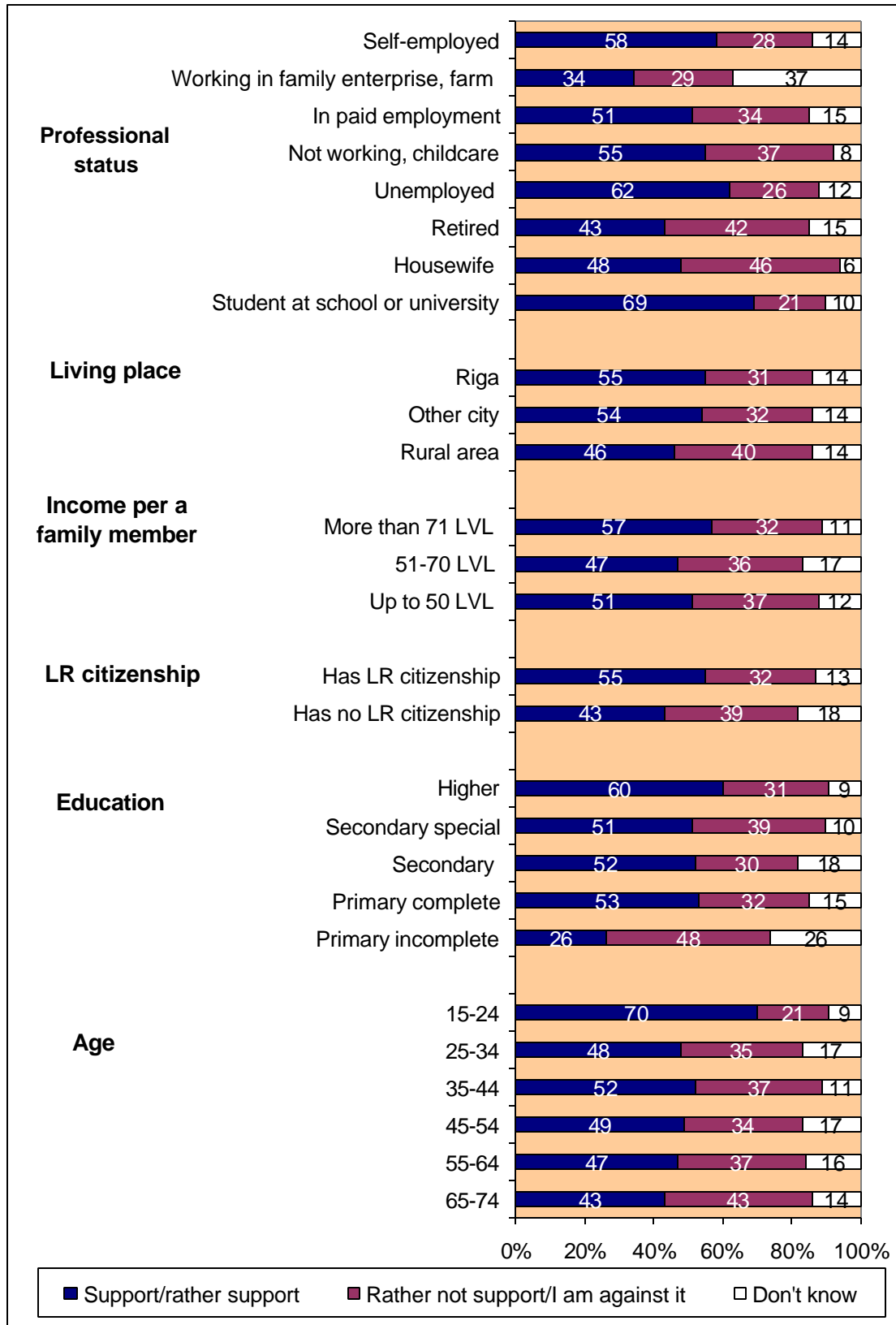
Euro pessimists who must be specially pointed out are:

- those living in the rural area;
- people with incomplete primary education;
- old people at the age from 65 to 74 years;
- retired;
- farmers (see Figure 2).

These euro sceptics groups also are constant since 1995, only they have increased numerically by joining the “unconscious” respondents. The survey of year 2002 relieves more radical gap in attitudes towards EU-accession by income, citizenship, age, professional status and education than it was in the previous years when support for Latvia accession was more common in all groups of society.

Figure 2. Influence of social-demographic parameters on attitude about Latvian accession in EU, 2002

What is your attitude towards Latvia accession in the EU? (Answers “support” and “rather support”, as well as “rather not support” and “I am against it” are summarized)



Source: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences;

Each euro pessimists group has its most characteristic reasons of reserved or renunciative attitude towards integration in EU. For old, retired people the negative attitude is based on fears to lose the Latvian identity – extinction of the Latvian language and culture, the state sovereignty and the national self-awareness, as well. For rural people and peasants working in farms without receiving any pay accession in EU associates with unconquerable competition with foreign farmers, the flow of import agricultural produce, the decrease of Latvian agriculture and wherewith Latvian peasants.

Some more negative stereotypes that dominate in society about Latvia accession in EU: the dependant relationship with EU institutions, which are not democratic because represent the interests of international market expansion and lobby the interests of big countries, transnational companies.

The antipathy against unequal dialogue with European institutions specially aroused after passing The Language law in Saeima which several times were corrected after assertive request of Max van der Stoep – High Commissioner on National Minorities of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). High Commissioner's suggestions to diminish demands of knowledge of the Latvian language in several positions for minorities were mostly put in the Language law after debate and politicians who had focused on nationally minded voters propagated the inability of the state institutions to protect the Latvian interests in European organizations.

Another painful question concerning accession in EU is the status and rights of migrants and refugees. Fears of foreign inexpensive, unskilled labour that could extract the local workers, as well as refugees that will have to be supported by the Latvian taxpayers' means create the scepticism in the average Latvian inhabitant, too.

Typical for public opinion is the fright of decrease not only in Latvian agriculture, but also in the national economy generally. The cheap sell-out and overexploitation of the local resources and labour, as well as production quota for local producers will preclude the blossom and development of the Latvian economics that was hoped for. Instead of it Latvia will receive the help of EU structural funds as the compensation during several years, which will not repay losses.

In Latvia the formation of public opinion on Latvia integration in EU can be characterised as occasional, dependent on success or failure of Latvian institutions in the international European courts, in accession negotiations with European Commission, as well as on the local political life reflected through mass media. For example, the Latvian society received the first deep negative information on Latvia and EU partnership in the parliament elections in 1998 when populist political parties included anti-propaganda on the EU in their voting campaign.

The same situation has repeated this year, in the period of electioneering. It must be added that on October 5 Latvia had the 8th parliament elections. The importance of Latvia incorporation in EU is proved by the fact that almost all leading political parties had defined their attitude towards this question in their election programmes. Attitude of position parties most frequently could be characterized as positive towards the essence of accession, but with the stress on acquirement of the maximum profit in the negotiations with European Commission, and protection of interests of the national economy and cultural identity.

However the small parties which were only trying to access in Saeima (national parliament) and opposition parties manipulated with the public opinion and pointed out the efforts of leading parties to take Latvia to EU by all available means, their inability of protection of the state and its population from the disadvantageous and authoritarian decisions of EU institutions.

Summarising aforesaid in Latvia there are two basic formers of public opinion on EU issues - mass media and politicians.

The very low trust in political parties (77% of the Latvian society completely or rather distrust¹), the parliament (71%) and the government (63%) complicates the situation (see *Figure 3*). As a result the society feels alienated from the passed laws and declared goals in the state institutions and unwillingly listen their spread information, but the advancement towards EU has perceived as the goal represented purely politicians' interests. This is one of the main reasons of the negative disposition in the Latvian society concerning EU.

The decision of Latvia integration in EU was included in the parliament-accepted conception of Foreign Policy of Latvia already in 1995 and later in the next governments' declarations and memoranda, but politicians did not find it necessary to explain clearly their position on the issue, to inform inhabitants on benefits and costs of this step, to participate in regular debates with population in mass media and thus to form purposefully both official position of the state on the Latvia integration in EU and the public opinion favourable to the state position.

In *Figure 3* it is seen that inhabitants express high trust in mass media (70% of society has trust in radio, 68% - in TV, 54% - in press²) and the only official that leaves behind mass media is the president of the Republic of Latvia Vaira Vike-Freiberga (71% feel trust in her³). The president is conscious of her resource of society's trust and has started to organize her and foreign politicians' meetings with the Latvian inhabitants on TV. This is the serious step towards influence and formation of the public opinion in direction of the government support on EU issues.

The other performers that popularise benefits of the EU-accession in apart from politicians are state institutions like European Integration Bureau, European Information Center, Institute of Foreign Relations etc., as well as non-governmental organizations – Club "Home – Youth for Unified Europe", Europe Movement in Latvia" etc. Their efficiency of influence of society's opinion is considerably lower, and this means that the government, as well as concrete politicians must undertake the leading role and responsibility for the information campaign on EU issues in Latvia.

Lately analysis-independent experts (like political scientists, sociologists, economists, journalists, etc.) have become active in expressing their attitude on EU-accession, as well as on the benefits and costs of this process. Their well-grounded ideas and statements have been influencing significantly, remarkably on the formation of public opinion. It must be considered as positive process when scientists have been following and commenting the government, politicians and officials' decisions and behaviour concerning EU-accession, when society itself has started the discussion on its future and is preparing for decision-making process.

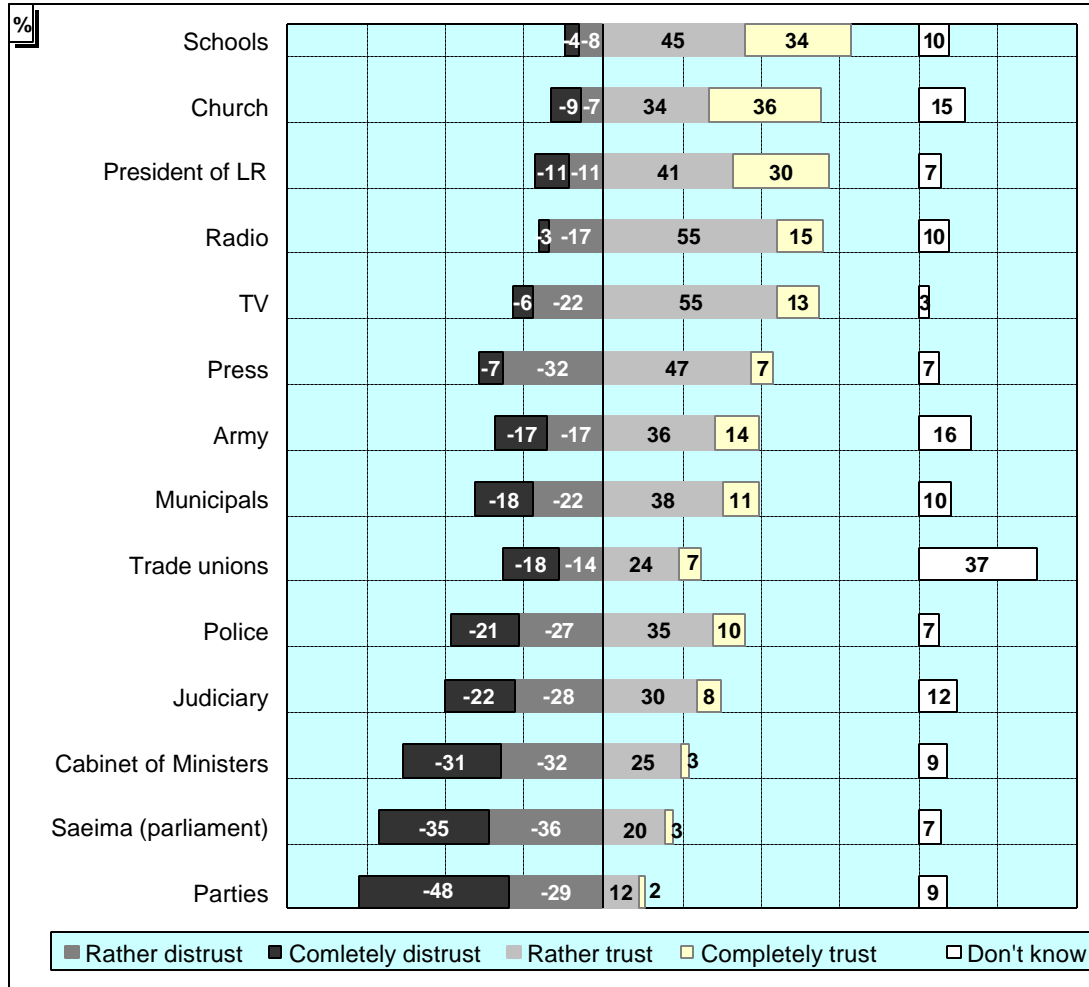
¹ *Source: Baltic Data House, August 2002.*

² *Source: the same.*

³ *Source: Baltic Data House, August 2002.*

Figure 3. Trust/ distrust of Latvian inhabitants in political and social organizations, 2002

To what extent do you trust in ...?



Source: Baltic Data House, August 2002;

base: % of all respondents; N=99