



# Weekly Briefing

**Latvia social briefing:**  
**National Identity in Latvia during the COVID Pandemic:**  
**Challenges and Opportunities**  
**Institute of Economics at the Latvian Academy of Sciences**

## China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: : Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

# **National Identity in Latvia during the COVID Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities**

## **Summary**

*The national identity of the Latvian state, just like elsewhere in Europe, has faced various obstacles. Even today, it faces non-use or ignorance of the Latvian language among the Latvian population, integration of minorities and immigrants into society, as well as appreciation of common values, cultural heritage and traditions. However, due to the national identity and integration policy of the Latvian state, as well as the desire of the population itself under the influence of Covid-19 restrictions, the national identity of the Latvian population is nurtured and developed to the best of its ability.*

## **Introduction**

In Latvia, as in any other country, the national identity of the country is based on a common language, culture and the history. In the 21st century, new obstacles have emerged that limit the common and unified language among all Latvians, but efforts are being made to preserve and improve the further development of Latvia's national identity, which would include everyone. The major political force is the policy of national identity and integration, the main task of which is to promote the satisfaction and love of the population towards the Latvian language, common values and the Latvian cultural space. During the Covid-19 pandemic, as elsewhere, in Latvia there were concerns about the future of national identity, but it is statistically proven that people value cultural heritage more during the pandemic, as well as form a united community to participate in public holidays such as day of proclamation of Latvia's independence on November 18.

### **I. National Identity and Integration Policy in Contemporary Latvia**

Today in Latvia, 63% of the population are Latvians. The second most represented nationality is Russians (24%) and the third is Belarusians (3%). 10% of the population are other minority nationalities. According to the results of the Central Statistical Bureau, it can be said that almost a third of the population in Latvia is not Latvian. In a way, this poses new challenges, such as the knowledge and use of the Latvian language in everyday life. Most of the Latvian

population speaks both Latvian and Russian, but a large number speak only Russian. There is a dilemma here about whether to offer so many opportunities where the Russian language is developed, but to consider the Latvian language as an option in a daily life. It is known that even in Russian schools Latvian language lessons are provided, as well as 60% / 40% of the general teaching process throughout Latvia is in Latvian. However, this is still not enough, which can be seen in the idea of the state leadership to ask the population to be vaccinated not only in Latvian but also in Russian as well, in the hope that it will reach more people. Of course, in the process of integration it is important to be aware of different strata of society and their cultural differences, but it must also be remembered that Latvia is the only place in the world where the Latvian language and culture can develop fully, so it is especially important to strengthen a common foundation which has both a unifying Latvian identity, strengthening it in the conditions of modern globalization, and it is possible for the population of a minority to join it.

For development of the country, it's important that Latvia's national identity and integration policy respond both to the new challenges of the 21st century and continue the work of social cohesion that began in the 1990s. Latvia is part of the Western political and economic space. Accession to the European Union opened new opportunities for the people of Latvia. At the same time, it makes us look more closely at the challenges of national identity and integration policy. Many Latvians have gone to work abroad, both by settling in their home countries for a short time and planning to stay there for a long time. Latvian youth have gone to education in European and world schools and universities. The national policy of national identity and integration, including the policy of citizenship, should take care to undermine the national identity, the sense of belonging to Latvia, to attract every citizen, regardless of where he or she lives, as well as to facilitate his or her return to Latvia. Citizens of the European Union and young immigrants have also settled in Latvia. In the process of integration, it is necessary to anticipate and give opportunities for these people to learn the Latvian language, get to know common values and the Latvian cultural space, so that new ethnic groups and disagreements in intercultural dialogue do not form.

## **II. Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on National Identity**

Latvia's ranking in the list of red zone countries, as well as taking the leading position in mortality from COVID-19. As elsewhere in the world, efforts to reduce the spread of the epidemiological disease in Latvia have had a significant impact on many things, including national identity. The most noticeable impact are the restrictions related to cultural events and

the learning process, both of which are major aspects in the identification of Latvia's national identity. In lockdown mode, cultural events were cancelled. This means that all theatre performances, concerts, poetry readings, art exhibitions and other things were temporarily disabled, which meant that the balanced development of the preservation and enrichment of this national identity was temporarily limited. On the one hand, it caused a big change from the economic point of view, where cultural activities and the budget allocated to them knocked out the state budget, but also the unemployment of cultural workers, but on the other hand, it created an additional patriotism in people. According to a survey conducted by the Central Statistical Council, 46% of respondents said that they had bought tickets to more than 5 different cultural events since 15.11.2021 because they could not wait to enjoy their usual performances. In this respect, it must be appreciated that perhaps the impact of COVID-19 has been good in raising feelings of national identity and patriotism, as well as promotes greater involvement of people in the development of the Latvian cultural space. People also travelled more in Latvia, got to know nature trails, national tourist sites, played more board games, which has a positive impact on national identity.

The issue of national identity is especially relevant in November, as the day of proclamation of Latvia's independence is on November 18. The country celebrated its 103rd anniversary in 2021. 2021 was the second year in a row that due to the pandemic it was not possible to traditionally celebrate November 18, which is the main national and patriotic holiday in Latvia. A survey by the Institute of Social and Political Studies of the University of Latvia's Faculty of Social Sciences showed that at least three-quarters of the country's population celebrated the holiday before the pandemic. The celebration builds and strengthens trust in the common views and institutions of the Latvian community, as well as in the solidarity of its members. During the social crisis caused by COVID-19, certain requirements had to be met with regard to public holiday arrangements, which immediately meant that certain celebratory activities had to be carried out individually or only with members of one's own household. This arrangement vividly reflected the fact that participation in the celebration of national holidays is of great importance in the formation of an individual's national identity, because for many it is this joint placement of candles or the singing of the national anthem that makes them feel part of Latvia and its people. However, more than in other years, the influence and importance of social networks proved, as many in social networks tried to maintain the patriotic spirit, thus involving others in their celebration traditions, as well as national news portals such as LSM.LV provided samples of patriotic folk songs or insight into the history of Latvia. All these activities

ensured internal unity among the population, thus promoting the development of national identity and integration practices.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of national identity is relevant in many parts of the world, including Latvia. The state's national identity and integration policy opens the door to various minorities and immigrants and their involvement and inclusion among the population of the Republic of Latvia, however, it also causes such problems as lesser use of the state language and putting culture and national values aside. It is important to pay attention to the fact that in the process of integration it must be remembered that the unifying basis is the Latvian language, the preservation and enrichment of the cultural and national identity, the unique cultural space for the balanced development of the Latvian national state. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had an impact on the development of the country's national identity, including positively stimulating the knowledge of one's own country and national culture better. The restrictions imposed by the lockdown, on the one hand, reflected that cultural events are a large part of Latvia's national identity, but on the other hand, it was a challenge for the residents, who, even in the lockdown mode, create a co-operative celebration through social networks on their own initiative. In general, it can be said that although the Latvia's national identity faces various obstacles and challenges, solutions are found not only by the government, but also by the people themselves.

## References

1. CSP. (2021, February 16). *Demogrāfija*. Centrālā statistikas pārvalde. <https://www.csp.gov.lv/lv/demografija>
2. LSM. (n.d.). *LV portāls - Cilvēks. Valsts. Likums*. lsm.lv. <https://lvportals.lv/viedokli/334877-svetkiem-piemit-mainibas-perspektiva-2021>
3. LSM. (2021a, November 17). *Valsts prezidents svētkos aicina būt vienotiem*. LSM.LV. [https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/valsts-prezidents-svetkos-aicina-but-vienotiem.a430698/?utm\\_source=lsm&utm\\_medium=theme&utm\\_campaign=theme](https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/valsts-prezidents-svetkos-aicina-but-vienotiem.a430698/?utm_source=lsm&utm_medium=theme&utm_campaign=theme)
4. LSM. (2021b, November 18). *Mūrniece: Uzticība Latvijas valstij vienmēr ir jāvusi mums pārvarēt vissmagākos laikus*. LSM.LV. [https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/murniece-uzticiba-latvijas-valstij-vienmer-ir-lavusi-mums-parvaret-vissmagakos-laikus.a430803/?utm\\_source=lsm&utm\\_medium=theme&utm\\_campaign=theme](https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/murniece-uzticiba-latvijas-valstij-vienmer-ir-lavusi-mums-parvaret-vissmagakos-laikus.a430803/?utm_source=lsm&utm_medium=theme&utm_campaign=theme)
5. REplay. (2021, November 16). *Katras valsts brīvība sākas cilvēkā: kā ir "būt brīvam" katram un visiem kopā* - REplay.lv. [https://replay.lsm.lv/lv/ieraksts/lr/151714/katras-valsts-briviba-sakas-cilveka-ka-ir-but-brivam-katram-un-visiem-kopa?utm\\_source=lsm&utm\\_medium=RP-widget-top&utm\\_campaign=RP-widget](https://replay.lsm.lv/lv/ieraksts/lr/151714/katras-valsts-briviba-sakas-cilveka-ka-ir-but-brivam-katram-un-visiem-kopa?utm_source=lsm&utm_medium=RP-widget-top&utm_campaign=RP-widget)