

Intervention by Inese Birzniece, MP  
EU Convention member from Republic of Latvia Saeima  
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Overview of the National Debate on the Future of Europe  
in Latvia

A few comments in Latvian about the National Debate in Latvia concerning the future of Europe:

All year round I gathered songs,  
Waiting for Midsummer Night,  
Midsummer Night is here at last,  
It is time to sing all the songs.

This is one of several thousand Latvian folk songs sung by Latvians around the world last night and this morning. Today is Jani, our most popular Latvian holiday, the summer solstice, Midsummer Night. Jani marks a divide in both nature and the work in the countryside. In nature it is the longest day and the shortest night, when the short summer in Latvia has reached its flowering height. For farmers, it marks the end of the planting season and the beginning of the harvest period. The highest point of the sun has been reached and all celebrants as the children of Jani participate in the annual wedding of the Sky Father and the Earth Mother.

The blessings of nature and God are the traditional Janu cheese and freshly-brewed beer. Songs, dances and rituals of Jani by all celebrants bring blessings to everything and everyone to whom the songs are addressed. Women and girls wear flower wreaths while men have wreath of oak leaves. Bonfires are lit and the celebration last the entire night, otherwise one will sleep away the rest of the summer.

How does Jani and this folk costume from my father's Barta district in southwestern Latvia relate to Latvia's national debate about the future of Europe? Regardless of the form of this national debate in Latvia, whether formally organized by the political establishment as the National Convention on the Future of the EU or the casual debates about Latvia and the EU by two people at the local pub or at the dinner table, the most common topic and issue discussed is the impact of the EU upon the Latvian national identity, both as a sovereign state and as a distinct Baltic culture and national heritage with its own language, mythology, folk songs, folk traditions and mentality.

The Latvian Government, together with the NGO, European Movement-Latvia, has organized and held the first meeting of the Latvian National Convention on the future of the EU on May 9, Europe Day. This three-hour meeting in Riga was co-chaired by the Prime Minister and the President of the European Movement-Latvia and broadcast live on the Latvian State Radio with over 200 participants from different social groups and

regions of Latvia attending. Representatives from various segments of society attended including the national and regional mass media, academicians, cultural societies of minorities living in Latvia, general NGOs, professional associations, arts, culture, sports, religious organizations, entrepreneurs, social partners and local governments. Other interested persons were also able to attend.

The first meeting included three panel discussions on these topics: 1) Latvia's sovereignty in the future Europe, 2) Latvia's identity in the future Europe, and 3) Latvia's role in the future Europe. The Latvian members to the EU Convention and invited NGO representatives made introductory presentations about each topic, followed by an open-ended discussion with the other participants.

While the Convention is trying to focus on the future EU of 5, 10 or 20 years from today, most of the Latvian public is concerned about debating the near-term future relationship between Latvia and the EU, especially as a potential EU Member State. Thus, the first official meeting of the National Convention in Latvia became a discussion about the public's concerns about, the benefits and drawbacks of EU membership for Latvia. Many speakers also emphasized that Latvia's accession to the EU was a question of catching up with lost time (50 years) and maintaining the same tempo of development with other European states, if not surpassing them.

Currently, the Latvia National Convention is creating 6 working groups, to parallel the existing working groups of the EU Convention. These Latvian working groups will be studying and discussing their topics with the goal to present discussion points and possible guiding principles about each topic at the next Latvian National Convention meeting in late August. In this way, the National Convention can serve to stimulate a broad national debate about both the current and future EU and Latvia's possible roles in such. More detailed information about the Latvian National Convention on the Future of Europe and other forms of this national debate in Latvia is available in the written overview document submitted to the Convention secretariat.

The Latvian Government, Parliament and all political parties in the Parliament have committed themselves to holding a citizens' referendum on Latvia's accession to the EU, after the Accession Treaty has been signed, perhaps late next summer or early fall. It is most important that our EU Convention goals of transparency, democratic legitimacy, simplification of the treaties and a more effective decision-making process do not mean the high cost of sacrificing one of the basic riches of today's EU, our cultural and linguistic diversity.

In conclusion allow me to return to the lessons of Misummer Night: One of the most important Midsummer herbs in Latvia is the mythical blooming fern, which, according to legend, opens its magic golden flower only on Midsummer Eve at midnight. This search for the blooming fern blossom by young couples is the essence of our Midsummer night. The results of this search appear to be successful as we note that every year around March 23 there is an increase in the number of children born.

Perhaps the Latvian search of the blooming fern blossom could be a contribution to Europe's demographic problems, just as our other cultural traditions and language can be valuable assets to the future EU. In our search for the more democratic Europe of the future, perhaps we all need to look for this fern blossom during the warm summertime and find its offered truth, beauty and love.

Thank you for your attention.