

Social Memory Monitoring of Latvia 2017

Executive summary

The goal of the *Social Memory Monitoring of Latvia 2017* is to acquire new data on the attitudes of Latvian society towards various historical issues, as well as on the dynamics of these attitudes. In order to achieve this, the Social Memory Research Center carried out a survey in cooperation with the research center SKDS and Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia. A handful of the 2017 survey questions were taken from the *Social Memory Monitoring of Latvia 2012*, as well as from other surveys that date back to 2004. Taken together, the longitudinal data presented in this report helps to understand the persistent and dynamic elements of the Latvian social memory, focusing on the reconciliation drivers and inhibitors vis-à-vis the most controversial episodes of Latvia's history (e.g. WWII, the Soviet period).

The data of the 2017 monitoring reveals the patterns of Latvia's social memory. First, a substantial part of the Latvian society is not able to take a position on most of the periods of Latvia's history before the 20th century when the European roots of Latvian identity and the awareness of the Latvian culture emerged. At the same time, the data indicates a predominantly positive attitude towards the foundation of the Republic of Latvia in 1918 and the Independence War (1918-1920). Hence, these two historical episodes that are very relevant to the Latvian statehood demonstrate a high potential to strengthen the society and unite various groups (ethnic Latvians and Russian-speaking minority, different generations and regions, etc.).

The results of the monitoring also suggest that the Latvian society has become more tolerant towards different historical narratives. In comparison with the 2012 monitoring, Latvians currently are more likely to accept that different societal groups in Latvia have different perspectives on the same historical events. Additionally, the majority of respondents believe that the evaluation of ambiguous historical events should be exclusively done by historians or other experts.

On the other hand, attitudes towards the World War II and Soviet occupation of Latvia still maintain the highest conflict potential in Latvia's social memory. Remarkably, though, the consensus of Russophone minority that Latvia voluntarily became a part of the Soviet Union has significantly weakened over the last five years. That has not, however, increased Russian-speakers' support for the occupation narrative, which prevails among the ethnic Latvians. Instead, an increasing group of Russophone respondents choose to abstain from answering this question (reaching 37% in 2017 survey). A thorough analysis of data rejects an assumption that Russian-speaking minority is afraid to state their opinion. On the contrary, it rather alludes to the changing attitude towards the distorted pro-Soviet narrative that Latvia voluntary joined the USSR. Moreover, although the Soviet occupation topic holds a potential of symbolic confrontation between ethnic Latvians and Russian-speaking minority, most individuals believe that in current circumstances the discussion on how Latvia became a part of the USSR is not relevant.

At the same time, differences on the evaluation of Soviet repressions towards Latvian citizens are still salient among ethno-linguistic groups. While Latvians hold a strong consensus that Soviet deportations were illegal, Russian-speakers are more likely to justify the Soviet deportations of Latvian civilians to Siberia and other remote parts of the USSR. This highlights the lack of knowledge and understanding of Communist crimes among Latvia's ethnic minorities.

The polarization also exists in terms of the commemoration of the victims of the holocaust. The size of the group, who is convinced that the Latvian government should do more in commemorating the victims of the holocaust, is nearly the same as the group of respondents, who are satisfied with the *status quo*. Looking at the data through the ethnolinguistic perspective, it is evident that the former group largely consists of Russian-speaking individuals, while the opposite is true for the latter. Yet, the data do not show correlation between taking part in the public commemorative events with respect to the commemoration of the holocaust and the attitude towards the government's responsibility to advance the commemoration. On the contrary – the absolute majority of the society do not take part in public commemoration of the holocaust victims.

In the context of World War II, one can still observe high diversity of attitudes towards the veterans, which is evident both among ethnic Latvians and Russian-speaking individuals. Particularly, both groups demonstrate a significant support for a claim that Latvian citizens, who fought in the World War II, were victims or simultaneously victims and heroes; the number of individuals, who believe that the veterans are exclusively heroes or villains, is relatively smaller. Hence, the conflict potential of the World War II is relatively low. Rather, it seems that there are signs of reconciliation between ethnic Latvians and the Russian-speaking minority. This is supported also by the data on the attitude towards two competing unofficial dates, when the WWII veterans are commemorated, i.e., March 16th for the Latvian Legion and May 9th or the Victory day, celebrated mostly among the Russian-speaking minority. The data suggest that negative and confrontational attitudes towards these commemorative dates, as well respective monuments, have lessened. In this pluralistic situation, only the victimization narrative has the potential to establish a shared understanding of the WWII and to unite a substantial part of ethnic Latvians and Russian-speaking minority. This narrative primarily considers all of the veterans as the victims of the war.

The data from the survey shows that the Independence Day celebrated on November 18th has evolved into a sustainable mnemonic ritual with a strong attachment to particular historical events that are popular among all ethnic groups in Latvia. The same is true for November 11th, the Lāčplēsis day, when the heroes of the Independence War (1918-1920) are commemorated. It is particularly noteworthy that the Lāčplēsis day is becoming increasingly popular among families with children. Hence, the founding of Latvia nearly a century ago has a high potential to consolidate the society on the basis of history. Besides, the 2017 monitoring shows that a new remembrance tradition has emerged on May 4th, a day when the restoration of the independence of Latvia in 1990 is celebrated. At the same time, the participation in the events, which commemorate the victims of the communist regime on March 25th and June 14th has significantly decreased over the last five years.