Local Referendums as a Paradigm for Transformation of Citizens’ Participation in Latvia

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Abstract
There is a single level local government system in Latvia since the last local elections in June 2009. In 2012 there are 119 local governments – 9 cities and 110 municipalities (novads). This administrative territorial division is the result of the administrative territorial reform, implemented in the 1990s. Although local governments are the closest power to citizens, voting activity in local elections in Latvia is lower than in the elections of the Parliament (Fig. 1). At the same time, the citizens’ trust in local governments is much higher than in the government, as well as Parliament and political parties, but, unfortunately, the attitude towards all these institutions in general is negative.

The system of the representative democracy of Latvia is in need of a serious transformation in all levels of governance. One of the possible solutions would be strengthening of the forms of direct democracy, which would ensure steady opportunities of participation in different processes of life beyond elections.

Keywords: citizens’ participation, local democracy, local governments, direct democracy, local referendum.

Introduction
Institutions of representative democracy in many countries, including the so called old democracies, experience decline in citizen trust. Edelman Trust Barometer 2012, the trust survey conducted by an international network of public relations agencies in 25 countries around the world, shows that 38% of citizens trust in the national governments (Edelman, 2012). Besides that, levels of citizen trust in governments in 2012 have reached the lowest point in the past five years. Levels of distrust apply to the performance of public officials as well – nearly half of respondents of the study did not trust government leaders to tell them the truth (Edelman, 2012).

The state of affairs in Latvia is fairly similar. A sign of crisis in democratic representative institutions is the low trust in public authorities, decrease in electoral participation, little interest to become involved in participation forms of the representative democracy. The voter turnout in the regular elections of the parliament of the Republic of Latvia has decreased from 89% in 1993 elections to 61% in 2006 elections; down to 59% in an early election of the parliament in 2011 (Fig. 1).

Fig.1. Voter turnout in the parliamentary and local elections in Latvia (1993–2011)
Data source: The Central Election Commission of Latvia, 2012
According to data from a survey conducted in July 2012, only 16% of the residents of Latvia have trust in the parliament and 21% in the government (Seimuskane, SKDS, 2012). Although the voter turnout in local government elections is decreasing (Fig. 1), the level of residents’ trust in local governments is comparatively higher: the results of 2012 survey revealed that 48% of the residents have trust in local governments, while 45% have not (Seimuskane, SKDS, 2012). The indicators of public trust in Latvia correspond to tendencies in other European countries where the population has more trust in local governments than in public authorities at the national level (Eurobarometer, 2009).

People have more trust in those public authorities which are closer to the epicentre of their challenges, those who know better the needs and the desires of the population. Comparatively higher levels of trust in local authorities indicate that this particular layer of government could help overcome distrust in Europe and should have a greater say in the implementation of EU policies (Eurobarometer, 2009).

The crisis of representative democracy does not necessarily mean the end of democracy, rather the need to transform the system in at least a few important segments. There are questions of increasing urgency – how to overcome distrust in representative bodies, could introduction of forms of direct participation or their improvement have a transformational effect? This challenge is so crucial to the member states that the Committee of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in September 2011, was adopted a special recommendation, stressing that the improvement of local democracy and direct citizen participation is likely to be a key issue in the future activity of the Council of Europe (EC, Rec 307 (2011)).

Also the European Charter of Local Self-Government (1985) indicates the significance of direct citizen participation in tackling the issues of the local community. Its preamble says that the right of citizens to participate in the conduct of public affairs is one of the democratic principles that are shared by all member States of the Council of Europe. Part two of the Article 3 of the Charter refers to assemblies of citizens, referendums or any other form of direct citizens’ participation, clarifying that the concept of local self-government, as explained in this Charter, shall in no way affect recourse to these procedures. Besides, the Article 5 of the Charter declares that changes in local authority boundaries shall not be made without prior consultation of the local communities concerned, possibly by means of a referendum where this is permitted by statute. Yet the Charter does not include any principles specifying the forms of direct citizens’ participation, nor any recommendations to the municipalities. In 2009, the European Committee for Local and Regional Democracy within the Council of Europe drew up the Additional Protocol to the Charter on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority. The aim of the Addition Protocol to the Charter is to call upon the member states to secure within their jurisdiction the right to determine or to influence the exercise of a local authority’s powers and responsibilities in order to facilitate the exercise of this right.

Already since 1999, various forums in Latvia have debated the role and the introduction of local referendums. Since 2008 the ministry in charge of local governments has drafted several draft laws on local referendums. Recent, 2012 version of the draft law prepared by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (since 2011 ministry is responsible for local governments) is now subject to public consultation. The draft law requires introduction of local referendums in Latvia on 1 January 2013.

The aim of the article is to study: what is the attitude of the population in Latvia towards the participation process in local governments; what forms of participation they use; what is their judgment on securing the forms of direct participation; could the introduction of local referendums fundamentally transform the quality of citizens’ participation in local governments in Latvia.

Theoretical Framework of the Research

Does participation play a role in modern public governance? It does, unless the participation process is not an imitation and has not a status of a formal procedure. In recent years, sayings like “from local government to local governance” or even “governance without government” become increasingly popular. Apart from exaggeration, their essence clearly shows the direction of modern public governance neither central government, nor local governments can operate autonomously any more without close cooperation with citizens, civil society organizations, other bodies, and enterprises (Vanags, 2006). Already now the actual situation in Europe shows that citizens ever more often use new forms of communication to express their opinions, often outside the official framework of cooperation.

J.Breul and J.Kamensky, leading researchers in American public management, developed six most important trends of government transformation, and the two most important ones among these were attributed to participation: engaging citizens in governance – along with the traditional approach of informing citizens and surveying their opinions,
it was said that citizen training and involvement in
decision making is important; also using networks and
partnerships because governments at all levels ever
more often have to make unconventional decisions
that require cooperation with other organisations and
use of information technologies (Kamensky, 2006).

It’s not easy to answer the following questions:
when is a low level of participation down to
contentment and when does it reflect discontentment
—a poorly organised participatory democracy; is there
a connection between participation indicators and
citizens’ satisfaction with policies implemented by the
authorities; which factors contribute to participation
activity and which create dislike? Besides, there is
quite a popular set of beliefs that acknowledges a
contradiction between democracy and efficiency,
arguing that more effective are those decisions that
are made by qualified, highly professional personnel,
and use of participation procedures is just a waste of
time with little result. Robert Dahl, one of the most
prominent researchers of political science in the 20th
century, formulated 6 different reasons why people

According to Dahl’s conclusions, you are less
likely to get involved:
1. ... if you place a low value on the rewards from
   political involvement relative to the rewards you
   expect from other kinds of activity;
2. ... if you think that there is no significant difference
   in the alternatives before you and, consequently,
   that what you do won’t matter;
3. ... if you think that what you do won’t matter
   because you can’t significantly change the
   outcome anyway;
4. ... if you believe that the outcome will be relatively
   satisfactory to you without your involvement;
5. ... if you feel that your knowledge is too limited
   for you to be effective;
6. ... the greater the obstacles placed in your way, the
   less likely you are to become involved in politics

More and more the weak state of representative
bodies brings into question the securing of the role
of direct democracy. Direct democracy means that
citizens have a right to directly participate in making
the most important decisions for the country and
the society through a popular vote, not only to fulfil
the obligatory requirements of the law, but also on
personal initiative, regardless of the preferences of
the representative bodies. In the context of direct
democracy, it is important to note two criteria.

The first, it applies to decision-making on
important political matters, but it doesn’t apply to
particular individuals. Namely, the right to elect own
representatives and to withdraw them (for example,
members of the city council or the parliament) is not
considered an expression of direct democracy.

The second, direct democracy grants power to
citizens, but its procedures are aimed at distribution
of powers. It means that the legal framework sets the
number of citizens required to initiate procedures of
direct democracy, regardless of the preferences of the
judicial power, or the executive power, at any level of
the governance (Buchi, 2011).

Direct democracy comprises several forms of
participation, i.e. referendums, citizens’ initiative,
counter-proposals, etc. Procedures of popular vote,
initiated not by citizens but by public authorities
(plebiscite), do not attribute to direct democracy
(Buchi, 2011).

In order to ensure direct participation, European
countries use various models, yet the referendum
is the most common form of citizens’ participation
(CG (21)3, 2011). Most European countries have a
practice of consultative referendums, few countries –
only binding referendums, but in several countries,
for example, in Switzerland, both consultative and
binding referendums are used. It is because of the
tradition of referenda and their great experience that
Switzerland is considered to be the founder of direct
democracy.

Premat, a French researcher, when analyzing
the tradition of Swiss direct democracy, draws
attention to a series of interesting conclusions:
- direct democracy procedures are much harder to
  manipulate with. They cannot be implemented
  immediately, and, to receive support to the issue
  that is put to vote, the population needs to be
  convinced;
- direct democracy procedures aim at the interests
  of the majority. But, in order to achieve a positive
  outcome in the long term, the perfect construct is
  maintaining balance between the rule of majority
  and the protection of minorities;
- direct democracy means elaborate tradition.
  Referenda and popular initiatives are a way of
  reaching agreement on common interests, when
  community representatives take a vote;
- it is wrong to think that direct democracy proce-
  dures are a deep disturbance of representative
government. The case of Swiss referendums is
that from 1848 to 2006, of 160 popular initiatives,
only 9% were approved;
- direct democracy procedures can be a good way
  to solve social inequities or conflicts;
- direct democracy is a part of the political education
  of citizens. The involvement of the incompetent
citizen is an argument used against direct
democracy procedures which are characterised
as simplifying some political problems. In fact
“direct” does not mean the “simple” or fulfilment of immediate wish but a closer relation between citizens and political topics. The complexity of the procedures allows citizens to organise themselves, to learn much from political culture and the culture of cooperation of their country;

- direct democracy is not an area governed by the media. Their task is to help the citizens to understand the manifold aspects of the referendum question. Yet the media cannot determine the outcome of the referendum vote;

- direct democracy is not an inexpensive procedure, but sometimes it may help to avoid the huge effects of lobbying, including financial expenses;

- a clear legal framework for procedures has an impact on the quality of direct democracy;

- any abuse of direct democracy might be banned by a Constitutional court (Premat, 2006).

Obviously, whether the direct democracy procedures will improve the quality of citizens’ participation or not, depends also on other factors, including the tradition of organizing the participation process, and the political culture, and the culture of cooperation at the particular level of governance.

**Research Methodology**

From July 13 till July 24, 2012, the authors of this paper in cooperation with the Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre (SKDS) conducted a survey among the residents of Latvia, using the method of direct interview at respondent’s home (Seimuskane, SKDS, 2012). Using stratified random sampling, 1050 permanent residents of Latvia aged 15-74 were surveyed, which is the representative sample of the general population. All regions of Latvia were included in the polling. The aim of the poll was to study: which forms of citizens’ participation are used by the residents; which factors determine and influence citizens’ participation; are there any connections between participation and trust in representative bodies; how do the residents view the introduction of local referendums, would the introduction of local referendums increase the level of citizens’ participation and lessen the crisis of trust in representative bodies. The survey data was analyzed using SPSS statistics program.

The research is based also on monographic method and document analysis method – study and evaluation of the normative acts and scientific researches.

**Legal Framework for Participation on Local Government Level in Latvia**

Legislation in the Republic of Latvia provides different options for residents to get involved in the work of the local government, its policy-making and decision-making process.

The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia guarantees that every citizen of Latvia has the right, as provided for by law, to participate in the work of the State and of local government, and to hold a position in the civil service (Constitution, Art. 101). Although in general the society perceives the participation in the work of the State and of local government as the right to participate in selection of the legislature, whether the Parliament (Saeima) or the local council, by voting and by standing as candidates, yet it is just one possible way of participation. This particular article gives the right to every citizen of Latvia not only to participate in elections and referendums, as provided for by law, but also to participate in exercising the legislative, executive and judicial powers in other ways laid down by law (Kusins, 2011, p.384-385). Direct and indirect participation in state affairs may take place, and Article 101 in the Constitution covers both of these forms of participation (Kusins, 2011).

Forms of participation may not be purely formal; they should be effective, because only effective participation corresponds to the principle of democracy. The respective rights protection mechanisms should be effective as well. The state not only has to provide the citizen with the formal right to participate, but it also has the responsibility to create the circumstances (opportunity) for the citizen to be able to participate in the work of the state and of local government, by consciously exercising this responsibility and comprehending the essence of participation (Kusiņš, 2011).

In accordance with the legislation, citizens of the Republic of Latvia and citizens of the European Union countries with permanent residency in Latvia are entitled to vote and to stand for election at parliament (Saeima) and local government elections. All residents of the country are entitled to form and join associations and political parties, to complaints and submissions, to a hearing, to challenge local administrative provisions, etc. (Vanags, Vilka, 2005).

To inform the citizens and for citizens’ participation in the local government, the legislation in the Republic of Latvia provides the following:

- local council elections;
- open council and committee meetings;
- availability of the council meeting minutes;
- council members holding office hours;
- reviewing complaints and submissions;
- public consultations;
- producing annual public reports (Vanags, Vilka, 2005)

In 2008, the **Law on Local Governments** (1994) was amended with article on a right to organise
Introduction of local referendums, and the Cabinet of Ministers was instructed to draft a bill on local referendums and to submit it to the Parliament (Saeima). Since 2008, for local governments responsible ministry (the Ministry of Regional Development and Local Governments till 2011, since 2011 - the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development) has drafted several times draft law on local referendums. The clause containing transitional provisions has been amended four times and the term for draft law preparation and submission to the Parliament all the time is postponed. Now the Ministry in charge is asking to the Cabinet of ministers for an extension to the deadline for submission of the draft law until October 1st, 2012.

In order to cooperate with the residents, local governments may use other forms of participation as well, because Section 12 in the Law on Local Governments (1994) allows them, in the interests of residents of the relevant administrative territory, to voluntarily carry out their initiatives with respect to any matter if it is not within the competence of the Saeima, the Cabinet of ministers, ministries, other State administrative institutions, the courts or other self-governments, or also if such activity is not prohibited by law. In Latvia, local governments may conduct opinion polls, resident meetings and forums, include representatives from NGOs or advocacy groups in committees and working groups, etc. Legal framework in Latvia does not forbid the local government council, acting by a majority, to call a consultative referendum in its administrative territory.

Research Results

Although the Latvian legislation provides different forms of citizens' participation in policy development at local government level, the results of the survey point to several challenges related to securing the participation process.

One of the survey objectives was to seek the views of the residents on local referendums: how the residents understand and judge this form of direct participation, what benefits or disadvantages they see; would the introduction of referendums at the local level have an impact on the level of citizens’ participation.

43% of the respondents support the introduction of local referendums in Latvia, while 1/3 of the respondents (34%) do not. Nearly one in four respondents (23%) found this question difficult to answer. In the authors’ opinion, the results of the survey and the fairly large number of erratic responses reflects the dual nature of the attitude towards referendums in the public rhetoric during the last year, which, on one hand, accentuates the significance of direct citizens’ participation, including referendums, in the development of the democracy, and, on the other hand, quite often points to the use of the referendum procedure as a fighting method in political competition, and placing too much emphasis on its role in parliamentary democracy, and the high financial cost of holding a referendum. Gunars Kutris, the president of the Constitutional Court, says about the issue of referendums that “(...) it is a sort of a method of political warfare. The local government elections are approaching, and the parties have to show their activity. You can lift yourself up by hiding yourself behind the battle cry of the defender of democracy. (...) These are normal methods of political warfare, which don’t involve slaughter”. (Vaivars, Kutris, 2012, p.14) Such statements are the most common in public rhetoric, and they largely coincide with the answers of the respondents when assessing several statements about local referendums: most often respondents noted that not all matters of local policy should be subject to referendum (69%), it is expensive to hold them (64%), there could be a lack of understanding among the residents about many issues that fall within municipal jurisdiction, resulting in short-sighted decisions (51%), referendums are a weapon of the political opposition used in political warfare to express discontent with the results of the election (51%).

Would the introduction of local referendums facilitate greater interest of residents in the social courses of action in the local government, and activate citizens’ participation in the decision-making process in local governments?

47% of respondents agree that introduction of referendums would facilitate great interest and higher level of participation, 30% disagree, but 23% of poll participants found the question difficult to answer.

Introduction of local referendums, according to respondents, would be a good way for the local government to:

- respect the interests of the residents – 51%;
- consult the residents – 48%;
- directly engage the residents in decision-making on different matters of high importance – 46%;
- cultivate and develop the residents’ sense of belonging, loyalty to the local community, territory – 44%;
- facilitate and develop local democracy – 41%;
- resolve differences between diametrically opposed, irreconcilable interest groups – 36%.

Yet, when assessing the statements about local referendums as the driving force of local democracy and a means of resolving differences between diametrically opposed, irreconcilable interest groups,
majority of respondents (44%) disagree with them. These results lead to a conclusion that respondents' attitude towards the referendum as a means of direct participation is more positive than the expectations about the development of local democracy, which obviously has been affected by not so positive personal experience of the particular individual or other individuals, in relation to the organization of the participation process, and the result of it.

Asked to write in their own words, why participation in decision-making process in their local government today is higher, the same, or lower than 3 years ago, most often respondents pointed to the low level of political trust; lack of faith that something could change; low engagement, lack of interest; people having other life priorities, and the massive emigration. The mood of the respondents is characterised by the following statements: “people don't believe something can be changed”, “they don't listen to my opinion anyway”; “nothing is changing, regardless of participation”; “can't achieve anything, people become tired of protesting”; “the self-government is at a far distance from the people”; “there aren’t that many active people left”, etc.

Participants of the poll reckon the following challenges in the context of local referendums:
- not all matters of municipal policy could be subject to referendum – 69%;
- the process of holding a local referendum would cost too much – 64%;
- there could be a lack of understanding among the residents about many issues that fall within municipal jurisdiction, thus local referendums could result in short-sighted decisions – 51%;
- referendums are a weapon of the political opposition used in political warfare to express discontent with the results of the election – 51%;
- local referendums would not yield results because of lack of residents' interest in the social courses of action in the local government – 47%;
- referendums discriminate tax payers – only citizens of the Republic of Latvia are eligible to participate – 47%.

There is a variety of local referendum traditions across European countries. Yet there is a belief that a right to decide upon any question falling within the exclusive competence of the local government (Levits, 2003), or within the scope of responsibilities of the local government (CG (21)3, 2011), should be secured for local referendums. 2/3 of respondents (69%) hold a view that not all matters of municipal policy could be put to referendum. In the authors' view, these opinions shouldn't be necessarily interpreted as a narrow understanding of local democracy, because the local referendum traditions in Europe define a series of matters that are “prohibited areas” to local referendums, for example, local government budgets, appointing or withdrawing local government officials, exacting local taxes and fees, matters of financial obligations of the local government, and signing the contracts within the private law sphere, etc. (Rec (307) 2011).

For this question, when attitudes of different socio-demographic groups are compared, a less than average proportion of affirmative responses were from respondents aged 15-24 (61%) and the oldest group aged 55-74 (67%). And a more than average proportion of respondents aged 25-54 were confident in this statement.

Answers to the question about the high financial cost of holding a local referendum in the poll do not show significant difference between the views of the respondents with regard to their age and gender. Most supportive (68%) of this view are people aged 45-54, least – aged 35-44 (59%) and 15-24 (61%). Data comparison between men and women yields a conclusion that a more than average proportion of women (67%) are convinced that the process of holding a referendum is expensive, compared to men (61%).

Respondents are fairly sceptical (51%) about the residents' competence regarding matters subject to local governance, which, in their opinion, may facilitate short-sighted decision-making in the local government. It is a sign that in the society, there is still a low self-esteem of the individual's competence. 47% of respondents say the local referendums won't yield any results because residents lack interest in the social courses of action in the local government.

Half (51%) of respondents are bothered by the use of referenda as an opposition's weapon in the political warfare to express discontent with the results of the local election. In the conditions of political competition in Latvia, this factor is significant for several reasons: first, the layout of political parties is such that 88% of Latvian local governments are run by chair persons with political affiliation to parties in opposition to the ruling political parties in the parliament and the government, or without a political connection to them, for example, local political associations and regional parties. Second, the referendum as a participation mechanism is a new tradition and form of cooperation both to the local government and the residents. Therefore, the choice of the optimum procedure of calling a referendum should be thoroughly assessed, so that, on one hand, it may lessen the possibility of using the referendum in political warfare, and, on the other hand, it wouldn't turn them into a mechanism, the use of which is complicated for the civic society, or of referendums being declared invalid.
The results of the poll point to several challenges to be considered during transformation or improvement of the organization of the participation process in local governments. These are:

- distrust in public authorities, largely stimulated both by irresponsible policies and clumsy, low quality public management;
- deep-rooted traditions of social passivity shaped both by the imitated participation form and government officials’ formal attitude towards it;
- disbelief in changing something by collaboration and in taking people’s opinions into consideration;
- total lack of interest and not seeing the point of participation;

- citizens having low self-esteem, lacking belief in one’s abilities, etc.

During a survey on different aspects of citizens’ participation in local governments, when asked what would be the respondent’s reaction in case the local government council made a decision in conflict with the interests of the residents of the local government, half (50%) of the respondents said they wouldn’t engage in any activity, even if the local government council made a decision which interferes with their interests. Only one third or 35% of the respondents stated that they would actively respond to such doings of the local government.

Respondents’ attitudes toward benefits and disadvantages of introduction of local referendums are as follows (Fig. 2).

Considering the options of advocating for residents’ interests in the local government and its institutions, the respondents were offered to assess several forms of participation (Fig. 3). The majority of respondents found such forms of advocacy and influencing self-government’s decisions effective:

- use of mass media in advancing a particular agenda – 59%;
- local elections – 58%;
- use of social media in advancing a particular agenda – 57%;
- personal contacts with members and official of the local government – 51%;
- collection of signatures, petitions – 51%;
- resident meetings – 49%;
- resident polls – 49%;
- local referendums – 45%;
- public consultations – 45% (Fig. 3).

An equal proportion of respondents (45%) do not consider them effective.

If forms of participation chosen by the respondents are compared to a survey conducted about ten years ago, there is a similarity in the top three forms of advocacy. Also “Democracy and local self-governments”, a 2001 survey conducted by the Department of Public Administration, University of
Latvia, had shown that most often the respondents specified elections and referendums (67%), use of public mass media (52%) and personal contacts with the decision-makers (31%) (Vanags, Seimuskane, Vilka, 2006).

Respondents felt that the following forms of advocacy are less effective:
- moving elsewhere – 64%;
- joining a political party – 57%;
- participation in non-governmental organisations – 54%;
- using trade union influence – 53%;
- round table discussions/forums – 52%;
- partaking in municipal committees, working groups – 46%;
- protests, demonstrations, strikes – 46% (Fig. 3).

![Fig. 3. Responses about the framework for advocacy in the local government and in its institutions](image)

The results show that, for advocacy, the residents rely more on the influence of the media and direct contacts with the decision-makers, rather than political parties, NGOs and trade unions. Respondents being quite reserved about joining political parties can be explained by the very high level of distrust in them. The most recent poll from spring 2012, conducted by Eurobarometer, the centre of public opinion analysis of the European Commission, shows that only 7% of the residents of Latvia have trust in political parties, while 90% have not (Eurobarometer, 2012). It is one of the lowest trust indicators for political parties in the European Union. Even more sceptical about their political parties are the residents of Italy, with 4% trust. Also data from the survey conducted by the authors confirm the tendencies seen in the Eurobarometer (2012) survey. Yet, in the authors’ opinion, the respondents ranked the influence potential of NGOs and trade unions surprisingly low.

Local referendums as an effective means for advocating for residents are mentioned by 45% of the respondents. Also other results of this polling show that an average of 43-45% of the respondents supports the idea of introducing local referendums in Latvia, while 35-25% don’t support it.

Conclusions

The following conclusions and suggestions can be drawn from the results of the survey:
- A referendum as a form of direct democracy is in accordance with the principle of self-government included in the European Charter of Local Self-Government. There is no need for a form of consultative (advisory) referendum in Latvia, because the current legal framework allows for a wide range of options and forms of consultation with the self-government. The introduction of binding local referendum form can change local participation environment in Latvia.
- A referendum is not a completely universal form of participation, therefore it is important to acknowledge not only the positive aspects of the procedure, but also the disadvantages. For example,
a referendum usually offers two answers to the question – yes or no, and there are no other choices offered. The new draft law on local referendums (2012) provides the option for deciding upon the matter of sustainable development strategy of the local government. In essence, how is the resident of the local government supposed to answer this question with a simple “yes” or “no”? One of the drawbacks of the referendums is that this procedure favours the interest of the majority, very often the case of popular vote is that it isn’t possible to take minority rights into consideration (Kusins, 2012). It is advised to balance the rights of both the majority and the minority.

• Introduction of local referendums by itself won’t solve the most challenging problems in organizing the participation process in local governments. In the beginning, they will neither be the driving force of the local democracy, nor develop residents’ sense of belonging and loyalty to the community. The poll data indicate a very low level of political trust among the residents, discontent with the results of political activity so far, lack of faith that something can be changed by participation, and low esteem of residents’ competence.

• Also other forms of direct participation should be assessed; forms that are much easier to implement in order to research the public opinion about a matter of high importance to the local community, thus learning both positive cooperation practices and a new experience of political participation. Yet, when choosing the form of participation, it is advised to ensure its availability to all age groups.

• Conducting a self-assessment of the participation process in Latvian local governments is advised in order to objectively assess the strong and weak links in the chain, to conduct and audit of the organizational and decision-making procedures, to assess their corresponding to the needs of the residents and the forms of communication. Already now the state of affairs in Latvia shows that, in order to express their opinions, residents use forms of cooperation and communication beyond the legal framework of participation.

• Referendum as a participation mechanism is a new tradition both to the self-government and the residents. Common interests and development of the local government is important, not private ambition or political revenge. Political participation may be learned only through practice.

• Along with the legal framework for the use of new forms of direct participation in local governments, a solution should be offered to make expression of opinion, or voting, on matters of high importance to the local community, as simple and as cheap as possible.

• Optimum choice of the procedure for calling a referendum should be assessed critically and with political responsibility. Setting a low threshold for citizens’ initiative, on one hand, improves democracy, but, on the other hand, it may be used unceasingly as a weapon of political warfare. But high requirements for participation quorum may lead to frequent invalidity of referendums, resulting in loss of their exclusivity.

• The option to challenge the legality of a referendum question in the Constitutional Court should be included in the legal framework of local democracy.

Whether the decreasing importance of institutions of representative democracy will result in increased importance of the forms of direct democratic participation, will depend on the quality of cooperation between residents and self-governments, and residents’ assurance that their opinion matters in the policy-making of the local government. The survey data shows that residents are quite rational about the advantages and the disadvantages of local referendums, and they are quite pragmatic about introducing them. Although local referendums are a form of participation deserving support in local democracies, they will not improve the quality of participation if the cooperation mechanisms between residents and the local government are weak and purely formal. Local referendums are important, but that is only one form of local participation in a complex system of participation.

References
Local Referendums as a Paradigm for Transformation of Citizens’ Participation in Latvia

Summary

The positions of the institutions of representative democracy at the present time in Latvia are very weak. It is characterised by the low trust in public authorities, decreased in electoral participation, little interest to become involved in participation forms of the representative democracy. Although the voter turnout in local government elections is decreasing, the level of residents’ trust in local governments is comparatively higher: the results of 2012 survey revealed that 48% of the residents have trust in local governments, while 45% have not.

There are questions of increasing urgency – how to overcome distrust in representative bodies, could introduction of forms of direct participation or their improvement have a transformational effect. To investigate what is the attitude of the population in Latvia towards the participation process in local governments; what forms of participation they use; what is their judgment on securing the forms of direct participation; could the introduction of local referendums fundamentally transform the quality of citizens’ participation in local governments in Latvia, the authors of this paper in July, 2012 conducted a survey among the residents of Latvia, using the method of direct interview at respondent’s home. Using stratified random sampling, 1050 permanent residents of Latvia aged 15-74 were surveyed, which is the representative sample of the general population. All regions of Latvia were included in the polling.

The results of the poll point to several challenges to be considered during transformation or improvement of the organization of the participation process in local governments. These are:

• distrust in public authorities, largely stimulated both by irresponsible policies and clumsy, low quality public management;
• deep-rooted traditions of social passivity shaped both by the imitated participation form and government officials’ formal attitude towards it;
• disbelief in changing something by collaboration and in taking people’s opinions into consideration;
• total lack of interest and not seeing the point of participation;

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Local Referendums as a Paradigm for Transformation of Citizens’ Participation in Latvia

Summary

The positions of the institutions of representative democracy at the present time in Latvia are very weak. It is characterised by the low trust in public authorities, decreased in electoral participation, little interest to become involved in participation forms of the representative democracy. Although the voter turnout in local government elections is decreasing, the level of residents’ trust in local governments is comparatively higher: the results of 2012 survey revealed that 48% of the residents have trust in local governments, while 45% have not.

There are questions of increasing urgency – how to overcome distrust in representative bodies, could introduction of forms of direct participation or their improvement have a transformational effect. To investigate what is the attitude of the population in Latvia towards the participation process in local governments; what forms of participation they use; what is their judgment on securing the forms of direct participation; could the introduction of local referendums fundamentally transform the quality of citizens’ participation in local governments in Latvia, the authors of this paper in July, 2012 conducted a survey among the residents of Latvia, using the method of direct interview at respondent’s home. Using stratified random sampling, 1050 permanent residents of Latvia aged 15-74 were surveyed, which is the representative sample of the general population. All regions of Latvia were included in the polling.

The results of the poll point to several challenges to be considered during transformation or improvement of the organization of the participation process in local governments. These are:

• distrust in public authorities, largely stimulated both by irresponsible policies and clumsy, low quality public management;
• deep-rooted traditions of social passivity shaped both by the imitated participation form and government officials’ formal attitude towards it;
• disbelief in changing something by collaboration and in taking people’s opinions into consideration;
• total lack of interest and not seeing the point of participation;
• citizens having low self-esteem, lacking belief in one’s abilities, etc.

Whether, the decreasing importance of institutions of representative democracy will result in increased importance of the forms of direct democratic participation, will depend on the quality of cooperation between residents and self-governments, and residents’ assurance that their opinion matters in the policy-making of the local government. The survey data show that residents are quite rational about the advantages and the disadvantages of local referendums, and they are quite pragmatic about introducing them. Although local referendums are a form of participation deserving support in local democracies, they will not improve the quality of participation if the cooperation mechanisms between residents and the local government are weak and purely formal. Local referendums are important, but that is only one form of local participation in a complex system of participation.

**Keywords:** citizens’ participation, local democracy, local governments, direct democracy, local referendum.

The article has been reviewed.
Received in August 2012; accepted in September 2012.