Participatory Budget Platform – Development and Implementation of a Shared Platform for Participatory Budgeting

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Briefing title

Participatory Budget Platform – Development and Implementation of a Shared Platform for Participatory Budgeting

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INTRODUCTION

The Participatory Budget Platform is a single national digital service through which residents of all 42 Latvian municipalities can propose local projects, vote on them and follow their implementation, using money that each municipality is legally required to set aside for this purpose. It was developed by the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development (MoSARD) after the Local Government Law made participatory budgeting, a process in which residents decide directly how a defined part of a public budget is spent, compulsory for every municipality from 2025. Before then only a few municipalities offered it, each under its own rules and with its own tools, so whether residents had a say depended on where they lived. Instead of leaving each municipality to build or buy its own system, the ministry provided one shared platform that checks voter eligibility automatically against the national population register and can also be used, with the help of staff, at local customer service centres. In its first year residents submitted 634 proposals and cast 88,352 votes. The case is relevant to any administration that wants to turn a national participation requirement into consistent practice across local authorities of very different size and capacity.



Key facts

- **Project:** Participatory Budget Platform - Development and Implementation of a Shared Platform for Participatory Budget
- **Applicant:** Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development (MoSARD), working with the State Digital Development Agency and the Ventspils Digital Centre
- **Country and level of government:** Latvia; a national platform provided by central government for use by all 42 municipalities (local level)
- **Duration and key dates:** 15 September 2023 to 31 May 2026; participatory budgeting mandatory for all municipalities from 2025; platform launched in 2025
- **Funding:** EUR 749,070 in total, of which EUR 630,000 from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and EUR 119,070 from the state budget to cover value added tax (VAT)**;**
- **Main components:** a common legal framework (Articles 59 to 62 of the Local Government Law); a shared platform on Geolatvija.lv for submitting ideas, voting and tracking implementation; automated eligibility checks against the National Register of Natural Persons; assisted voting at customer service centres; map navigation and open data;
- **Headline results:** 634 proposals and 88,352 votes in 2025; 261 proposals and 52,448 votes so far in 2026; 117 projects approved and 34 completed; more than one million content views; actively used by around 40 municipalities.

EPSA Category

Innovating Government, Governance and Policies

Prize

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1. Relevance

The case for a national approach grew out of the Administrative-Territorial Reform of 2021, which merged Latvia's municipalities and reduced their number from 119 to 42. The merger strengthened the administrative and financial capacity of local government, but it also made each municipality considerably larger and placed many residents further from the centre where decisions are taken. The EPSA jury noted that participatory budgeting has particular value in this setting because it gives people living outside municipal centres a direct means of influencing what happens in their own neighbourhoods and reduces the sense of being excluded from local decisions. The applicant describes the underlying problem as long-standing weakness in citizen engagement with, and trust in, local decision-making, which the larger scale of the new municipalities risked deepening.

Some municipalities had already introduced participatory budgeting on their own initiative, but these schemes depended on local political will and administrative capacity, followed different rules and used different digital solutions. Residents of neighbouring municipalities therefore had very unequal opportunities to influence local spending, and the effort of designing separate schemes was duplicated. Articles 59 to 62 of the Local Government Law replaced this patchwork with a common framework**.** The law requires every municipality to open a minimum share of its budget to residents' decisions and harmonises who may take part, the grounds on which proposals may be rejected, procedural rules, transparency and accountability standards, and the use of both digital and assisted voting.

The money involved is tied to what residents themselves contribute. Personal income tax and property tax paid by residents account on average for 48% of a Latvian municipality's annual budget, and the minimum reserved for participatory budgeting is calculated on this portion, rising from 0.1% in 2025 to 0.2% in 2026, to 0.5% by 2029, though some municipalities are already voluntarily allocating 0.5% to this initiative. Across all municipalities this amounted to EUR 5,636,084 available for residents' decisions in 2025 and EUR 6,833,414 in 2026, with a median of about EUR 80,000 per municipality in 2026 and the capital, Riga, accounting for the largest share.

Placing this obligation on all 42 municipalities at the same time created a practical problem that the law alone could not solve. Not every municipality had the staff or budget to procure, secure and maintain a voting system that met the legal requirements, and 42 separate systems would have been costly to build and run and would have reproduced the fragmentation the law was meant to end. As the applicant and the evaluators describe it, the project's added value lies in giving every municipality the same legally compliant tool from the outset, so that a resident's opportunity to take part no longer depends on the capacity of the local administration. The platform also goes further than the earlier local schemes by checking eligibility automatically against the National Register of Natural Persons, Latvia's central population register, which removes the need to verify votes by hand, and by allowing residents without digital skills or internet access to take part with the help of staff at customer service centres.

The EPSA evaluators placed the project in a wider frame as well. Participation is open to residents and not only to Latvian citizens, which the consensus meeting regarded as helpful for integration, and the approach was considered novel in Central and Eastern Europe and well aligned with European Union priorities on citizen participation.

2. Project design and implementation

MoSARD organised the work in two phases. In the first, it developed the implementation model and the practical conditions for participatory budgeting together with municipalities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In the second, funded by the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Union's recovery instrument under NextGenerationEU, it commissioned and built the platform. The total budget of EUR 749,070 comprised EUR 630,000 from the RRF and EUR 119,070 from the state budget to cover VAT, and according to the validation report it was spent on external contractors for the initial development and launch of the platform.

Responsibilities were divided among four actors according to their existing mandates, an arrangement the validation report described as clear and comprehensive. MoSARD led the project and acted as product owner: its own experts defined the business requirements, wrote the user stories that describe what each type of user needs to be able to do, prepared design concepts and technical specifications, and carried out acceptance testing. The State Digital Development Agency provided the national ICT (information and communication technology) infrastructure, hosting, security and system administration, and handled procurement. The Ventspils Digital Centre developed the 'assisted voting' function for people with limited digital skills and integrated the platform with the network of state and municipal one-stop customer service centres. External contractors selected through open public procurement carried out the technical development, the professional design of the user interface and user experience, and ongoing maintenance. Keeping product ownership inside the ministry meant that the administration decided what was built, while specialised technical work was bought in from the market.

Development followed a user-centred design approach, in which the people who will use a service help shape and test it at each stage. The process ran through the following steps:

- **Conceptualisation:** the core functions and five core user profiles were defined with municipalities and NGOs, based on practical needs and the legal requirements.
- **Prototyping:** interactive prototypes were built in the design tool Figma and tested for usability with citizens representing the five profiles, and their feedback was used to refine the interface and functions.
- **Iterative development:** the ministry's expert team issued a series of sequential change requests to the developers, so that the solution could be adjusted during the build in response to test results and the most important features prioritised.
- **Pre-launch testing:** hands-on workshops and testing sessions in test environments prepared municipal staff to run project competitions.
- **Continuous improvement:** after launch, regular seminars and user feedback continue to shape the platform.

The jury emphasised the bottom-up character of this process, in which municipalities discussed different approaches and functions collectively so that a single platform could respond to their different local circumstances. The main constraint was time, since the platform had to be ready when the legal obligation took effect, and this required regulatory refinement, technical development and testing to proceed in parallel. Some functions were adjusted along the way in response to usability testing, feedback from municipalities and work on the integrations with national registers, and the applicant reports that the platform was delivered on schedule and made available to all 42 municipalities in 2025.

For residents and municipalities, a participatory budgeting cycle on the platform, which is hosted on the national portal Geolatvija.lv, runs as follows:

- A resident logs in and submits a project idea with a short description, an estimated cost, images and any supporting documents; ideas may be submitted for any municipality, regardless of where the person lives.
- The system verifies the person's eligibility through the log-in, including age, citizenship, residence status and address.
- The municipality reviews each idea within 30 days for legality and for whether it falls within the municipality's remit; the legal grounds for rejection include proposals of a commercial or political nature, proposals that duplicate approved or ongoing projects and proposals serving strictly private needs.
- Every idea that does not fall under a ground for exclusion must be published for voting; voting lasts about 30 days on average, only residents of the municipality concerned may vote, and they can vote only 'yes' for a project.
- Projects are selected based on the number of votes received, with the highest-ranked proposals given priority for funding. However, the specific selection rules are determined by each municipal council and may differ between municipalities, for example by requiring a minimum number of votes or limiting funding to the top three projects. In all cases, the selection is subject to the budget reserved for participatory budgeting.
- The municipality implements the selected projects and reports progress on the platform, and residents receive automated notifications when ideas are submitted, when voting opens and closes, when results are known and when a project is accepted, rejected or moves into implementation.

Voting is open to residents aged 16 and over who have declared their residence in the municipality, which the system confirms automatically against the National Register of Natural Persons. For residents who cannot or prefer not to use the platform, Latvia's roughly 300 existing customer service centres, with at least one in every municipality, provide the offline route: under an authorised representation procedure, an assistant at the centre can cast a vote on the resident's behalf. Because these centres already help residents with a range of administrative services, assisted voting was added to an existing channel and did not require new offices or staff.

Municipal staff were prepared for their new tasks through a series of seminars on managing the platform. To make the process transparent, the platform offers map navigation so that residents can see where projects are located and browse projects in other municipalities, and all project data are published as open data, in a structured form that anyone can reuse. MoSARD has also set up a dedicated participatory budgeting section on its website with guidance and information for residents and municipalities.

3. Outcome

In 2025, the first year of operation, residents submitted 634 project proposals and cast 88,352 votes, and by the time of the validation visit a further 261 proposals and 52,448 votes had been recorded for 2026. The validation report notes that the 140,800 votes cast over the two cycles correspond to roughly half the number of people who voted in the last municipal elections, and the platform has recorded more than one million content views. Across both years, 117 projects had been approved and 34 completed, and the platform is actively used by 38 of the 42 municipalities.

Most of the selected projects are physical improvements that residents chose for their own surroundings, such as benches, playgrounds and sports facilities, dog parks, walking paths and trails, better public spaces and the

restoration of memorial and cultural heritage sites. The validation visit included the Jugla Lake boardwalk in Riga, a 250-metre wooden walkway with a viewing platform, tactile reliefs of birds and fish and information in braille, connected to a 700-metre looped trail around the park. That project was developed before participatory budgeting became national policy, and it illustrates the kind of earlier municipal practice on which the national model was built.

About 2,000-2500 people have voted with assistance at customer service centres, which the validation report puts at around 2-3% of all voters. The number is small compared with online participation, but it means that a lack of digital skills or access does not shut anyone out, and because the service runs through existing centres it adds little administrative burden. For municipal staff, the automatic validation of age and declared residence has replaced the manual checking of voters, and the harmonised procedures allow the ministry to monitor implementation nationally and compare municipalities. The structured data on what residents propose and support also give municipalities evidence on local priorities that they can draw on in wider planning and investment decisions.

Some larger municipalities near Riga have voluntarily gone beyond the legal minimum, reflecting their commitment to participatory budgeting and the benefits they see for community engagement. While the mandatory allocation was set at 0.1% in 2025, rising to 0.2% in 2026 and 0.5% by 2029, some municipalities have already allocated 0.5% voluntarily. The applicant also reports that preparing and discussing proposals has drawn NGOs and neighbourhood groups more actively into community initiatives, and the jury observed that the platform allows successful ideas in one municipality to inspire similar proposals elsewhere.

Participatory budgeting is now a legal duty of every municipality and a recurring annual process, so its continuation does not depend on project funding or on the preferences of individual councils. The platform is run as a centrally managed shared service, and its operation and maintenance are carried out largely in-house by the responsible institutions at minimal external cost. The applicant sees the shared-service model as a template for other nationwide digital services, as a way of reducing fragmentation and improving interoperability across the public sector. Looking ahead, the jury saw scope to involve residents not only in proposing and selecting projects but also in carrying them out.

Success factors

- **A clear legal basis:** the Local Government Law makes participatory budgeting mandatory and sets common rules, which gave the platform a defined purpose and secures its continuation.
- **National scale through a shared service:** one platform gives residents of all 42 municipalities the same tool at significantly lower cost than 42 separate municipal systems.
- **User-centred, iterative design:** prototyping and usability testing with citizens, and the involvement of municipalities and NGOs at every stage, shaped the platform before and after launch.
- **Clear governance:** the project structure was built on the existing mandates of each institution, with the ministry retaining product ownership.
- **Inclusion by design:** assisted voting through existing customer service centres gives people with limited digital skills a way to take part, supporting groups that would otherwise be unlikely to join public consultations.

- **Automated eligibility checks:** linking to the national population register secures the vote and removes manual verification.
- **Openness to residents:** participation is open to residents and not only to citizens, which supports integration.
- **Integration into routine practice:** participatory budgeting is built into municipalities' standard operating procedures and is no longer an occasional exercise.
- **Proactive information:** residents are kept informed through automated notifications, the platform and the ministry's website.
- **Political and leadership support:** national and local stakeholders are committed to the model, and it does not depend on temporary funding.

Lessons learned and recommendations

1. **Pair a legal obligation with the means to meet it.** A participation requirement placed on local authorities of very different capacity is more likely to be implemented evenly if central government provides a ready-made, compliant tool at the same time as the obligation takes effect.

2. **Standardise what is common and leave room for local choice.** Latvia centralised eligibility checks, publication rules and the technical infrastructure while allowing each council to set its own selection rules, which kept the system workable for municipalities ranging from small towns to the capital.

3. **Use existing registers to make participation secure and light to administer.** Linking the platform to the national population register removed manual checks, reduced the scope for disputes about who may vote and spared municipal staff routine work.

4. **Provide an offline route through channels that already exist.** Building assisted voting into an established network of customer service centres extended access to people without digital skills at little additional cost.

5. **Keep product ownership inside the administration.** In-house experts who write the requirements, manage change requests and test the result can steer external contractors closely and adapt the system as testing reveals problems, which matters most when a legal deadline leaves little room for delay.

6. **Set a binding minimum and let authorities go further.** A modest legal floor made the obligation acceptable to all municipalities, while those that see the benefits remain free to commit more, as some near Riga have done.

7. **Plan from the start how participation and its effects will be measured.** Administrations adopting a similar model can decide in advance what data they will collect on who takes part, including older and vulnerable residents, how much of the reserved budget is spent, what approved projects cost, how satisfied residents are with the results and whether trust in local government changes, so that the value of the process can be shown over time.

8. **Close the loop with residents.** Automated notifications at each stage and public progress reports on selected projects show participants what became of their proposals and votes, which gives them a reason to take part again.

9. **Consider extending participation into implementation.** Once proposing and voting are established, involving residents in delivering the selected projects could deepen their engagement and sense of ownership.

10. **Adapt the model to national rules before transferring it.** The validation report identifies local self-government rules and the national tax system, on which the reserved budget is based, as the main areas that other countries would need to adjust.

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