



**European Parties Elections
and Referendums Network**

**2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 19
THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN LATVIA
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Key Points

- Domestic issues predominated but there was a European colouration to them.
- The election demonstrated the problem of projecting the EU as a political system to the national public and an elite/mass gap was evident over EU affairs.
- Candidates included prominent figures and a significant number of national MPs, thus providing a first indication of European careers for the Latvian political elite.
- The results produced a distinct swing to the Right and a setback for parties in government.
- Turnout was one of the highest in Central and Eastern Europe but well below that for national elections.

The Background

In marked contrast with the referendum on EU membership nine months earlier, the June 2004 European elections in Latvia saw a focus on issues of primarily domestic importance or immediate concern rather than questions of historical or long-term consequence – which had, in the end, significantly influenced voters in September 2003 to give their support to Latvia's turning-point in international affairs by joining the EU.¹ Nevertheless, disconnected aspects of European politics did surface before and during the campaign for seats in the European Parliament. This period before the vote also highlighted the problem of projecting the EU as a meaningful type of political system to the Latvian public. In short, European elections were “domesticised” but with enough European colouration to distinguish them from national elections. They suggested, furthermore, that a hard distinction between domestic issues on the one hand and European issues on the other is really artificial.

¹ See: G.Pridham, "Latvia's EU accession referendum, 20 September 2003", *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Referendum Briefing No 10*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2003 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/latviaepernrefbriefing.pdf>.

The two are in reality commonly related already in a new member state like Latvia. The problem here is therefore largely one of public perception.

The key to understanding the politics of the EU in Latvia at the moment is the considerable gap between the political elites, conditioned by the experience of working through accession business, and the general public concerning awareness and information about EU institutions and the policy impacts of integration (as distinct from the somewhat abstract arguments that eventually decided the referendum vote in favour of EU membership). Already in the middle of the membership negotiations, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report on human development in Latvia had noted that 'most issues linked with integration into the EU do not reach the agenda of the public' even though 'several of the EU's priorities correspond with those listed in Latvian public opinion polls, such as: the reduction of unemployment, the fight against terrorism and organised crime (which includes the drug trade), the strengthening of the economy, social security and assistance to farmers'². There were occasional exceptions such as when the question of importing pork from EU countries produced heated debate; but this touched on the country's favourite meat. Clearly, there is a basic difficulty in bridging the wide space between semi-abstract or historical notions of the EU's importance and ad hoc expressions of its everyday relevance over concrete issues.

Normally, political parties and NGOs and sometimes the media play a useful role in bridging this awareness gap; but there was little sign of this happening in the period surrounding these European elections. Conscientious efforts by the EU to conduct information campaigns – complemented in Latvia by parallel activities of the proactive European Movement (EKL) – reach some limited circles, notably the educated; but apparently with little deep or lasting effect. In fact, unlike in the referendum campaign, the EKL did not play a central part during the European elections since parties were in the forefront of activities. During 2001-3 the government's communications strategy had been mainly limited to the accession process rather than explaining broader integration effects, so that stereotypical views of the EU based more on gut feelings than knowledge continued to predominate. Accordingly, there remained great ignorance among the public about the workings of the EU and its various institutions; and, this combined with a sense of the European Parliament as something distant and incomprehensible or at least unknown, unlike local government and the Saeima (national parliament)³. The complexity of the EU's institutional structure makes it difficult, in any case, for ordinary voters, especially in new member states, to appreciate the significance of European elections including the EP's now important functions although not ones easily comparable with standard national parliaments.

It was hardly therefore surprising that it was domestic political considerations which largely determined public responses in Latvia to European elections in June 2004. Evidence from opinion surveys in the weeks before the election on 12 June showed a strong preference for making national issues the main basis for deciding how to vote. Issues of concern according to Eurobarometer were employment, agriculture and

² See: UNDP, *Latvia: Human Development Report 2000/2001, The Public Process in Latvia* (Riga, 2001), pp. 53-4.

³ Latvian News Agency (LETA), report, 13 June 2004.

Latvia-specific issues⁴. This general picture was confirmed after the election when survey research showed that the domestic political situation, especially the government's standing, was together with the appeal of the candidates the most important factor for the voters⁵. Hence, the scope was great for Latvian voters to convert European elections into a de facto plebiscite on the government's performance.

The government led by Indulis Emsis (Europe's first Green prime minister), in office only since March, was in a minority with parliamentary support from the National Harmony Party, whose main purpose was reconciliation between ethnic Latvians and non-Latvians and minority rights. In the somewhat charged political atmosphere of Latvia, where "Left" was associated with "Russian", there was a strong perception on the Right that the Emsis government was in hock to foreign interests. Tension was high at this time over education reform and the role of the Latvian language in schools, with virulent opposition to this from both domestic Russian pressure groups and Moscow. Then, in late May, the cabinet made the contested decision to appoint an ethnic Russian to head the Corruption Prevention Bureau. It was seen as a partisan move against the previous government's appointee; and this became all the more controversial when the new head, Loskutovs, made the tactless statement in a television interview soon after that the occupation of Latvia had been 'a normal process in the expansion of the USSR'. Furthermore, in the month before the European elections, this government, the eleventh since independence in 1991, was dogged by growing rumours of its instability and impending collapse.

There was the additional problem that the political elite, institutions and parties still suffered from prolonged public mistrust. During the accession referendum campaign last summer the pro-EU cause had sought to play down the role of parties and politicians, with a major part allowed for the European Movement and an emphasis on prestigious public and particularly cultural figures; but this time it was parties that were unavoidably the central actors. While the EU as a whole enjoyed more prestige than national politics, there was, however, some public scepticism due to accession having been driven energetically by the political elite and therefore some risk that this association could create a negative potential for the EU's reputation.⁶

In addition, some link was being made between declining support for EU membership and rising food prices, a current object of complaints in the weeks before European elections; while a survey by the Market and Public Opinion Research Centre (SKDS) in the final week of European election campaign showed that almost a half of Riga's inhabitants thought their standard of living would decline because of Latvia's membership of the EU.⁷ During the few months before the European elections, support for EU membership showed a marked decline compared with the September 2003 referendum when 67% had voted in favour. The figures were in February 53.1% and in April 43% according to SKDS, with opinion fairly evenly divided or uncertain during these months about whether EU membership was good or bad. In a survey carried out by SKDS in May, 30.1% regarded membership as positive, 24.4% as

⁴ Latvian News Agency (LETA), report, 8 May 2004.

⁵ Author interview with Aigars Freimanis, Director, Latvijas Fakti opinion research centre, Riga, August 2004.

⁶ See: UNDP, *Latvia: Human Development Report 2002/2003*, p.114.

⁷ See: LETA report, 14 June 2004.

negative while 40.1% responded neither way.⁸ According to Eurobarometer in May, Latvia registered one of the lowest levels of support for EU membership among the new member states. This fitted broadly with cross-national patterns of support in the years leading the 2003 referendum.

There was evidently a diffuse mood of anti-climax following the dual accessions to NATO and the EU in the spring of 2004. The public was no longer lifted up by metaphysical or grandiloquent arguments about voting for a better future. There was a growing but very inchoate sense of what the realities of membership could be, but this was based more on subjective perceptions or selective stories in the press or through the rumour mill than on any secure knowledge about the EU with all its pros and cons. There also remained quite some uncertainty about what to make of the European elections and how to relate Latvian political parties to them.

All this placed the parties in a quandary. Their leaders were very aware of such problems as explaining the EU's complexity; but at the same time were inevitably sucked into the political competition that seizes politicians over European elections despite the EP's difficult institutional credibility. At the same time, the political elite was well-educated in EU affairs and the candidates included a high proportion of national MPs while most parties were members of one or other transnational party formation. The three centre-right parties - New Era, Latvia's First Party and the People's Party - were all members of the European People's Party (EPP); while the Social Democratic Workers' Party (LSDSP) was in the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the former governing party Latvia's Way was in the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR).

A certain prestige was attached at the party level to these transnational links, which had networking advantages and provided membership of a party group in the EP. Together with European elections they offered the various parties a European dimension to their strategies, with for instance Latvia's Way hoping to revive its fortunes having failed to gain re-election to the Saeima in 2002.⁹ Some of the parties mentioned their transnational party affiliation in their programmes for European elections; but as a whole they did not make this very visible during the campaign itself. It was felt this would only confuse the voters with yet more EU type information; and some parties did not want to advertise that they belonged to the same European party for reasons of political competition at the national level.

The Campaign

There were altogether 16 parties with 245 candidates running for the nine seats in the EP. The electoral law passed in January provided for proportional representation with a system of party lists and a 5% threshold for parliamentary representation. Its most

⁸ See: *Current Latvia*, weekly news summary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9-16 March 2004, p. 8; LETA reports, 12 May and 10 June 2004.

⁹ Author interview with Georgs Lansmanis, Secretary-General, Latvia's Way, Riga, April 2004. According to him, this meant the party needed to elect at least one MEP out of Latvia's nine. The party took advice from the German Naumann Foundation on campaign organisation and was advised by the UK Liberals to concentrate on domestic issues. This included advocating more spending on education even though the EU had no responsibility in this area.

interesting feature was the lifting of the ban that had applied to national elections on former KGB agents and those who had continued to be members of the Communist Party after January 1991. The parties running included all the main national parties but also a regional party from the poor eastern region of Latgale as well as a fringe party called Conservative (financed by an eccentric millionaire businessman who made a show of wearing rough denims and leather gear) and a group calling itself Political Organisation of Euroseptics which had first appeared during the EU referendum campaign. The last was among other things opposed to 'excessive centralisation and bureaucratisation of the EU administration'. Its top candidate, described as a publicist, was chairman of a movement for national independence; while other candidates included those with mixed occupational backgrounds like several company directors, an artist, a doctor and the president of the Internet Club.¹⁰

The most salient aspect among the candidates was the number of prominent figures. These included two former prime ministers (Guntars Krasts 1997-98 and Andris Berzins 2000-2), the current Foreign Minister Rihards Piks and six other former ministers as well as over 30 national MPs (out of a total of 100 in the Saeima), e.g. the first ten candidates of Latvia's First Party were all national MPs followed by two current ministers. Several lists also included local government councillors such as Dainis Ivans, former leader of the Latvian Popular Front and now chair of the culture committee on the Riga City Council as well as LSDSP chairman (he was its second candidate). This political weight among the candidates was aimed at using electoral "locomotives" to draw votes and it reflected the strong personal factor in Latvian politics (which also related to public scepticism towards parties as distinct from public personalities).

But there were other reasons why so many top politicians were willing to opt for an EP career even though Latvia's nine seats hardly offered much scope for political influence among the total of 732 MEPs. The electoral law required that those elected would have to give up their domestic political positions. The reasons for this were: political weariness with both the fast pace of transition events and alienation on the part of the electorate (a by-effect therefore of anti-party feeling) and also persistent pressure from sponsors, the appeal of MEP salaries and privileges combined with less intensive parliamentary business in Strasbourg but also the promise of five years in post in contrast with the instability and usual brevity of government office back in Riga¹¹. At the same time, it was expected that MEPs could eventually return to national politics while meanwhile acquiring much EU expertise and useful political networks as well as maybe keeping a high profile back in Latvia (seen as all the more possible because of there being only nine of them).

The various party programmes combined European themes with issues of domestic concern, which in some cases had a European dimension although this was not always highlighted. For example, Latvia's Social Democratic and Workers' Party emphasised employment, social protection and education as issues but also highlighted its Social Democratic links in Europe including membership of the Party of European Socialists. The latter was advantageous for the party's legitimacy given its

¹⁰ The full list of all party candidates was published in *Diena*, 10 April 2004.

¹¹ See: *The Baltic Times*, 3-9 June 2004. For instance, it was made clear in interviews with the author that Rihards Piks, the Foreign Minister, had better career certainty in the EP given his tenure of office was unlikely to be long because of current government instability.

Communist origins and the fact its first candidate, Juris Bojars, was well-known as a former KGB major for which reason had been banned from standing for national elections¹². Latvia's Way, allied with the European Liberals, was, among other things, against excessive regulation of enterprise and tax harmonisation in the EU, and for free movement of labour and developing the national economy within Europe. Its website, as with other parties, included questions and answers about the EP, European elections and party policies.

By mid-May, however, when the campaign began to develop, it was clear that political competition was already focussing on certain emotive domestic issues. Political tension was rising as European elections crystallised differences between parties over ethnic issues such as education reform, citizenship and asylum seekers. There were differences here between the National Harmony Party, still supporting the government in the Saeima, and the more radical For Human Rights in a United Latvia (PCTVL), essentially a party of ethnic Russians, which urged the continuation of student demonstrations over education reform, sought to use the European elections for publicising internationally human rights problems in Latvia and advocated militant action on election day with its supporters demonstrating at voting stations 'against discriminatory practices set in the Constitution' (referring to citizenship requirements) and in solidarity with non-citizens and minorities. For Human Rights in a United Latvia also announced early on back in March that it would use the European campaign to urge the EU to grant official status to minority languages including Russian. Thus, we see here a case of a party extending its arguments from the national to the European level thereby gaining some international publicity, knowing that minority rights issues have a certain resonance in European circles.

Polarisation also arose from the aggressive line of the parties on the Right towards the Communist past. In January several of them voted against lifting the ban on candidates with a Communist or KGB past, while a few days later Sandra Kalniete (Foreign Minister in the then government and soon to be Latvia's Commissioner understudy from May to November) said at the annual general meeting of New Era that its future MEPs should ensure that the EP officially condemns the crimes of Communism. While there were differences among the Right parties over European federalisation, with For Fatherland and Freedom (TBB/LNNK) giving a strong priority to national sovereignty, they tended to agree in their stress on national values and safeguarding national interests. For instance, New Era talked about protecting national identity through Latvian culture and TB/LNNK raised the question of Latvia's representation in the EU as a small country. In short, therefore, domestic issues were to the fore – more so in the propaganda battle in the campaign than in the party programmes – but they were often given a European twist for publicity's sake and to mobilise different sets of voters. There was altogether a strong element of Left/Right polarisation; but as typical of Latvian politics this was mixed with the ethnic factor and thus became highly charged.

¹² Bojars was Latvia's Social Democratic and Workers' Party chairman until 2002. The current chairman emphasised the need for the party to show its European links 'in the face of the right-wing criticism in Latvia that the Latvia's Social Democratic and Workers' Party was not like West European (i.e. Social Democratic) parties' (author interview with Dainis Ivans, LSDSP chairman, Riga, April 2004).

Meanwhile, the EP office in Riga provided some Euro-cosmetics for the start of the campaign with a “Flight to Europe” motif; while the European Movement launched its own information and motivational campaign both in Riga and out in the countryside aimed at promoting turnout. However, indications from the campaign and news reports in these weeks were that the European elections hardly promoted a real knowledge of the EU. There were two reasons for this.

Firstly, the main attention to EU affairs was drawn by scare stories especially in rural areas and invariably linked to farming matters and the EU’s agricultural requirements. These had apparently become rampant since the country joined that organisation on 1 May. The Cooperation Council of Farmers’ Organisations registered in early May many calls from concerned farmers asking whether every milkmaid required an EU licence and thinking there was an EU ban on the use of aluminium milk cans. Invariably, a sense of suffocating bureaucracy was the leitmotiv of such stories which were becoming widespread – and had a resonance as milk production accounted for nearly a quarter of the agricultural sector. Small farmers in particular were alarmed at the amount of paperwork now necessary following accession; and there were reports of some of them selling or slaughtering their few cows to avoid this. Clearly, small farms are disadvantaged by the CAP. One solution would be the concentration of resources among small farms but anything sounding like cooperatives is abhorred in Latvia because of the Soviet experience. Also, many farmers with a pronounced sense of independence do not even belong to farmers’ organisations (which also helps to explain ignorance about EU agricultural policy detail).¹³ As one national politician commented about rural campaigning for the EP, “the EU doesn’t get understood among people – [they say] ‘don’t speak about such high-level topics, tell me how much money I will get for my cow!’”¹⁴

Secondly, the European campaign in Latvia was in fact low-key notwithstanding the political tension between the parties which featured mainly in the media. Party polemics hardly stimulated a public desire to learn more about the EU; on the contrary, this only reinforced public aversion to party politics. There was a contrast with national elections in terms of the visible element on the street. Few posters were evident and electoral glitz and paraphernalia were much less present compared with the campaign for the Saeima in 2002. There was a financial explanation for, in this case of European elections, sponsorship for parties was much less forthcoming since business circles and oligarchs did not view the EP as an institution with comparable influence. The signs were that they were holding back their funds for local elections in 2005 and the national elections in 2006.¹⁵ Whereas the overall expenditure for the 2002 Saeima elections had been 6.3 million lats and for local elections in 2001 it had been 2.2 million lats (roughly the same figure in pounds sterling), the planned expenditure for the parties in these European elections was decidedly modest. Expenditure figures in lats for some of the main parties were: New Era, 30,000; People’s Party, 75,000; Latvia’s Social Democratic and Workers’ Party, 50,000; and, For Fatherland and Freedom (which went on to win by far the most votes), 50,000.¹⁶

¹³ LETA, report, 9 May 2004; *The Baltic Times*, 13-19 2004.

¹⁴ Author interview with Georgs Lansmanis, Secretary-General, Latvia’s Way, Riga, April 2004.

¹⁵ See: D. Auers, ‘Latvia’s European Parliament elections’ in *The Baltic Times*, 3-9 June 2004.

¹⁶ See: *Diena*, 20 May 2004. Details on actual expenditure up that point included figures for some parties above these amounts and in a few cases less than planned; but this did not alter the picture of much less campaign expenditure compared with national and local elections.

The highest figure was for the new Conservative Party whose millionaire sponsor provided 100,000 lats; but this only pointed to one other difference. The cheaper campaigning with the main parties no longer monopolising the funding allowed fringe parties to make some impact. Altogether, therefore, the voters were much less motivated from above compared with national elections; and, notwithstanding their negative or ambivalent reactions to party messages, they did not become more convinced during the campaign of the importance of the EP and European elections.

Results

As Table 1 shows, the result showed a major shift to the Right with the nationalist For Fatherland and Freedom emerging the victor with a vote well ahead of all other parties. It was also the only party to gain votes compared with the 2002 elections to the Saeima, despite the much lower turnout which was down by 30% (turnout in 2002 was 72.5%, in fact the same figure too for the 2003 referendum on EU membership). For Fatherland and Freedom's top candidate, Guntars Krasts, a former prime minister, proved to be the most popular candidate out of the 245 based on the pluses against names in the ballot papers. For Fatherland and Freedom's second and third candidates also received a high number of pluses thus confirming the importance of the personal factor in Latvian party politics. The centre-Right New Era also did well giving both opposition parties very nearly 50% of the vote and six of the nine EP seats.

Table 1: European Elections in Latvia, June 12 2004

Party	Votes	%	Seats	%2002 (change)
Fatherland and Freedom	170,819	29.82	4	5.4 (+24.42%)
New Era	112,698	19.68	2	23.9 (-4.22%)
For Human Rights in United Latvia	61,329	10.71	1	19.0 (-8.29%)
People's Party	38,114	6.65	1	16.6 (-9.95)
Latvia's Way	37,357	6.52	1	4.9 (+1.62)
Latvia's Social Democratic and Workers' Party	27,437	4.79	0	4.0 (+0.79%)
National Harmony Party*	27,423	4.79	0	
Union of Greens and Farmers	24,405	4.26	0	9.4% (-5.14%)
Latvia's First Party	18,614	3.25	0	9.5 (-6.25%)
Total	577,879			
Registered votes	1,397,736			
Turnout	41.34			

Source: Central Electoral Commission, Latvia, <http://www.cvk.lv>

* The National Harmony Party was in the 2002 election part of the alliance For Human Rights in United Latvia

Two other centre-Right parties – the People’s Party (in government) and Latvia’s Way, which achieved its goal of representation (having failed re-election to the Saeima in 2002) – each won a seat in the EP (the current Foreign Minister was elected for the People’s Party). Both other government parties – the Union of Greens and Farmers and Latvia’s First Party – performed badly. The one party of the Left to win representation, with one seat, was For Human Rights in United Latvia which had taken a radical line over Russian minority rights. The MEP elected for this party, Tatjana Zdanoka, a prominent figure, had run a lively and focussed campaign and received one of the highest totals of pluses in the ballot papers. Altogether, Latvia was remarkable among all EU member states for having the highest total of wasted votes (26.7%). Two parties, Latvia’s Social Democratic and Workers’ Party and the National Harmony Party, just failed to pass the 5% barrier. The well-financed Conservative Party won just 1.7% of the vote; while the Eurosceptics received only 0.95% although they defiantly announced the country would be hearing from them again over the question of a referendum on the EU Constitution – a proposal that was immediately shot down by various party leaders and the state president.

Turnout, at just over 41%, was well below the national level but it was one of the highest among the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe, with only Lithuania ahead at just over 48%. The turnout in Latvia was even higher than in five of the old member states – Finland, Portugal, Sweden, the UK and the Netherlands. Relatively speaking, it was respectable remembering that European elections had repeatedly suffered from a turnout problem. The polarisation between the right-wing opposition and the government and the parties of the Left seemed to have encouraged turnout, all the more as the education issue acerbated ethnic relations while relations between Latvia and Russia were very strained in this period.

Having said that, there were various specific factors at work in explaining the low turnout compared with national elections. The much lower campaign expenditure compared with domestic elections obviously had some effect but so too did the new voting procedure required by an EU directive. Now for the first time Latvians had to vote only where they were registered as residents, as required for EU elections to give EU citizens resident in Latvia an opportunity to vote – whereas previously they had been free to vote at any polling station in the country with their passports stamped to show participation (which remained for national elections). This was the main discussion point just after the election since many Latvians do not live in the area where they are registered (e.g. students in Riga). Also, people living in cities often have tiny cottages or huts in the countryside for weekend relaxation or to visit older family. Moreover, voting was on a Saturday which was traditional but in this case, where the importance of voting was not compelling, the passion for working on allotments and planting carrots, potatoes and cabbages seems to have defeated the idea of returning to the cities to vote. The sense of rurality in Latvia, given the timing, helped to constrain the turnout on this occasion.

Inevitably, the result was interpreted as a decisive defeat for the government of Indulis Emsis from the Union of Greens and Farmers. *Diena* unambiguously explained this in terms of the link between the government and the Left and hence the Russian factor; and this point was hammered by politicians on the Right in opposition, especially former prime minister Einars Repse who had taken an intransigent and rather bitter line towards this government since his loss of office in March. According

to him, the government had been punished for 'disregarding the community's interests and flirting with pro-Moscow forces.'¹⁷ The period following the elections saw increased pressure on the government especially once one of the government parties, the People's Party (the only government party to have an MEP), chose to have talks with the opposition New Era about a possible new coalition government. These continued well into the summer though they proved inconclusive. Controversy arose in August over Emsis's abrupt appointment of his party colleague Ingrida Udre, the president of the Saeima, as Latvia's European Commissioner despite the Greens' electoral setback. Expectations had been that Sandra Kalniete, the competent Commissioner understudy, would be given that position; but she suffered from having been appointed by the Repse government in which she had served as Foreign Minister.

Conclusion and Analysis

Latvia's first election to the European Parliament was a mundane event lacking the mild excitement of the referendum on EU membership; but then the purpose and consequences were very different. It was certainly an event taken seriously enough by the parties themselves but political competition saw to that. There was also a rather weak government and hence the temptation for the opposition parties of the Right to exploit some emotive issues against it. Post-election survey research showed that turnout was somewhat higher among opposition parties' supporters than among those of the government parties.¹⁸ One can easily see future European elections in Latvia becoming "domesticised" but then this has been the pattern so far in the other including older member states. European themes were indeed given attention in the campaign but they were usually instrumentalised for electoral and partisan reasons.

The other main observation which is perhaps peculiar to Latvia as a former Soviet republic is the strong presence in this election of the Communist past even though, formally, the referendum of the previous September on EU membership had been widely seen as turning away from that past and looking to the future. But the Russian factor was present in many ways: over the lifting of the ban on former Communists as candidates (a matter of sharp division and acerbic debate in the Saeima); through the heightened tension between Latvia and Moscow during this period with regular coverage in the media, including such stories like that about increased activity by the Russian intelligence services in the Baltic states since they joined NATO and the EU; and, of course, in the sensitive question of education reform and minority rights. The last problem, with respect to the role of Latvian Russians and citizenship, is clearly an example where a Latvian problem has become more "Europeanised" through the efforts of For Human Rights in a United Latvia to make this a special issue at the EU level, all the more likely now that For Human Rights in United Latvia has a representative in the European Parliament.

In fact, the European elections provided some signs of two-way interactions between domestic and European politics which are likely to develop more in the future. Certainly, the political elites understand this phenomenon. And it is evident too in the

¹⁷ See: LETA, report, 12 June 2004.

¹⁸ Author interview with Aigars Freimanis, Director, Latvijas Fakti, Riga, August 2004.

thinking of party candidates, and obviously among the nine MEPs elected, some of whom are already prominent, that a European mandate is a possible means for re-entry to national politics at a later date. The interweaving of European and domestic political careers is a pattern already established in old member states; and it is likely to develop too in the new ones.

More worrying, however, is the wide gap that was evident in this election between the political elites and the general public over EU affairs. To some extent this revolves around differences over knowledge and understanding of these affairs where the political elites and parties have become conditioned through the accession experience but where the public has remained largely ignorant. Again, this is not unique to Latvia but in a country where mistrust towards these elites and towards political institutions is so strong the problem has a deeper meaning. Whether better public awareness of the EU through the experience of membership proves disillusioning, at least for some years, or whether the greater (albeit still somewhat abstract) credibility of the EU begins to make a real impact and counters this public mistrust remains to be seen.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>