

REFERENDUM BRIEFING NO 10 LATVIA'S EU ACCESSION REFERENDUM, 20 SEPTEMBER 2003

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Key Points

- The EU accession referendum in Latvia was the last in the series held in post-communist states and this deliberate timing was used by the pro-EU campaign to emphasise the need to avoid international isolation.
- Of these post-communist states, Latvia boasted the highest turnout; and recorded a Yes vote distinctly above the long term opinion poll trend.
- The pro-EU campaign was far better organised than the opposition; and it took account of key public attitudes such as a cynicism towards the political elite.
- Latvia has, in its Russian population, the largest ethnic minority of the candidate countries and, this minority showed less enthusiasm for EU accession partly because of the style of the campaign but also because of problems of social integration.
- Latvia is the poorest of the accession countries and, socio-economic factors played a significant part in determining local variation in the result.

The Legal Framework

The referendum question was: "Do you support Latvian membership of the European Union?" This was the fourth referendum held in Latvia since the return of democracy. The previous three issues were: Latvian independence (March 1991), the repeal of the law on amendments to the citizenship law (October 1998), and the repeal of the law on amendments to the law on state pensions (November 1999). The last of these was invalid because of low turnout. The results of these three referendums were as follows:

Theme (Year)	Yes Vote %	No Vote %	Turnout %
Independence (1991)	73.68	24.69	87.56
Citizenship Law (1998)	44.98	52.54	69.16
State Pensions (1999)	94.17	5.34	25.1

In May 2003, the Parliament (Saeima) passed amendments to the Constitution and Law on National Referendums and Initiatives, as the Constitution had not authorised referendums on international matters. As a result, EU membership would only be valid if at least half the number of voters that had voted in the previous national election turned out to vote. In October 2002, 497,543 voters had participated in the election to the Eighth Saeima, thus requiring that at least 248, 772 voters participate in the September 2003 referendum for it to be valid. And, then, at least 50% of these would have to approve the referendum question.

The timing of the referendum as the last of those on EU accession in candidate countries due to join in May 2004 was deliberate on the part of the government, which thereby hoped to strengthen arguments about Latvia not becoming isolated in the newly unified Europe. This was because public opinion on EU membership had, for years, remained divided with support for accession during 1998-2002 usually in the range of 40-50% and opposition usually either close behind or around 10-15 % less. Nevertheless, opting for a date just after that chosen for the referendum in Estonia (September 14) gave a key influence to the outcome of that country's vote on the result in Latvia. Caution and tactics in the timing of the Latvian referendum also entailed a risk.

Political Background

The referendum represented the culmination of a process since independence in 1991 which emphasised as top priority Latvia's accession to European and Western political and economic organisations such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe (in 1995) and the WTO (in 1999), the transatlantic security structure represented by NATO (Latvia joined its Partnership for Peace programme in 1994), but most notably the EU. Latvia became an associate member of the latter under its 1995 Europe Agreement in 1998. The overriding objectives for joining Euro-Atlantic structures were both economic opportunities but also the compelling desire for international security, its hard version being represented by NATO and its soft version by the EU.

While it could be argued that national interests dictated Euro-Atlantic integration, nevertheless party-political differentiation was evident. Some parties, notably on the left and the conservative right, have been less enthusiastic about EU accession than others. Nevertheless, domestic developments, such as electoral outcomes, as well as the greater probability of EU membership following the 2002 Copenhagen summit have encouraged a wider cross-party consensus on the question over the past year. In March 2003, the conservative For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Conservative Party (TB/LNNK), having lost much support in the 2002 election, moved from a Soft Eurosceptic position to adopting one supporting EU membership

on the grounds that "by saying 'No' to the EU, we would remain in the ante-room before the East and the West and lose support from the world's developed countries for our economic growth and security."¹ Similarly, the leftist Equal Rights Party approved a new platform in April 2003 that now supports Latvia's EU membership, urging the EU to change from being a union of countries into a union of peoples in which every ethnic group, including minorities, will have equal rights.² In other words, the party's own particular line was adapted to the EU framework. This had a wider significance as the leftist parties in Latvia are associated with the strong Russian minority and still tend to maintain good relations with Russian leaders despite shifting their positions on EU accession. The National Harmony Party is basically pro-EU, while the de facto communist Latvian Socialist Party (LSP) has remained consistently anti-EU as well as anti-NATO.

In other words, the accession process, interacting with electoral and political change, has forced this greater consensus and, given the timing, this is relevant as immediate background to the referendum campaign on EU membership. Insofar as political parties influence voters in referendums, then the prospects for a positive outcome to the September vote were thereby enhanced. All the same, there were some issues – notably, that of national sovereignty as well as the major question of the Russian minority – that were emotive or divisive and could disrupt such a calculation, remembering too long-term trends in public opinion indicating this was rather divided and certainly doubtful about the prospect of EU membership.

As in the other Baltic states, there were fairly widespread doubts at both elite and mass levels about losing national sovereignty so recently acquired after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This was, at one level, an understandable emotional reaction given that any new state (or, one with renewed independence) is bound to over-emphasise matters of national identity for a time as a way of establishing its legitimacy. At the same time, on a rational level, there was an awareness of the essential differences between the EU and the USSR concerning, for instance, the former's acceptance of national citizenship and, of course, its democratic rules, procedures and beliefs. However, the matter was not simply a question of black and white. Some particular reservations towards the EU captured this sensitivity about national sovereignty. There was some irritation over European bureaucratic regulations (similar to that sometimes voiced in Scandinavian states) and perceived international interference in Latvian affairs. Clearly, matters of European legislation and its magnitude were at the forefront during this period because of the ongoing membership negotiations.

What is interesting at this point in time is the real elite-level concern to counter any such popular, one may also say populist, views of the meaning of European integration. Judging by interviews conducted by the author in May 2003 with key figures in Latvia's integration politics, there was a strong recognition among them of the national sovereignty issue and the complications it presented for the pro-EU campaign in the months before the referendum. This issue was that much more complicated in simple terms because the word *Savienība* ("Union") is the same in the titles of the two systems – *Eiropas Savienība* for the EU and *Padomju Savienība* for the Soviet Union (unlike in some accession states like Poland and the Czech and

¹ *RFE/RL Newslines*, vol. 7, no. 61, part II, 31 March 2003.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 7, no. 71, part II, 14 April 2003.

Slovak Republics). According to one party international secretary involved in transnational links who was also a national organiser of the EU referendum: "people still remember Soviet times", have heard about the European bureaucracy and feared that EU regulations would be imposed without the Latvian government having a deciding voice. As a consequence, it was necessary to explain the EU's procedures and that, for instance, Latvia would play a part in shaping its policies in the European Council.³ The head of the Latvian European Movement explained that his organisation would be using both popular means – such as producing a calendar on the theme "The EU is not the Soviet Union" – as well as more sophisticated arguments to counter any comparison between the EU and the USSR.⁴ It has, of course, to be added that there were limits to how far pro-EU publicity could avoid the term "Union" simply because of the EU's own title. This was especially true in official information aimed at explaining its institutions and procedures (and, not to be forgotten, in the wording of the referendum question).

Broadly speaking, the numerous Russian minority (comprising one-third of the population) was much less likely to be motivated by a concern for national sovereignty than ethnic Latvians. It was also to be expected that they would view the EU positively as an external advocate and, following accession, future guarantor of their minority rights. However, much depended on how far these broad notions were internalised, excluded other concerns and were actually appreciated based on a knowledge of EU actions. Judging by elite interviews conducted by the author in May 2003, it was widely assumed among key organisers of the referendum that non-Latvians (there were also some much smaller minorities as well as Russians) would not share ethnic Latvians' sensitivity about national sovereignty but rather focus on socio-economic questions like employment possibilities and welfare. Nevertheless, various complicating factors affected a full exercise of their rights within the EU itself depended on Russians becoming Latvian citizens, while EU membership could actually cause problems in relations with Russia because of the construction of the Schengen border and the question of visas (in fact, visa fees had been increased for travel to Russia). While most Russians wished to remain in Latvia rather than emigrate to Russia, economic contrasts being a decisive factor here, nevertheless, national sentiment could still count when it came to such aspects of Latvia's finalisation of its Euro-Atlantic integration. At the same time, the question of elite/mass relations was also relevant to the question of minorities. Latvian legislation favouring the rights of the titular nation had been liberalised under sustained pressure from European organisations, notably the OSCE and then the EU. This had been carried through by a small and committed part of the political elite where EU conditionality over membership was a decisive factor.⁵ But were these elite attitudes running ahead of public opinion and, if so, did this pose a problem given the EU's important and fairly visible role in this policy liberalisation?

Public opinion trends over recent years showed a level of support for EU membership lower than most other candidate countries from Central & Eastern Europe. However,

³ Interview with Juliya Zukovska, International Secretary of Latvia's Way (LC), in Riga, May 2003.

⁴ The arguments included: the EU is 'a union of nation states'; and, Latvia supports the role of small states in the European Convention (interview with Ainars Dimants, European Movement, in Riga, May 2003).

⁵ N. Muiznieks and I. Brands Kehris, 'The European Union, democratisation and minorities in Latvia' in P. Kubicek (ed.), *The European Union and Democratization* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 51.

while divided and rather doubtful about this prospect, the pro-EU side retained a certain edge over time. But this could not be seen as a secure advantage, given for instance evidence from *Latvijas Fakti* that public attitudes on EU accession were 'unsteady', i.e. not deeply rooted and possibly subject to change. At the same time, this indicated some scope for campaign mobilisation by the EU cause. The question asked was a pre-run of the referendum – if a vote were to take place on EU accession, how would you vote now? – and the figures over the previous four years from late 1998 to late 2002 were as follows:

Table 1: Public Attitudes on EU Accession

Date	For (%)	Against (%)	Undecided (%)
Nov. 1998	46.6	26.8	26.6
Feb. 1999	36.6	30.4	33.0
May 1999	44.2	31.0	24.8
August 1999	50.7	29.6	19.7
Nov. 1999	49.7	28.0	22.3
Feb. 2000	43.5	37.7	18.8
May 2000	39.7	37.3	23.0
August 2000	44.5	32.4	23.1
Nov. 2000	45.3	34.2	20.5
Feb. 2001	41.4	32.7	26.0
May 2001	37.6	37.4	25.1
August 2001	42.7	30.7	26.6
Nov. 2001	43.2	31.2	25.6
Feb. 2002	36.3	43.0	20.7
May 2002	41.5	38.4	20.1
June 2002	45.5	38.5	16.0
July 2002	46.6	35.3	18.1
Sept. 2002	46.2	35.8	17.9
October 2002	49.1	35.4	15.5
Nov. 2002	45.9	35.9	18.1
Dec. 2002	47.7	33.2	19.1

(Source: European Integration Bureau in cooperation with the State Chancellery and *Latvijas Fakti*)

In other words, the notional vote for EU membership remained ahead throughout the quadrennium before the referendum year with the one exception of February 2002. However, on some occasions, as in May 2000 and May 2001, the pro-EU vote's lead was very small. However, it is significant to note the relatively high proportion of the undecided over this period. These ranged from 25.5% to 33.0% (they diminished somewhat in the latter half of 2002 when the prospect of EU membership became clearer), suggesting some considerable potential for information campaigns and the referendum on the EU to influence public opinion.

While the support for EU accession over this period since 1998 had ranged from 36.3-50.7%, there was a tendency in the immediate months before the 2003 referendum for this support to rise above 50%, although it dipped below this level in July. In the final weeks of the campaign, however, support once again rose to just above 50%. Opinion surveys also reported on expected participation in the referendum. During the summer, this promised to be upwards of 70%; while in September the expected level

reached 87% according to In Mind Marketing Research. By and large, ethnic Latvians and the more educated were the most inclined to vote.

On socio-economic and demographic indicators, the surveys of *Latvijas Fakti* for February-July 2003 inclusive provided a fairly clear picture of the structure of the pro/anti-EU preferences. These showed that citizens (i.e. those enfranchised to vote) were somewhat more pro-EU than all respondents who included non-citizens; while Latvians were much more pro-EU accession than non-Latvians. For Latvians, the range of support for accession was 53.1%-62.5% compared with 34.1%-42.7% for non-Latvians. A similar range was evident in the In Mind surveys in the weeks before referendum day. Socio-economic factors were strongly present with much more support among those with higher levels of education (those with university degrees were much more pro-EU than those with basic education or secondary education qualifications); just as those with higher incomes were rather more in favour. There were also regional variations related to this last indicator. For example, Latgale, the poorest region, in the East of the country, was fairly consistently the least enthusiastic about EU accession.

In completing this picture one should relate such evidence to levels of knowledge about the EU; and on this we turn to the referendum campaign itself, which provided the best opportunity to date for promoting this. At the end of 2002, it was reported there was a general lack of serious discussion of enlargement issues and hence a need for upgrading public education in this area⁶. In other words, would the referendum satisfy this need and, given the opinion trends summarised above, would the actual decision on EU membership (as distinct from the hypothetical question asked in opinion surveys) convince those undecided to support accession or not?

The Referendum Campaign

The campaign began in effect in early May with the Europe Week organised by the Latvian European Movement (EKL) which involved activities in different towns and districts throughout the country. Well-organised and financed as it has been for many years, the Latvian European Movement provided an important backbone to the 'Yes' effort in the campaign that developed during the summer and reached its final phase in the five weeks from 12 August until the vote on 20 September. As a whole, the 'Yes' campaign had substantial advantages over the No' campaign of superior organisation, resources and EU expertise. At the same time, the 'No' campaign suffered from a certain fragmentation, lacked any charismatic leader and simply failed to develop the drive that characterised some anti-European efforts, notably the recent anti-Euro campaign in Sweden⁷. The 'Yes' campaign also showed evidence of careful strategic planning, some imaginative thinking and focussed activities angled to the particular tendencies in public attitudes outlined above (indeed, the opinion surveys quoted here formed part of the strategic and focussed nature of the 'Yes' campaign).

It may, therefore, be said from the outset that the considerable imbalance of efforts and resources in favour of the Yes campaign was the decisive factor in turning the

⁶ C. Walker, 'Latvia's road to the West: next stop EU', *RFE/RL Newslines*, vol. 6, no. 231, 11 December 2002.

⁷ 'Cik demokratisks bija referendums?', 14 October 2003, <http://www.politika.lv>.

uncertainty and vulnerability of pro-accession sympathies (as demonstrated by opinion surveys during recent years) into a clear-cut result in the eventual vote. The timing of the referendum was also important for this allowed the 'Yes' campaign to argue more convincingly that the vote was both historic and definitive. This was clearly on the minds of key actors for, as President Vaira Vike-Freiberga declared on the occasion of her re-election on 20 June: "I believe that when the moment to take a decision comes, the Latvian electors will look at the other candidate countries and will ask themselves whether they shall remain the only ones to stay behind."⁸ In the final week of the campaign, once the Estonian referendum result was declared as a very clear approval of EU accession, then the pro-EU forces underlined how important it was not to split the Baltic states by isolating Latvia from its neighbours. During these days, a mood of optimism was evident among the Yes camp, encouraged by opinion poll results.

The campaign organisers took full advantage of being the last in the series of EU referendums by studying experiences in other candidate, but also some member, states. Ramona Umblija, head of the government's referendum organisation unit, emphasised this aspect of the planning. At the beginning of the campaign in early May, this unit was studying referendums and their lessons in a number of EU member states such as Ireland, Denmark, Finland, the UK and Norway. But the EU accession referendums in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe were also followed closely for ideas and techniques that might prove useful for the Latvian campaign. To this end, she visited neighbouring Lithuania for the referendum held there in May (following a visit to Ireland the month before) and was again present in Estonia for their referendum. Members of the Management Group, which ran the information campaign on Latvia's accession, had several contacts with experts from the USA, Danish PR consultancy companies, Austria and Estonia.⁹ In short, the government's management of the referendum was to, say the least, professional; and, this was again shown in the use of experts on EU affairs and consultants throughout the campaign.

The concept behind the government campaign was for a three-stage process based on: information and dissemination, discussion (including conferences on different aspects of accession such as the economic), and then, in the final weeks, a "call to vote" emphasising mobilisation for turnout purposes. The Management Board, established in February, ran the government's information campaign, which commenced on May 5 and lasted right up to referendum day. It utilised opinion surveys for targeting special groups such as people in rural areas, employees at the bottom end of the salary scale and those above 55 (to name some groups least inclined towards EU entry) with specially prepared material and arguments. This Board also had funds from the state budget to allot to projects run by NGOs, municipalities and cultural organisations and these could include some proposed by anti-EU groups for the sake of promoting dialogue on EU accession. It also issued campaign material such as special brochures produced by the European Integration Bureau (a government co-ordination unit) and structured in the form of questions and answers. These were on the themes of concern to the public that were identified early on such as: the maintenance of state

⁸ 'Referendum on the European Union in Latvia, September 20th. 2003', <http://www.robert-schuman.org>, p. 3.

⁹ *Report on Information Measures regarding Latvia's accession to the European Union undertaken in the First Half of 2003*, summary report to the Latvian Government, provided by the Referendum Campaign Unit, Prime Minister's Office, Riga, pp. 4, 6-7..

sovereignty and national independence; possible changes in material welfare; stability and safety; as well as the future of the countryside. Fact sheets were produced for special interests, such as 29 on specific agricultural issues alone (no doubt reflecting the importance of EU policy in this area), with other series for such groups as youth, parents, consumers and employers. All these materials were made available in libraries and on the Internet while there were info-bus tours especially in rural areas.

The pro-EU accession effort consisted of both official campaigns and those run by NGOs and private initiatives, with the Latvian European Movement being the most important non-governmental actor. The government allocated 1.59 million Euros for the campaign and there was extensive use of advertisements placed in newspapers and broadcast on TV and radio (as *Latvijas Fakti* surveys showed, most Latvians obtained their information on the EU from the electronic media). But the pro-EU campaign was not just better organised and funded than the opposition. It was also more strategically minded, early on identifying risks that could derail the Yes campaign; and, in doing so, adapting its approach and style to particular public mentalities. Many of these envisaged the risks involved in unforeseen events at home and abroad (a familiar concern of elites over winning elections), but one theme was remarkable both for Latvian society but also other post-communist countries. This was that "society has no trust in politicians and officials" and the risk that the "public has an opinion that this is just a campaign of the political elite and officials."¹⁰ This mistrust was fairly widespread and it was, among other things, strongly linked with the high incidence of corruption in Latvia; well documented by the European Commission, the Open Society Institute and other international bodies, notably Transparency International (which regularly identified Latvia as one of the worst cases in Europe). This represented a rather basic problem for the pro-EU campaign since, ultimately, its success depended on the credibility of the (overwhelming pro-EU) political elites.

The government confronted this problem by: playing down the role of party politicians (although there was a point beyond which this was not possible), giving prominence to respected public, often cultural figures. It also used experts (popularly seen as more 'objective' than politicians) in focus group activity and some cosmetic devices such as calling the government-sponsored information campaign the 'People's Campaign.' As key figures in the Yes campaign organisation acknowledged from the outset "people don't want to listen to politicians", only to individual experts as well as artists and writers. This also made the Yes campaign cautious about using leaders from current EU member states, not only because they were politicians but also because their participation would be seen as provocative given public sensitivity about international pressure. Instead, there was a preference for using cultural figures especially popular musicians like the charismatic composer Raimonds Pauls who organised free concerts in the European cause throughout the country, while writers and poets signed pro-EU declarations. As to foreign involvement, the preference was for inviting 'ordinary people' on a focus group basis such as farmers from the EU and older people from Estonia. Apparently, there was less reserve about political figures from the Scandinavian or Baltic states due to a fairly widespread sense of Nordic-Baltic commonality. The major exception to this de-emphasis on political figures was the Latvian President Vike-Freiberga. Mrs Freiberga had been elected in 1999 as non-partisan candidate which allowed her to claim officially a certain neutrality in politics.

¹⁰ *Latvia in Europe – Strategy for People's Campaign*, Prime Minister's Office, 18 March 2003, p. 3.

And, yet she was deeply committed to Latvia's future role in the EU (and NATO, as became very evident at the Prague summit in November 2002). Easily Latvia's most popular political figure, Vike-Freiberga used many occasions to promote a Yes vote and actively joined in the campaign in its final stage from mid-August, urging Latvia's integration into Western international structures as a way of finally closing the chapter on the country's unhappy past half-century.¹¹

In stark contrast, the anti-EU forces were small, somewhat divided and lacked funds. The principal anti-EU movement, led by Janis Sils, consisted of different bodies like the Latvian teachers' syndicate, the farmers' union of the Bauska region in the South and club 415 (an organisation of students, teachers and some businessmen).¹² And yet the opposition had potentially powerful arguments as their slogans 'EU=Soviet Union' and 'Independence outside the EU' illustrated. They appealed essentially to Latvian nationalism and also argued that, as a poor country, Latvia would suffer economically inside the EU in competition with stronger member states. There was much mileage to be gained from these arguments given public concerns about national identity and mistrust towards politicians; but the anti-EU cause was not exploited convincingly.

The pro-EU accession arguments, on the other hand, were much more developed and varied although, by the last few weeks of the campaign, they had - to a large degree - been reduced to a simplified 'West versus East' message. They may be summarised as follows:

1. *National Sovereignty/Independence*: The answer to criticisms that EU membership would damage national sovereignty was twofold. In an acknowledgement that it would indeed affect national sovereignty, it was stressed that Latvia would – notwithstanding its position as a very small state – actually gain in influence through becoming part of a large and internationally important organisation like the EU. The other line of argument was more blunt and contrasted the EU with the USSR as geopolitical systems, namely: that the former was based on conviction not military power.

2. *Security*: The argument used here was that EU and NATO membership were parallel and complementary especially with respect to the different dimensions of international security, i.e. the EU provided political security, as against the military security coming from NATO membership. Since NATO membership was already settled, there was a case for completing the new security arrangement for the country.

3. *Economic*: This argument flowed from Latvia's increasing trade with Western Europe, mentioned above, and pointed to Latvia's likely faster economic growth as a future EU member state, which would - among other things - boost foreign direct investment, compared with staying outside the EU. It was also noted that Latvia would, as a member state, receive more EU funds. (The country's chief negotiator with the EU went on record as saying that Latvia would be one of the biggest recipients of EU funds after entry; while the press published tables detailing EU funds that Latvia had received in past years).

4. *European Values/Standards*: This developed a cultural argument analogous to the 'return to Europe' theme, and stressed the guarantee to personal freedom that would

¹¹ 'Prezidente iesaistas ES kampana', *Diena*, 15 August 2003.

¹² *Referendum on the European Union in Latvia*, <http://www.robert-schuman.org>, p. 4.

come from belonging to the EU. There was also a modernisation interpretation lent this argument through the effects of European integration on such aspects of life as welfare, health and law as well as the economy.

5. *Historical*: The powerful point made here was that in joining the EU (as well as NATO) Latvia would finally be able to put behind itself the painful experience of a half century that involved both the Second World War and then a period of Soviet rule. The most poignant expression of this view and sentiment was the statement by President Vike-Freiberga just after the referendum result that the vote undid the 'odious' Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 that had spelt doom for the Baltic states for fifty years.

6. *The Future*: Captured by the pro-EU slogan 'Your Choice, Our Future', this argument simply said Latvia had no real alternative and that the country's best future lay with Euro-Atlantic integration. This was an extension of the historical argument of, course; but it also had some tactical advantages. Firstly, it allowed the government to distract voters from its current problems such as the budget, which was under discussion at the time. Secondly, the argument about the future was especially directed towards older voters (one of the more Eurosceptical groups) who were urged to vote for EU membership for the sake of their grandchildren.

It should be pointed out that much of the pro-EU campaign's material was produced in Russian as well as Latvian. Some different arguments were used, or certain ones were emphasised more than others, with Russian voters, notably stressing the economic possibilities and opportunities for youth inside the EU, although information material on the EU itself was usually the same. All the same, the strong emphasis on turning definitively to the West and, as in some pro-EU publicity, disparaging the East had some effect in alienating Russian voters which was exploited by the anti-EU movement.¹³ At one point in September, European Commissioner Verheugen felt compelled to correct a misapprehension in Latvia by saying that Russia would not be joining the EU in the near future, mentioning the fact that that it had not applied for membership,¹⁴

The referendum did provide an unprecedented opportunity for educating the public on the EU, although - in fact - the level of argumentation used tended to be fairly simplistic and did not really comprise an information campaign about the EU's own operation and procedures. (The European Integration Bureau nevertheless produced some informative and colourful brochures on the EU's institutions and member states). There was nevertheless some evidence that interest in the EU grew during the period of the long referendum campaign. Predictably, this was influenced by education levels and was stronger among those who were economically active than among older voters.

The Results

The referendum outcome was a very clear victory for the pro-EU campaign which, although holding substantial advantages over the opposition, had been far from

¹³ 'Cik demokratisks bija referendums?', 14 October 2003, <http://www.politika.lv>.

¹⁴ *RFE/RL Newslines*, vol. 7, no. 170, part II, 8 September 2003.

complacent and made every effort to win over voters. The Yes vote was, in fact, well above the poll trends of the previous months; while the turnout was exactly in line with that of the previous national election a year before. It was the highest turnout among the post-communist candidate countries and could be seen as due to the successful mobilisation efforts of the 'Yes' campaign.

Table 2: Results of Latvia's Referendum on EU Membership

Number of Votes Cast	1,010, 467	72.53%
For EU accession	676, 700	67.0%
Against EU accession	325, 980	32.3%
Invalid ballots	7, 787	0.8%

(Source: Latvian Statistical Office, <http://www.cvk.lv>)

The Yes vote predominated in 30 out of the country's 34 electoral districts, and in many cases the vote in favour of the EU was very high: it was over 70% in 20 of the districts and over 80% in 6 of them. (The vote from Latvians abroad was 92.4% in favour of EU membership). The highest Yes vote of any electoral district was that of Valmiera with 83.1%. The four exceptions with No majorities were (giving the percentage of No votes in brackets): Rezekne (55.7%), Daugavpils city (67.2%), Daugavpils district (50.3%) and Kraslava (50.4%). Riga, the capital and by far the largest city, showed a majority of 59.1% in favour but it was below the national average.

The first point to make about this local variation is that all four exceptions were in the Eastern region of Latgale, which is the poorest region of the country. It was also the one that continuously showed the least support for EU accession in the surveys conducted by Latvijas Fakti in the half year before the referendum. To some extent, Latgale's Eastern location suggested a geographical factor at work indicating less enthusiasm for integration with Western Europe. But the vote also supported those who argued that the division between 'winners' and 'losers' of the economic transition since communism mattered in determining attitudes towards European integration which was often seen as favouring the former. In this sense, it seems that the opposition movement had had some effect with its economic arguments.

However, there was one other powerful factor determining local variation in the vote. The vote was not in fact uniform in Latgale, for it was most negative where the Russian population was relatively high as in the four exceptions mentioned above. Daugavpils had a minority of Latvians (only 14.2% of the population in 1999) and a majority of Russians (58.5%), while Rezekne and Kraslava similarly had non-Latvian majorities albeit less dominated by Russians (in Kraslava Russians together with Belorussians predominated over Latvians). As a whole, Russians did, when it came to voting, show less support for Latvia's EU membership than ethnic Latvians – as, indeed, had been predicted in the opinion polls – but one should nevertheless be careful about adopting too absolute an interpretation on the ethnic question here. There were also some Western districts in Latvia, such as in Kurzeme, where - despite the significant presence of Russians - the vote for EU accession was high. In Liepaja, for example, the vote for EU accession was 76.5% even though the Russian

population there was 39.6% and only 44.8% were ethnic Latvians, according to 1999 figures (Russians together with Ukrainians and Belorussians nearly formed a majority there with 49.7%).

In general, then, the ethnic factor was clearly an important one in determining voting behaviour. This was not totally surprising given that the pro-EU arguments had been implicitly if not explicitly unfriendly to Russia by virtue of being so strongly pro-Western. But it was not exclusive of other factors with which it evidently intermixed. The sense of economic dejection and abandonment was powerful in certain areas, and this factor combined with geographical distance (or the perception of this).¹⁵ Many Russians apparently were concerned that EU membership would impact harmfully on relations with Russia even though most of them had no desire to return to their motherland. Moreover, since early in the year there had been some tension with Moscow over the treatment of the Russian minority in Latvia (and in Estonia) and the atmosphere of relations with Riga had worsened at the time the referendum was held. Thus, more abstract reasons for Latvian Russians to like the EU – as the real guarantee of minority rights and promise of better economic conditions in the future – appeared not to be that decisive when it came to voting on 20 September.

Conclusion: Wider Significance

With this referendum, Latvia took its final step towards EU membership, which - along with that of other post-communist states and two Mediterranean countries, is set to take place on 1 May 2004. There can be little doubt, given the relatively high Yes vote and the strong turnout, that this final step demonstrated the legitimacy of this decision. At the same time, the country will join NATO and so complete its main objectives in external relations since its independence in 1991. This development may in a wider context be seen as confirmation of Latvia's successful regime change and as a guarantee of the country's democratic consolidation, given the important influence exerted by international organisations especially in improving the question of the status of minorities in Latvia.

Nevertheless, the actual vote in the referendum demonstrated some problems that were not really a surprise given the evidence from opinion research. Ethnic Russians were clearly much less enthusiastic about joining the EU even though on rational grounds there were strong reasons for their supporting it. Furthermore, the vote gave a fairly serious warning about public disaffection on socio-economic grounds. Although this did not at all jeopardise the Yes vote, it nevertheless represented a source of perhaps greater discontent in the future especially if adapting to actual EU membership proves arduous.

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

¹⁵ '66.96% balso par Latviju Eiropa', *Diena* 22 September 2003.

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>