

# The Referendum on Latvia's Accession to the European Union: Analysis and Conclusions

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**ABSTRACT.** The results of a referendum and sociological data (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences) show that a large portion of ethnic Russians (44 percent) voted against accession to the European Union, while 20 percent voted in favour and 36 percent did not participate. The Latvian ethnic group was much more positive: 57 percent in favour, 18 percent against, and 24 percent did not participate. Representatives of other ethnic groups in Latvia voted 33 percent in favour, 25 percent against; 41 percent did not participate. The answer to the question why the attitudes towards accession to the EU are quite negative among ethnic Russians was sought both in quantitative and qualitative data. The results of this analysis testify that attitudes towards the EU are based on fear, a sense of inequality, uncertainty, and disappointment and among the Russian-speaking population also in a sense of inequality and exclusion. These negative emotions are based mainly in dis-satisfaction with implemented public policies.

**Key words:** EU INTEGRATION, ETHNIC GROUPS, RUSSIAN SPEAKING POPULATION, REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN, FACTORS SHAPING ATTITUDES TOWARDS EU.

The referendum on Latvia's accession to the EU was held on the 20 September 2003, a Saturday. The voters had to answer the question "Are you in favour of Latvia joining the European Union?". The date of the referendum had great significance in Latvia's case, because it was the last of the candidate countries to hold a referendum and there was information about the positive vote in other countries, including Estonia a week earlier. As a result, a week before the referendum, special maps were prepared asking: on which side would Latvia stand – on the side where the "old" and "new" European Union countries are, or alongside Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine? The article presents and analyses the campaign and the main results of the referendum on Latvia's accession to the EU and suggests some factors shaping the attitudes of voters' in Latvia regarding EU membership.

## Referendum on Latvia's accession to the EU: Campaign and the main results

In characterising the pre-referendum campaign, it must be noted that the government granted a sum of million Lats to the campaign organising committee.

The main focus of the government-supported and funded national campaign was a public information campaign that lasted 138 days (from 5 May to 19 September) and was dedicated to informing the public and promoting discussions about Latvia joining the EU. Its task was to give an opportunity to express various, often differing opinions, and also to present objective and comprehensive information about the benefits and risks of Latvia joining or not joining the European Union. However, political scientists<sup>1</sup> considered this campaign to be somewhat one sided, with residents mainly called on to vote to join the EU.

Analyzing the political processes associated with the referendum, it can be concluded that this was one of the rare occasions when both the media and society was on the side of the political elite. Latvia's biggest media outlets, church representatives, trade unions, and the heads of the country's biggest enterprises all supported EU accession.

Turning to the results of the referendum, it must be said that on the whole no one in Latvia was surprised by them. Almost three-quarters (72.5 percent) of all eligible voters in Latvia took part, a total of 1,010,467 voters, which was a bigger turnout than at the most recent Parliamentary elections. Those in favour of EU membership amounted to 676,700 or 66.97 percent of voters. Those against equaled 325,980 or 32.26 percent of voters. If the results are projected onto all eligible voters in Latvia, 48 percent of all eligible voters were in favour of joining the EU, and 23 percent were against.

Surprise and discussions in Latvia were generated by the attitude and voting of the Slavic minority in the referendum: 44 percent of ethnic Russian Latvian citizens voted against Latvia joining the EU, 20 percent were in favour, and 36 percent didn't vote. On the other hand, 57 percent of ethnic Latvian citizens voted in favour, 18 percent were against, and 24 percent didn't vote (Figure 1).

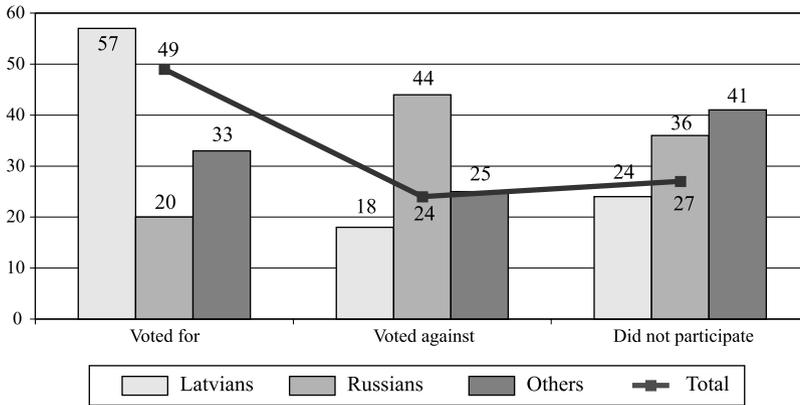
The most interesting aspect of this issue was not whether there was an ethnic divide in the referendum, but rather when and why the attitudes of Russians toward the EU changed. Surveys show that in the mid 1990s Russians had a more positive attitude toward the EU than Latvians; for example, in 1998 64 percent of Russians and 58 percent of Latvians had a positive attitude (Figure 2).

After 1998 there was an overall trend among all ethnic groups towards a fall in the numbers supporting EU accession. In 2001 an average of 50 percent in all ethnic groups supported it. But in 2002 a change in attitudes could be seen, with the number of Latvians in favour of joining the EU rising, while the number of supporters among Russians and other nationalities fell (Figure 3).

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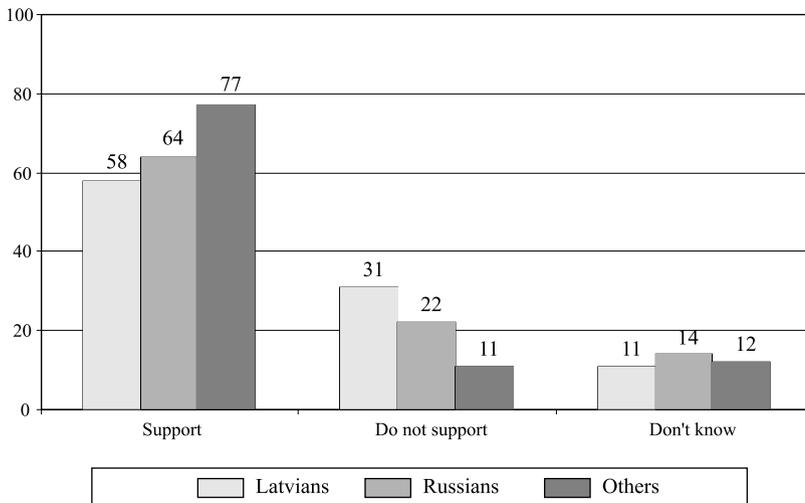
<sup>1</sup> Daunis, A. *How democratic was the referendum?* Available at: <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?id=108954&lang=lv>, (14.10.2003)

FIGURE 1. Voting in the referendum: ethnic dimension. Percentage of citizens aged 18–75 (October 2003).



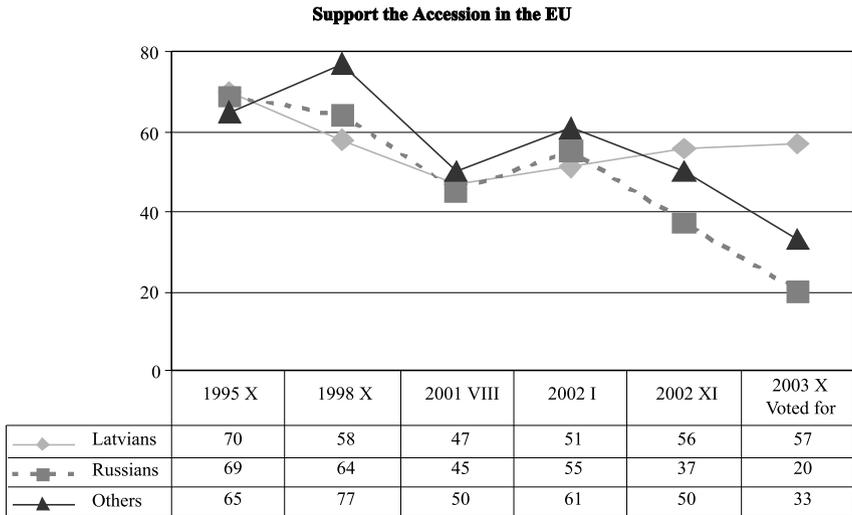
Source: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2003. Post-referendum survey in Omnibus, September–October 2003. National multistage random sample. Sample size: 1000 respondents. Weighted.

FIGURE 2. Support to the accession in the EU in 1998. Percentage of citizens aged 18–75.



Source: Baltic Data House. October, 1998. Sample size: 500 respondents. National multistage random sample. Weighted.

FIGURE 3. Changes in attitudes towards the EU (1995–2003). Percentage of citizens aged 18–75.



Source: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2001–2003; Baltic Data House, 1995–1998. Sample size: 500 respondents in every turn. National multistage random sample. Weighted.

What happened in 2002 that considerably influenced people’s perceptions of EU membership? Survey results do not give a definitive answer, but they do indicate where it should be sought.

## Factors determining choice of Latvia’s residents at referendum

Before the referendum, the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences in conjunction with Baltic Forum and the Secretariat of Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs conducted a study to analyse attitudes toward the EU, the sense of belonging, inter-ethnic relations, and attitudes toward ethnic policies in Latvia. This study facilitated the creation of models for how attitudes toward the EU develop.

Based on this study, as well as a pre-referendum survey conducted by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences and focus group discussions carried out by Latvia Facts (December 2003), it can be concluded that the choice by Latvia’s residents in the referendum was determined by the following factors:

- The pre-referendum campaign;
- Perceptions about Latvia’s economic development after joining the EU;

- Perceptions about Latvia's security after joining the EU;
- Political dissatisfaction;
- Political alienation from the state (especially prevalent amongst Russians).

### *The pre-referendum campaign*

The pre-referendum campaign in Latvia was effective with regard to Latvians, motivating them to vote in favour. The texts shown in the mass media were interpreted by ethnic Latvians more as a signal that the country must join the EU so that Latvia wouldn't stay on the "other side" along with Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, etc., but on the "right side" with the other countries of Europe. Another way in which the media texts were read was: "joining the EU means the correction of a historical injustice". Factors connected with the Latvian ethnic identity (a collective fear of Russia, a collective sense of history) played a major role in deciding how Latvians voted.

These signals did not work on other ethnic groups in Latvia in terms of "for the EU." They possibly had the opposite effect. The focus groups conducted by Latvian Facts (December 2003) showed that members of other ethnic groups and residents of the Latgale region perceived the pre-referendum campaign as quiet and unnoticeable.

### *Perceptions about Latvia's security after joining the EU*

The reason why a large number of ethnic Latvians voted "for" is connected with Latvia's security: "Latvia doesn't have any other option (it can't stand alone)" (50 percent of ethnic Latvians), "Joining the EU is a guarantee of Latvia's security" (44 percent of ethnic Latvians). Amongst respondents from other ethnic groups, the belief that "Joining the EU is a guarantee of Latvia's security" was not widely held (Latvia Facts, October 2003). It can be seen that the reasons rationalised in the surveys for voting "for" in the referendum correlate with emotional reactions to the pre-referendum campaign.

### *Perceptions about Latvia's economic development after joining the EU*

A second significant argument why both ethnic Russians and ethnic Latvians voted to join the EU was the perception that "joining the EU will facilitate Latvia's economic development" (an important argument for 44 percent of ethnic Latvians and 64 percent of ethnic Russians). A relatively large number mentioned that "EU financial support, investments in Latvia will increase" (an important argument for 34 percent of ethnic Latvians and 33 percent of ethnic Russians; Latvia Facts, October 2003).

Economic arguments were also important to those who voted "against": people are scared of changes in their lives and are concerned that living standards will

fall because joining the Euro zone will lead to price rises that will not be compensated by gradual wage increases; taxes will rise because Latvia's taxes will be harmonised with those in the EU; unemployment will rise because of an inflow of workers from the EU countries and because uncompetitive enterprises will be shut down. People are anxious that EU bureaucrats will exploit and deceive people in Latvia. There was also a widespread view that Latvia is not ready yet to join the EU (arguments mentioned in focus group discussions, Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (BISS), 2003; survey results, Latvia Facts, October 2003).

### *Political discontent*

The study conducted by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences permits the conclusion that attitudes among ethnic Russians toward Latvia joining the EU were formed by making assessments of the domestic situation. Domestic problems, especially with regard to citizenship, language, and education policies in Latvia, have created a range of negative emotions that also promote the development of negative attitudes toward joining the EU. Dissatisfaction with Latvia's citizenship, language and education policies, combined with a shattering of illusions that the EU will be actively involved in Latvia's legislative process with regard to these issues, was the basis for the negative attitude of ethnic Russians toward joining the EU in the referendum. It should be noted that the answers to the question of what happened in 2002 should be sought here. In 2002 all minority schools in Latvia (teachers, students, and parents) experienced the introduction of bilingual education (BISS 2002) and opponents of education reform in minority schools started organising the protest campaigns for 2003 and 2004. This was the period when European regulatory institutions, having judged that Latvia's legislation concerning minorities was acceptable to the EU, stopped monitoring in Latvia about these issues, and this also could be one of the reasons why the attitude of ethnic Latvians toward joining the EU became more positive, while that of ethnic Russians became more negative.

### *Political disaffection*

Alongside dissatisfaction with the ethnic policy practiced by the state, ethnic Russians often display an emotionally negative stance toward the state. The lack of a feeling of belonging to the state makes them feel alienated in Latvia, and these feelings are transferred to the EU: "If we aren't needed here, who is going to need us there?" The sense of marginalisation and inequality felt by non-citizens manifests itself at such a level they even concede the referendum results may have been falsified, but as previous surveys show (Baltic Data House 1998, BISS 2001), ethnic-Russian citizens and non-citizens share the same attitudes.

*The importance of the other socio-demographic aspects in the vote for accession to the EU*

Evaluating the importance of different socio-demographic aspects in the vote for accession to the EU, the ethnic dimension appears as the most significant one. However, statistically significant differences can be found in respect to respondents' age, gender, income, level of education, and region (Table 1–2).

TABLE 1. The importance of the socio-demographic aspects in the voting for accession to the EU. Percentage of citizens aged 18–75.

		Voted for	Voted against	Did not participated
<b>Total</b>	<b>Citizens</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>27</b>
Region	Rīga	46	28	25
	Vidzeme	59	18	23
	Kurzeme	51	18	32
	Zemgale	54	19	27
	Latgale	33	34	33
Degree of urbanisation	Rīga	46	28	25
	Other town	47	23	30
	Country side	53	21	26
Age	18–30	39	29	32
	31–45	47	27	26
	46–60	55	22	23
	61–74	59	13	28

*Source:* Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2003. Post-referendum survey in Omnibus, September–October 2003.

National multistage random sample. Sample size: 1000 respondents. Weighted.

Both the data of Central Election Commission on the results of the referendum and a survey conducted by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences confirm that the voting in different regions of Latvia was different: the Latgale region (the eastern part of Latvia) was less positive, but the Vidzeme, Kurzeme, and Zemgale were more positive to the accession to the EU. But if we look at data in respect to degree of urbanisation, we can observe that there were no statistically significant differences in voting between the capital, other cities, and the countryside.

Looking on the division of answers in different age groups, we can observe that young people were surprisingly more reserved than older people: among those aged 18–30, 39 percent were in favour, and among those aged 61–74, 59 percent were in favour. Conversely, in 1998, young people were more positive about accession to the EU than older people.

It is interesting to note that there was a significant gender difference: 57 percent of women were in favour, but only 40 percent of men.

TABLE 2. The importance of the socio-demographic aspects in the voting for accession to the EU. Percentage of citizens aged 18–75.

Total	Citizens	Voted for	Voted against	Did not participated
		49	24	27
Education	Basic	40	20	41
	Secondary	49	25	27
	Secondary vocational	52	23	25
	University degree	58	28	14
Social Status	Employed	48	27	25
	Not employed	45	27	28
	Retired	56	12	32
Income per family member a month	Less than LVL 30	37	28	36
	LVL 31–50	46	23	31
	LVL 51–70	58	18	24
	LVL 71 and more	54	22	24
	DK, NA	45	29	27
Gender	Male	40	28	32
	Female	57	20	23

Source: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2003. Post-referendum survey in Omnibus, September – October 2003. National multistage random sample. Sample size: 1000 respondents. Weighted.

As might be expected, those people with basic education were less active during the referendum. This is a tendency observed at every election in Latvia. Those with university degrees were most active in the referendum, and they were also more positive to the membership in the EU.

Income per family member each month has to be evaluated as an important factor as well. Among those who have an income less than 30 LVL a month (about 53 USD), only 37 percent were in favour, compared to those with an income 51–70 LVL (about 90–125 USD), among which 58 percent were in favour.

TABLE 3. The importance of the socio-demographic aspects in the voting for accession to the EU. Percentage of citizens aged 18–75.

Total	Citizens-Russians	Voted for	Voted against	Did not participated
		20	44	36
Education	Basic	8	27	65
	Secondary	25	44	31
	Secondary vocational	21	44	35
	University degree	19	63	18

Source: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2003. Post-referendum survey in Omnibus, September–October 2003. National multistage random sample. Sample size: 1000 respondents. Weighted.

If we look particularly at the Russian group, then we have to admit that there were no statistically significant differences among different age, income, and gender groups. The main differences were among education groups. Thus we can observe that those with the highest education were more against accession to the EU: among those with a university degree only 19 percent voted in favour, while 63 percent were against (Table 3).

### *Conclusion*

The voting of Russians and other ethnic groups in the referendum were determined by economic considerations (negative expectations), fear of losing direct and symbolic ties to Russia, and a protest against ethnic policies in Latvia. A precise answer on how much weight each of these factors had in the referendum cannot be given due to the methodology used for the study.

For the political process as a whole, the referendum on Latvia joining the European Union and the public debates after the event only widened the gulf between ethnic Latvians and ethnic Russians living in Latvia. As the attitude towards the EU among the Russian minority in Latvia is more negative than positive, and the basis of these attitudes is founded in a sense of alienation from the state, a lot of efforts at a governmental level should be made to change the communication model among the state institutions and inhabitants of Latvia and to promote the development of a European identity amongst the residents of Latvia.

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### ANALIZĒ IR IŠVADOS

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BALTĪJOS SOCIALINIŲ MOKSLŲ INSTITUTAS, LATVIJA

**SANTRAUKA.** Referenduma ir sociologinio tyrimo, kurį atliko Baltijos socialinių mokslų institutas (Ryga), duomenys leidžia teigti, kad didesnioji dalis rusų Latvijoje (44 proc.) balsavo 'prieš' šalies stojimą į ES, 20 proc. rusų balsavo 'už' ir 36 proc. referendume nedalyvavo. Latvių grupė buvo nusiteikusi pozityviau – 'už' balsavo 57 proc., 18 proc. 'prieš' ir 24 proc. referendume nedalyvavo. Straipsnyje apibūdinama, kaip buvo vykdoma agitacinė kampanija dėl šalies stojimo į ES, kokios visuomenės grupės ir institucijos palaikė stojimo į ES idėją ir kokie motyvai lėmė šią paramą. Analizuodama kokybinių ir kiekybinių tyrimų duomenis, autorė aiškinasi, kodėl etninėje rusų grupėje vyrauja neigiamos nuostatos dėl šalies stojimo į ES. Tyrimų rezultatai rodo, kad nuostatos dėl narystės ES lemia baimė, netikrumas ir nusivylimas. Rusakalbių gyventojų požiūriams įtakos turi ir neįgybės jausmas bei atskirtis. Autorės nuomone, tokias neigiamas rusų etninės grupės emocijas taip pat formuoja nepasitenkinimas vykdoma šalies politika.

Gauta 2004 metų rugsėjį  
Įteikta spaudai 2004 metų gruodį