



# A NEW WAY FORWARD: LATVIA'S ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

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A new way forward: Latvia's accession to the European Union

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## About the author

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## About REWEU

The project (Re)uniting the East and West: Reflections on the 2004 EU enlargement (REWEU) The project is focused on the commemoration of the 2004 "big bang" EU enlargement on the occasion of its 20th anniversary in May 2024. Through the combination of local, national and international public events, collection of historical memories and narratives, studies on impacts of 2004 enlargement, costs of non-enlargement and role of women in the process, as well as exhibitions and media articles, the project contributes to wider contemporary efforts of EU memory politics. The project focuses on eight selected EU countries, four from the older EU Member States which were part of the Union's decision-making processes leading up to the big enlargement (Belgium, Finland, Greece and Italy) and four newly acceding countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland). The project is funded by the European Union through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) under the European Remembrance strand.

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## Introduction

Latvia's accession to the European Union (EU) on the 1st of May 2004, was a significant milestone in the country's post-Soviet transformation, marked by intense political debate and strategic framing by political elites. The decision to join the EU was a historic, strategic geopolitical and socioeconomic choice. In the early stages, there were significant concerns within Latvia about the potential costs and risks of EU membership, including fears about losing sovereignty, economic challenges, and cultural shifts. Meanwhile, political elites managed to shift public opinion through strategic campaigns that highlighted the economic and security benefits of joining the EU. Latvia's EU accession was portrayed as a step toward modernization, economic stability, and a secure position within the European geopolitical landscape, particularly in light of historical experiences with Russia.

This article draws from and summarizes the vast volume of material produced on the topic of the accession of Latvia to the EU. Documents, analyses, interviews, and scientific articles in great number have been produced over the decades before and after the accession of the small Nordic country into the EU. Among the notable works used are "Return to Europe: 1990-2015 in Essays of Latvian Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers and Diplomats",<sup>1</sup> as well as several works by Karlis Bukovskis. In particular, the in-depth analysis of Latvia's accession done together with Justīne Elferte<sup>2</sup> for the book "The Centenary of Latvia's Foreign Affairs", the

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<sup>1</sup> "Pirmie izšķirošie gadi: Krievijas armijas izvešana un Latvijas nonākšana Eiropas Savienības priekšvēstulē" from *Atgriešanās Eiropā Latvijas prezidentu, premjerministru, ministru un diplomātu esejās*. No starptautiskās atzišanas līdz pirmajai prezidentūrai Eiropas Savienībā 1990–2015, compiled by Kristīne Kozlova (Riga: Zinātne, 2016),

[www.zinatnesgramatas.lv/site/fileBlock/upload/e\\_Eiropa.pdf](http://www.zinatnesgramatas.lv/site/fileBlock/upload/e_Eiropa.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> LIIA, "The Centenary of Latvia's Foreign Affairs: Activities and Personalities", ed. Andris Sprūds, Valters Ščerbinskis, Diāna Potjomkina (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2017).

[https://liia.lv/en/publications/the-centenary-of-latvias-foreign-affairs-activities-and-personalities-658?get\\_file=2](https://liia.lv/en/publications/the-centenary-of-latvias-foreign-affairs-activities-and-personalities-658?get_file=2)

article on the role of the foreign banks in Latvia's accession into the EU,<sup>3</sup> as well as the overall pace of the EU accession in Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian state-building process<sup>4</sup>. The article will also draw on a vast majority of documents as well as evaluations done by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia<sup>5</sup> as the central coordinating ministry of the EU affairs in Latvia, and media articles compiled by the European Union Information Centre of Latvia, and public opinion polls such as the Central and Eastern Eurobarometer series.

The decision to join the EU emerged as a strategic priority following Latvia's regained independence in 1991, driven by a desire for security, economic development, and integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures. This desire reached its culmination with the 2003 referendum, which saw more than 67.49% of voters support joining the EU.

### Latvian sovereignty at the forefront of framing EU accession

While different strategic aspects of EU accession were highlighted throughout different points, the framing of EU accession centered and revolved around the idea of sovereignty. Having just regained its independence, the general population of Latvia was skeptical of integrating into a new Union right after over 50 years of occupation by the previous one. The Singing Revolution, the Barricades<sup>6</sup> – these key drivers of Latvian independence were events that were still very fresh in the

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<sup>3</sup> Bukovskis, K. (2022). Europeanization by foreign banks: Latvia from 1995 to 2004. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 54(3), 491–512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2022.2150666>

<sup>4</sup> Karlis Bukovskis (2022), *The Four Stages of State Rebuilding in the Baltic States Since 1990*. In: *State-Building, Rule of Law, Good Governance and Human Rights in Post-Soviet Space*. Routledge, [10.4324/9781003198024-3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003198024-3)

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "20 years of Latvia's membership of the European Union" Last accessed: January 15, 2025. [https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/20-years-latvias-membership-european-union?utm\\_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/20-years-latvias-membership-european-union?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F)

<sup>6</sup> Latvian Public Broadcasting, "Five stories from the 1991 Rīga Barricades" January 20, 2020. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/culture/history/five-stories-from-the-1991-riga-barricades.a345406/>. See also Edgars Engīzers, "The historical significance of the barricades" Conference paper, (Riga, 2017) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372892481\\_The\\_historical\\_significance\\_of\\_the\\_Barricades](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372892481_The_historical_significance_of_the_Barricades)

minds of Latvians. The success of the Latvian independence movement was catharsis not only for national pride and patriotism, but also generations of societal trauma caused by the Soviet regime.

This societal trauma initially expressed itself in the public discourse concerning EU accession as skepticism and distrust of foreign powers. Independence had to be protected, and any impact on Latvia's ability to self-govern needed to be carefully approached. In the early nineties there was a certain fear that the statehood of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia might become a "bargaining chip" in the behind-the-scenes negotiations of superpowers. Therefore, certain early discussions revolved around the idea that Latvia's objectives cannot be achieved by establishing alliance relations with Western powers, but rather a conditional "neutrality", or cooperation models among the small countries in the region.<sup>7</sup>

Edvīns Inkēns, a journalist and a member of the Latvian Popular Front during the second congress of the Latvian Popular Front in 1989 stated: "For many years we have heard that most countries do not recognize the incorporation of the Baltic countries in the Soviet Union, but suddenly now, when we have decided on equating our *de facto* status to our *de jure status*, the response is such that it is disappointing. We are dealing with evasive, empty declarations and even a variety of attempts to silence us."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile Sandra Kalniete, MEP, ex-European Commissioner and ex-Foreign Minister of Latvia, in her memories of this period rhetorically asked: "Why couldn't Latvia be an island?... I wish the world would leave us alone once and for all."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Edijs Bošs "Conceptualization of Foreign Policy during the Awakening Period" in "The centenary of Latvia's Foreign Affairs: Ideas and Personalities" edited by Diāna Ptjomkina, Andris Sprūds, Valters Ščerbinskis (Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2016) p. 133

[https://lai.lv/publikacijas/latvijas-arlietu-simtgade-i-sejums-idejas-un-personibas-556?get\\_file=2](https://lai.lv/publikacijas/latvijas-arlietu-simtgade-i-sejums-idejas-un-personibas-556?get_file=2)

<sup>8</sup> Materials of the 2nd Congress of the LTF, State Archives of Latvia, microfilm A-LVA-MP002.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Kalniete, *Es lauzu. Tu lauzi. Mēs lauzām. Viņi lūza* (Rīga: Jumava, 2000), <http://kalniete.lv/ebooks/eslauzu/>

The political leadership of Latvia essentially had to show that the EU was a new way forward – a step away from binary thinking and spheres of influence, or classic bilateral diplomacy, towards a new international project, where Latvia's independence would be protected and the state could develop in all manners. The political leadership through this idea of sovereignty highlighted key themes through which accession was framed.

First, Latvian political elites framed EU membership as a "return to Europe," emphasizing the country's European cultural, historical, and political heritage. This narrative positioned Latvia's EU accession as a rectification of the geopolitical injustices of the Soviet occupation, signalling Latvia's reintegration into the European family of nations. The political leadership emphasized the EU as a community of shared democratic values, rule of law, and human rights. Joining the EU was framed as a commitment to these principles, reinforcing Latvia's transition to a democratic state. While emphasizing integration, political elites reassured the public that EU membership would not dilute Latvia's national identity or sovereignty. They framed EU accession as a partnership where Latvia would have a voice in shaping Europe's future.

**The political leadership emphasized the EU as a community of shared democratic values, rule of law, and human rights.**

Second, the economic benefits of EU membership were a central theme. Political leaders presented the EU as an opportunity to modernize Latvia's economy, attract foreign investment, and access structural funds for development.

Membership was framed as a pathway to prosperity, offering Latvians better living standards and access to the single market. Economic arguments played a significant role in framing the decision to join the EU. Political elites highlighted that EU membership would provide access to a larger market, enhance foreign investment opportunities, and stimulate economic growth. By 2003,

approximately two-thirds of Latvia's foreign trade was already conducted with EU countries, demonstrating a clear economic alignment that made accession appealing.<sup>10</sup> The leaders stressed that joining the EU would not only stabilize Latvia's economy but also elevate living standards through increased trade and investment opportunities.

Third, security was also a key theme in the framing of EU accession. While the EU was not a Union based on collective security *per se*, the process of EU accession in Latvia was tied to NATO accession as well.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the political leadership frequently used similar messaging with regard to both international organisations. For example, it was argued that both NATO and the EU would reduce the diplomatic, military, political, and other pressures that Russia could exert over Latvia.<sup>12</sup> While NATO would do it through a military alliance, the EU could protect Latvia through strengthening its economy, social system, and the general welfare of the society.<sup>13</sup> Through access to western markets, funding opportunities, and a system of political alliance, Latvia's dependence on Russia would decrease, therefore, reducing Russia's ability to destabilize the internal situation of Latvia.

### The role of the government in the framing of EU accession

Latvia's accession to the EU in 2004 was marked by substantial political consensus among mainstream political parties, although there were some dissenting voices

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<sup>10</sup> Latvian Public Broadcasting, "Latvia marks 18 years of EU membership" 1 May 2022. Accessed on 3 January 2025. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/culture/history/latvia-marks-18-years-of-eu-membership.a454805/>

<sup>11</sup> Kārlis Bukovskis, Justīne Elferte, "Latvia's Path to the European Union: In-between the Backstage and the Spotlight" from *The Centenary of Latvia's Foreign Affairs: Activities and Personalities*, ed. Andris Sprūds, Valters Ščerbinskis, Diāna Potjomkina (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2017), 195,

<sup>12</sup> Guntis Ulmanis, "Atjaunotās Valsts prezidenta institūcijas loma Latvijas ārējās un iekšējās drošības nostiprināšanā" in "Atgriešanās Eiropā: Latvijas prezidentu, premjerministru, ministru un diplomātu esejās. No starptautiskās atzīšanas līdz pirmajai prezidentūrai Eiropas Savienībā 1990 – 2015." compiled by Kristīne Kozlova (Zinātne, 2016)

[www.zinatnesgramatas.lv/site/fileBlock/upload/e\\_Eiropa.pdf](http://www.zinatnesgramatas.lv/site/fileBlock/upload/e_Eiropa.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

and debates about potential risks. Besides certain concerns about how EU integration might exacerbate tensions between Latvian and Russian-speaking populations, and nationalist factions raising concerns about EU integration leading to an erosion of Latvia's ability to self-govern, independence, and national identity, there actually was such broad consensus by the Saeima (the Parliament of Latvia) on EU accession, that this led to a very weak level of public debate, and a weak opposition.

The extraordinary session of the Saeima on April 7, 1995, where MPs approved the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' draft document "Basic directions of the foreign policy of the Republic of Latvia until 2005"<sup>14</sup> was an instrumental factor for further integration into the European Union and the subsequent official application for membership. In his memory of the foreign policy debate of April 7, 1995, Valdis Birkavs, previous Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, noted that "Unfortunately, the debate was not fruitful, [...] the main reason for the weak opposition was the fact that the majority of the Saeima clearly supported the concept."<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, even though there was broad political approval for the EU accession process under the 5th Saeima, the outgoing government feared that there might not be a strong pro-European coalition after the elections.<sup>16</sup> So in October 27, 1995, the government

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<sup>14</sup> Basic directions of the foreign policy of the Republic of Latvia until 2005, published in the Official Journal "Latvijas Vēstnesis" 9.02.1995, <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/26775>

<sup>15</sup> Valdis Birkavs, „Pirmie izšķirošie gadi: Krievijas armijas izvešana un Latvijas nonākšana Eiropas Savienības priekšvēstulē” from *Atgriešanās Eiropā* Latvijas prezidentu, premjerministru, ministru un diplomātu esejās. No starptautiskās atzišanas līdz pirmajai prezidentūrai Eiropas Savienībā 1990–2015, compiled by Kristīne Kozlova (Rīga: Zinātne, 2016), 66, [www.zinatnesgramatas.lv/site/fileBlock/upload/e\\_Eiropa.pdf](http://www.zinatnesgramatas.lv/site/fileBlock/upload/e_Eiropa.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Māris Riekstiņš, „Atjaunotās Latvijas ārpolitikas pirmsākumi un stratēģiskās prioritātes” from *Atgriešanās Eiropā* Latvijas prezidentu, premjerministru, ministru un diplomātu esejās. No starptautiskās atzišanas līdz pirmajai prezidentūrai Eiropas Savienībā 1990–2015, compiled by

of Māris Gailis (centre-right, pro-EU coalition formed by five parties – “The Latvian Way”, the “Political Union of Farmers”, “Latvia’s Green Party”, “Latvian Farmers’ Union”, and “For Fatherland and Freedom”) submitted Latvia’s official request to join the European Union. However, after the elections on October 14, 1995, President Ulmanis convened all 11 elected parties of the 6th Saeima to discuss the long-term priorities of Latvia’s foreign policy. The material that became the “6th Declaration of the political parties of the Saeima” was largely based on the April 7, 1995 “Basic directions of the foreign policy of the Republic of Latvia until 2005” document.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Latvia’s course did not change, even with a political change.

The fact that the vast majority of politicians, and therefore also the public, perceived EU integration to be self-evident led to further issues. The lack of interest and intellectually strong opposition led to a number of issues, including: 1) a lack of additional arguments and flexibility in the later negotiations with the European Commission on the conditions for accession; 2) society later blaming the Foreign Ministry for not releasing all of the information and the lack of transparency; 3) the alienation of the public to the EU accession process due to a lack of knowledge about the EU, the creation of biases, and the understanding of the EU as an elite project.

The following years saw the government enact large-scale anti-corruption, judiciary, and economic reforms to ensure the completion of the Copenhagen criteria. Furthermore, accession negotiations had slowly begun. During this time, the Latvian political elite emphasised EU membership as a transformative process

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Kristīne Kozlova (Rīga: Zinātne, 2016), 19,

[www.zinatnesgramatas.lv/site/fileBlock/upload/e\\_Eiropa.pdf](http://www.zinatnesgramatas.lv/site/fileBlock/upload/e_Eiropa.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Kārlis Bukovskis, Justīne Elferte, “Latvia’s Path to the European Union: In-between the Backstage and the Spotlight” from *The Centenary of Latvia’s Foreign Affairs: Activities and Personalities*, ed. Andris Sprūds, Valters Ščerbinskis, Diāna Potjomkina (Rīga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2017), 194, [https://www.lai.lv/publikacijas/latvijas-arlietu-simtgade-darbi-un-personibas-658?get\\_file=2](https://www.lai.lv/publikacijas/latvijas-arlietu-simtgade-darbi-un-personibas-658?get_file=2)

that would modernize Latvia. However, this period was also characterised by a certain level of political instability. Multiple governments had resigned from 1995 – 2000. The governments led by Andris Bērziņš (Centre-right, pro-EU, the nationalist coalition formed by four parties – “The Latvian Way”, the “People’s Party”, “For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK”, “New Party”) from 2000 – 2002, and Einārs Repše from 2002 – 2004 (Centre-right, pro-EU, nationalist coalition formed by four parties – “New Era”, “Latvia’s First Party”, “For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK” and the “Union of Greens and Farmers”) were at the metaphorical finish line of EU accession. During this time, it was important to keep political momentum going and prepare the general public for the referendum to join the European Union. These governments also focused on calming the general public’s fear about the future of Latvia’s sovereignty and its ability to self-govern as well as on keying in on economic benefits. These governments also tried to counter the Euroskepticism particularly present among rural populations and older demographics.<sup>18</sup>

### The role of the media and NGOs in the framing of EU accession

With regard to the media’s role in the framing of EU accession, the Latvian media largely acted as a conduit for the pro-EU narratives championed by the political elite, focusing on themes of modernization, economic opportunity, and security while addressing concerns about identity and sovereignty in a more subdued manner. Furthermore, a key message in the Latvian media at the time was not to miss the historical opportunity to join the EU and NATO along with other former communist countries and, more importantly, with the Baltic States. Essentially, this was a plea against the isolation of Latvia on the European continent. The media was able to integrate successful themes from the independence movement into

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<sup>18</sup> Sandor Richter et al. “EU Eastern Enlargement: The case of the former ‘second wave’ applicant countries” WIIW Research Reports, No. 270, September 2000, p. 25. Last accessed on January 13, 2025: <https://wiiw.ac.at/eu-eastern-enlargement-the-case-of-the-former-second-wave-applicant-countries-dlp-194.pdf>

the EU accession movement. These were ideas such as Baltic unity, and moving away from the Soviet past, sovereignty in a new world, etc. Furthermore, as visible in Figure I, the Latvian media was the main source of information for the general public about information concerning the EU and the ongoing political debates, so the framing of the media was crucially important. This synergy between political and media messaging played a critical role in securing public approval for Latvia's EU membership.

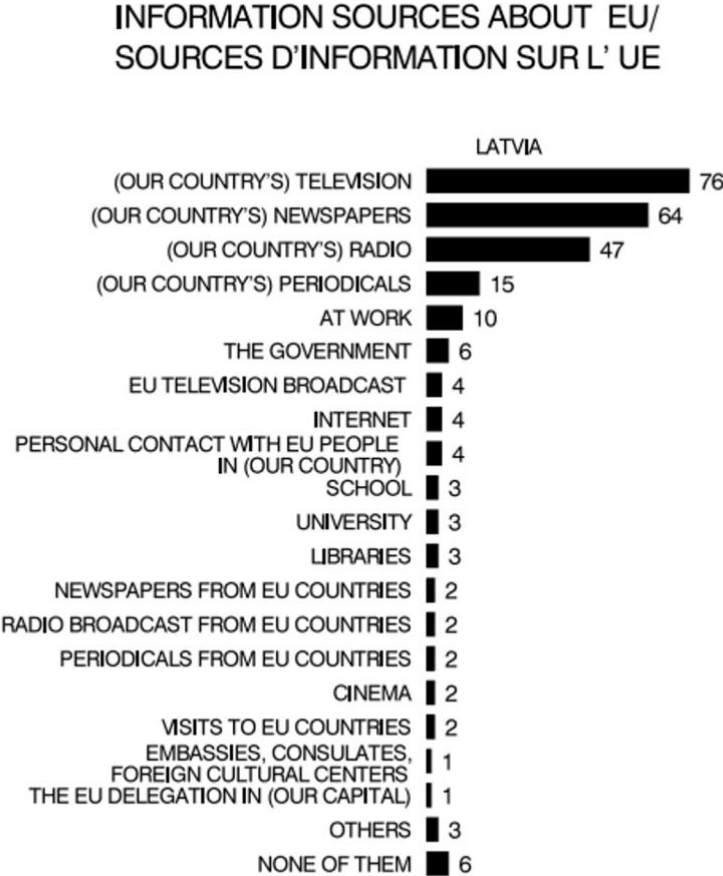


Figure I – Information sources about EU from the Central and Eastern Eurobarometer

Source: Central and Eastern Eurobarometer – series 8, ICPSR

The role of Latvia's civil society and non-governmental sector (NGOs) during the country's process of accession to the European Union was moderate but meaningful, reflecting broader patterns in post-socialist Europe. NGOs, including organizations like the European Movement – Latvia, actively contributed to public awareness campaigns, helping to shape the narrative around EU membership. They were instrumental in emphasizing the economic, security, and democratic benefits of joining the EU. However, the capacity of these organizations was limited compared to the influence of political elites and international actors.

**While NGOs participated in public discourse, their influence was often overshadowed by state-driven narratives and policies.**

The NGO sector in Latvia during this period was still in its developmental stage, with limited resources and expertise. Consequently, while NGOs participated in public discourse, their influence was often overshadowed by state-driven narratives

and policies. Civil society actors primarily acted as facilitators of EU values, engaging in activities to educate the public on the EU's principles and potential benefits. This effort was essential in addressing public skepticism and enhancing understanding of the EU accession process. Despite their active involvement, NGOs and civil society organizations often worked independently of the political elite, which dominated the negotiation and decision-making processes. The Latvian government relied heavily on EU institutions for guidance, creating a dynamic where civil society's role was more supportive than directive. This reflects broader trends in post-socialist countries where political elites, rather than grassroots movements, spearheaded EU integration initiatives.

## Two sides of the same coin – Benefits and costs of EU accession

### Benefits of EU accession

EU membership was presented as a foundational part of Latvia's post-Soviet transformation, providing the opportunity not only to modernize the state, but also to align with Western Europe. One of the most compelling promises made by Latvian politicians was the significant financial aid the EU could provide to different sectors. Furthermore, the EU funding was essentially marketed as a tool for improving infrastructure, with promises of modernizing communication networks, upgrading sewerage and water supply systems, and building new roads while repairing and renovating existing ones.<sup>19</sup>

In the agricultural sector, which faced particular uncertainty, Latvian political leaders sought to reassure farmers by emphasizing the benefits of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). While acknowledging the challenges of competing within the EU single market they argued that CAP subsidies would bolster the agri-food sector, ensuring growth rather than stagnation or lack of competitiveness. These assurances were also given to other industries, where the political elite highlighted the EU's single market as a key driver for attracting foreign direct investment, boosting Latvian businesses, and creating jobs.

Another important benefit was the promise of the “four freedoms” of the single market — the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital within the Union. Politicians portrayed these freedoms as opportunities to improve the Latvian economic and social welfare.

For individuals, EU membership would simplify travel for work, education, and personal growth. Latvian politicians explained that there would be easier access

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<sup>19</sup> European Union Information Center, “Viedokļu kopsavilkums par Eiropas Savienību no preses izdevumiem 2003. gada augustā.”, (Rīga, 2003), p. 4

to jobs and educational opportunities across the EU.<sup>20</sup> For businesses, the free movement of goods and services was expected to enhance competitiveness and foster innovation. Latvian industries, which had been stunted under the Iron Curtain's isolation, would be able to catch up technologically and integrate into a modern, interconnected economy.

Additionally, the free flow of professionals and companies into Latvia was marketed as a catalyst for knowledge transfer. Politicians argued that this would increase the skills and abilities of Latvian workers, improve industry standards, and position the country as a competitive player in the EU market.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond economic and infrastructural benefits, EU membership was seen as a pathway to consolidate democratic institutions and governance. Political elites emphasized the EU's ability to enforce transparency, accountability, and good governance in state institutions. Aligning with European norms and practices was not just a technical adjustment but also a moral imperative, aimed at, for example, strong anti-corruption measures.<sup>22</sup>

### Costs of EU accession

While the Latvian political elite and media were optimistic about EU accession, parts of the population and some political figures raised concerns about the risks and costs associated with joining the Union. These concerns mainly centered around economic challenges, cultural implications, sovereignty, and the social costs of reform.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 2 – 4.

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particularly worrisome for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which feared being outcompeted.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, compliance with EU labor market regulations and environmental standards was viewed as burdensome for businesses, who already were fearing an increased level of competition. Businesses worried that these regulations, while beneficial in the long term, could impose significant costs on Latvia's fledgling industries, straining the economy in the short term.<sup>24</sup>

The agricultural sector was another area of contention. While CAP subsidies were promoted as a lifeline, farmers expressed concerns about transitioning away from Soviet-era support systems. Adapting to EU standards was seen as a double-edged sword - necessary for EU integration but potentially negative for the competitiveness of the sector. Increased competition from other EU farmers added to these apprehensions, raising fears of a diminished role for Latvian agriculture in the European Union.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, "The expectations of Latvian citizens concerning the EU", September, 2003, <https://ppdb.mk.gov.lv/datubaze/latvijas-iedzivotaju-motivacija-un-ekspektacijas-attieciba-pret-latvijas-iestanos-eiropas-savieniba-2/>. See also European Information Centre, "Viedokļu kopsavilkums pret Eiropas Savienību no preses izdevumiem 2003. gada augustā" (Riga, 2003), p.2

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.2

<sup>25</sup> Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, "The expectations of Latvian citizens concerning the EU", September, 2003, <https://ppdb.mk.gov.lv/datubaze/latvijas-iedzivotaju-motivacija-un-ekspektacijas-attieciba-pret-latvijas-iestanos-eiropas-savieniba-2/>

**The Russian-speaking population had concerns about language rights, integration policies, and political representation, as these groups feared further marginalization under EU policies.**

EU accession required Latvia to implement extensive reforms, particularly in areas like governance, law, and infrastructure. Critics argued that these reforms, although necessary, would be costly and could strain the country's financial resources in the short term. This was especially concerning given Latvia's relatively small economy and the need for significant

structural adjustments. For Latvian nationalist factions, EU membership raised fears about the erosion of cultural identity and traditional values. Aligning with EU norms on social issues like immigration and multiculturalism sparked anxiety, especially among conservative groups. For example, already in 1992, a Parliamentarian of the Supreme Council (Parliament of Latvia from 1990 until 1993) Aleksandrs Kiršteins rhetorically asked "do Latvians ... have to uncritically admire the Maastricht agreement, for even greater migration ...?"<sup>26</sup> Parliamentarian Jānis Freimanis had very similar positions, saying that "we have to thoroughly think out the question of national identity, namely, what is our national identity really? Therefore, do the Maastricht documents fit us or not?"<sup>27</sup> The Russian-speaking population, which formed a significant part of Latvia, also had concerns about language rights, integration policies, and political representation, as these groups feared further marginalization under EU policies.

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<sup>26</sup> Stenogram of the June 2, 1992 session of the Supreme Council, Latvijas Republikas Saeima, [http://saeima.lv/steno/AP\\_steno/1992/st\\_920602.htm](http://saeima.lv/steno/AP_steno/1992/st_920602.htm)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## Cooperative approach of the Baltic states

Latvia's decision to join the EU was heavily influenced by its historical and political relationship with Russia. Latvia's past as a Soviet republic left a legacy of caution and wariness towards Russia. The EU on the other hand offered a critical opportunity to ensure Latvia's sovereignty and security. For pro-European political elites, particularly those in center-right parties, the EU represented a geopolitical anchor to the West, providing both economic stability and collective security, and, most importantly, reducing Russian influence.

Latvia's neighboring Baltic states, Estonia and Lithuania, were also key players in the EU accession process. All three countries shared similar experiences of Soviet occupation and a desire to rejoin European institutions. The Baltic states were united in their aspirations to integrate into NATO and the EU, which provided a strong regional bloc in negotiations with both Western powers and Russia.

The cooperative approach between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania during the EU accession talks was seen as a way to present a united front. Cooperation and active dialogue between the Baltic States, including during the EU accession process, was strengthened by the inter-parliamentary institution – the Baltic Assembly – founded on 8 November 1991, and the Baltic Council of Ministers, established on 13 June 1994. Their shared interests included the promotion of Baltic security, the pursuit of economic modernization, and the need for EU and NATO membership to ensure long-term political stability.

## Vox Populi – Public support for EU membership and the accession referendum

Public support for Latvia's EU accession evolved significantly over time, influenced by both, political leadership and the wider socio-economic context. Initially, Latvian public opinion was mixed, with many citizens uncertain about the benefits and risks associated with EU membership. In the early years following Latvia's regained independence in 1991, political elites framed EU accession as a vital step for the country's return to the West and economic modernization.<sup>28</sup>

Public opinion in Latvia about EU accession was shaped by various dividing lines, particularly between generational, ethnic, and political groups. Early on, there was a notable division between the Latvian-speaking majority and the Russian-speaking minority. The Russian-speaking minority was concerned about their future within an EU Member State that had been actively distancing itself from Russia. For example, Vjačeslavs Altuhovs, the president of the Russian commune in the newspaper "Vesti Segodna" on August 25, 2003 stated that "Europe does not respect Russians and Slavic people at all, as evidenced by Kosovo and Serbia, as well as the Union not interfering in Latvia's educational reforms. Furthermore, joining the EU will lead to an even bigger distancing from the 'ethnic homeland', because the border with Russia will be tougher."<sup>29</sup> The Latvian-speaking population was more aligned with national independence movements and the desire for integration with Western Europe and was largely supportive of EU membership. This group viewed EU accession as a step toward strengthening Latvia's sovereignty, aligning with Western political and economic structures, and

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.fomoso.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Latvia-in-the-Economic-and-Structural-Policy-of-the-EU.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> European Union Information Center, "Viedokļu kopsavilkums pret Eiropas Savienību no preses izdevumiem 2003. gada augustā.", (Rīga, 2003), p. 2

ensuring greater security from Russia's influence. For example, Andrejs Vilks, a criminologist in the Latvian newspaper NRA on August 11, 2003 stated that "Crime will increase if Latvia remains outside of the EU. Latvia then will find itself in the midst of Russia's organised structures and its shadow economy."<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, Georgs Andrejevs, the Latvian ambassador to the Council of Europe at the time stated that "Joining the EU is the least of the potential evils that could await us if we do not accede. Remaining outside the EU, we will lose more than we would if we join. We will not be able to remain sovereign for long, without acceding to the

**The Latvian-speaking population viewed EU accession as a step toward strengthening Latvia's sovereignty, aligning with Western political and economic structures, and ensuring greater security from Russia's influence.**

EU."<sup>31</sup> This discourse remained somewhat present throughout the entire accession process and remained relevant after joining the European Union. The tensions between the Latvian- and the Russian-speaking populations still flare up periodically, whenever larger national or EU reforms take place or when international tensions between Russia and the West increase.

There was also a clear public divide concerning the economic consequences of EU accession. Statements published in newspapers mentioned doubling of healthcare costs<sup>32</sup>, two to five times increase in the price of foodstuffs,<sup>33</sup> foreign businesses taking over Latvian businesses,<sup>34</sup> and more. These concerns were

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<sup>30</sup> European Union Information Center, "Viedokļu kopsavilkums par Eiropas Savienību no preses izdevumiem 2003. gada augustā.", (Rīga, 2003), p. 4

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 4

<sup>32</sup> European Union Information Center, "Viedokļu kopsavilkums pret Eiropas Savienību no preses izdevumiem 2003. gada augustā.", (Rīga, 2003), p. 3 (Linda Kilevica, journalist, published in "Latvijas Laiks" 05.08.2003)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

directly juxtaposed by messaging from the government, academia, and civil society.

In this regard, the Latvian government played a central role in promoting the referendum and mobilizing support for EU membership. The leadership of the country, particularly the ruling center-right parties, presented EU accession as essential for Latvia's economic modernization, political stability, and integration into the Western world. Prime Minister Andris Šķēle, President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, and other political figures were key advocates for EU membership, regularly framing it as a pathway to prosperity and security. They emphasized that EU membership would improve living standards, provide access to development funds, and secure Latvia's place in the European political and economic community

While the Latvian government and political elites were the primary advocates for EU membership, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations significantly contributed to public debates and efforts to educate the population on the benefits of EU membership. Numerous NGOs, including the Latvian Human Rights Committee and the Latvian European Movement, actively participated in disseminating information about the EU and its benefits. They organized informational sessions, debates, and seminars, targeting various segments of the population to ensure that voters understood the implications of EU membership. These groups produced pamphlets, held community meetings, and utilized local networks to reach rural and less-engaged populations.

Furthermore, business owners, journalists, politicians, and regular citizens also frequently wrote opinion pieces and articles in newspapers to explain the benefits

of the EU and try to quell doubts and concerns about the future of Latvia as a Member State.<sup>35</sup>

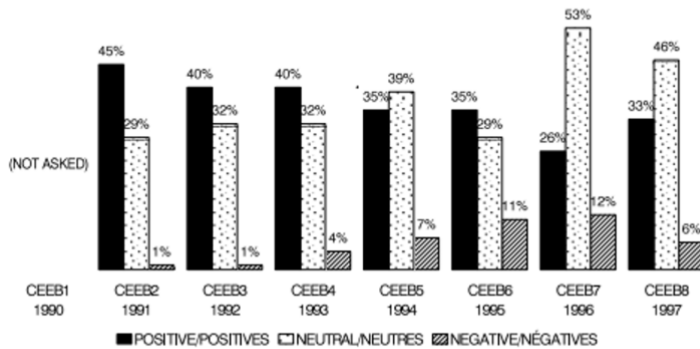
The success of certain aforementioned narratives, messaging, and campaigns resulted in a fluctuating public opinion about Latvia's accession to the EU. The Central and Eastern Eurobarometer 8, for example, showed that (fig. II) from 1991 – 1997 the positive image of the European Union in Latvia had been falling among Latvian citizens. Meanwhile, the support for joining the European Union had stayed relatively high. The survey results in Fig. III show that the proportion of Latvian citizens who were considering voting 'for' Latvia's accession to the EU, fluctuated between 36.8% and 55.6%, while the proportion of respondents who would have voted 'against' accession ranged between 26.4% and 40.9%. However, the general trend over time would be that supporters of Latvia's accession to the EU increased.

Figure II – European Union's image in Latvia

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<sup>35</sup> European Union Information Center, "Viedokļu kopsavilkums par Eiropas Savienību no preses izdevumiem 2003. gada augustā.", (Rīga, 2003)

EUROPEAN UNION'S IMAGE IN LATVIA  
L'IMAGE DE L'UNION EUROPÉENNE EN LETTONIE

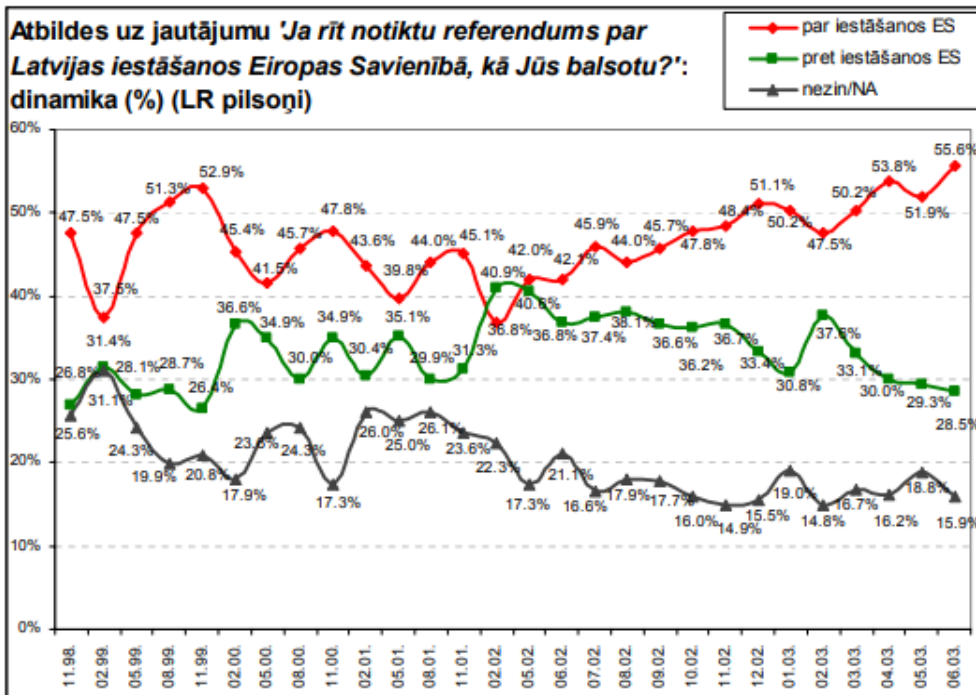


ANNEX FIGURE 12

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROBAROMETER 8

Source: Central and Eastern Eurobarometer – series 8, ICPSR

Figure III – If the referendum about Latvia joining the EU happened tomorrow, how would you vote?



Green – against joining the EU  
Red – for joining the EU  
Black – do not know / no opinion

Source: Market and public opinion research centre „SKDS“

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Latvia's accession to the European Union was a defining moment in its modern history. The successful outcome of the 2003 referendum was the result of a long-term strategic effort by political elites, civil society, and the media to frame EU accession as a historic opportunity for Latvia's post-Soviet transformation.

Latvia's path to EU membership was characterized by the necessity of alignment with Western Europe. These campaigns did not just highlight the benefits of EU membership like financial aid, economic development, and the strengthening of governance, but also ensured Latvia's freedom, security and the commitment to democracy. This was also a narrative that affirmed the belief of many Latvians that it was necessary to distance Latvia from its Soviet legacy and embrace a modern European identity.

Civil society also played an important role. NGOs and grassroots movements helped facilitate widespread dialogue on EU membership, organizing public forums, distributing educational materials, and encouraging citizens to learn more about what it means to join the European Union.

The media also played a critical role in informing the public and shaping public opinion. Latvian media outlets provided extensive coverage of the debates surrounding EU membership. While the debates from the side of the Parliament and government might not have always been as transparent or open, as some would have wanted, the continuous coverage and analysis of events and promises ensured that the decision to join the EU was not perceived as imposed from above, but rather as a collective choice based on the general public's opinion.

Despite the overall success of the campaign, it is important to acknowledge the significant concerns and reservations that were also present during the accession process. Minority groups, especially the Russian-speaking population, voiced

concerns and worries about how EU integration might affect their status in Latvian society. Issues such as language rights, cultural integration, and political representation were relevant factors for these groups, raising fears of potential marginalization in the EU. Nationalist factions also expressed concerns about the erosion of Latvia's cultural identity, arguing that alignment with EU norms on social issues could dilute traditional values and customs.

Economic anxieties were also a complicated factor. Critics worried that Latvia's economy, still recovering from decades of Soviet rule, might struggle to compete within the EU's single market. SMEs and farmers faced uncertainties about increased competition and EU regulations and rules. Implementing the extensive reforms required for accession also posed financial challenges, with concerns that the short-term costs might outweigh the immediate benefits.

As we look back, we must express gratitude to the leaders of the past who had the foresight and determination to seize the historical opportunities presented to Latvia. These leaders navigated complex political and social landscapes, balancing competing interests and addressing valid concerns to build a consensus for EU integration.