

Turkish EU membership from Latvia's perspective: Why should we care?

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Introduction

EU enlargement is not a topic that has caused heated discussion in Latvia. Moreover, similarly to the 'big European questions' on where the borders of the EU are, or what ambitions the EU should have both in regard to its internal performance but also to the EU's global role, debates on further enlargement of the EU are almost non-existent. For example, a former minister has said that he cannot recall "a single discussion in the Cabinet of Ministers or the parliament" on Turkish EU membership bid during November 2002-December 2004.¹

This could be partly explained by the assumption that Latvia as a small country is likely to have a minor influence on these 'big European questions' within the EU. In addition, as a new member state, Latvia knows very well what an effect EU membership can have on the development of a country. Thus, the logic of further EU enlargement is not questioned.

Hence Latvia supports further expansion of the European block and, according to official statements, there seems to be no differentiation placed on the potential candidates, i.e. whether Latvia supports speedy accession of the Balkan countries before Turkey. Also the public opinion in Latvia – like in other new member states – is more favourable of further EU enlargement than in the EU-15. According to Eurobarometer data, 62% of Latvians support further expansion of the EU while only 26% are against it.²

But when it comes to possible Turkish accession, official statements, political party programs, media coverage as well as public opinion reveals that it is not perceived unambiguously. Turkey is the only candidate country whose EU integration has caused some, albeit limited, discussion.

The most common issues raised about Turkish EU accession in Latvia are the loss of EU structural funds (for EU-10) that would have to be spent in Turkey, in addition to the overall economic burden of Turkey's membership for the EU, the immigration

¹ "Latvia's Interests and Fears Regarding Turkey's Accession to the European Union", Ph.D. Nils Muižnieks, speech at the conference "Turkey in the European Union: What Does Latvia Have to Say?" organized by Baltic Forum, the European Commission Delegation to Latvia, and the European Parliament Information office, in Riga, Latvia, 28 April, 2006

² Eurobarometer 64, Autumn, 2005

potential, the 'otherness' of Turks, and human rights violations in Turkey. The need to change the EU's common policies and institutional set-up is also mentioned. Summing this up, one could easily come to the conclusion that Turkish EU accession is not favoured in Latvia, or that at the moment Latvians see little justification for Turkish EU integration. To investigate these perceptions this paper examines the arguments that are used, and should be used, in the debates on how Turkish EU accession is considered from the perspective of the EU, and Latvia in particular.

Part I

Arguments in favour of Turkish EU membership from Latvia's perspective

1. EU as a global actor

Those in favour of Turkish EU accession point to Turkey's role in increasing the significance of the EU as a global actor. They say that Turkey could serve as a bridge to the Islamic world and be a very useful partner to help the EU achieve its foreign policy ambitions.

Turkish EU accession supporters also point out that the evolution has left Turkey quite closely aligned with EU policies, and that Turkey has taken part in every EU-led military operation, except for the mission in the Republic of Congo. Plus, the recent decision to deploy troops in Lebanon proves that Turkey wants to be and has the means to be a regional player, a mediator and a contributor to the European response³ thus increasing the space for stability in the world.

The same argument can be heard in Latvia. It is believed that due to the size of the Turkish population, its territory, geographic location, and its economic, security and military potential, as well as culture and religion, "Turkey can significantly contribute in enhancing regional and international stability".⁴ By having Turkey in the EU, the European block would be able to "secure its influence and spread its values to regions that traditionally have been considered unstable, including the Middle East and the Caucasus" so that stability, peace, democracy and functioning market economies spread to these regions, as well.⁵

³ "Turkey claims Mideast peacekeeper role", Vincent Boland, Financial Times, 6 September, 2006

⁴ "Turcija un Eiropas Savienība: izaicinājumi un iespējas" (Turkey and the EU: challenges and opportunities), Einārs Sēmanis, deputy state secretary in Latvian Foreign Affairs ministry in a speech at the conference "Towards United States of Europe: Future Challenges and potential Solutions" at the University of Latvia, 8-9 December, 2004

⁵ Ibid.

It is also believed that Turkish EU accession would give “Latvia and the EU an Islamic ally at a time when hatred against the USA and a mistrust of Europe dominates in Islamic countries.”⁶

Moreover, Latvian Foreign affairs minister Artis Pabriks has explicitly said that not admitting Turkey into the EU is not in Latvia's interests. “We have to have close relations with Turkey (...) If we don't, the EU's international role will decrease, there will be less security around EU's borders which will result in a negative influence for relations with countries like Ukraine and Moldova. Turkey will be like a litmus test for EU policy in these countries”.⁷

However, Latvian member of the European Parliament (MEP) Inese Vaidere disagrees and argues in favour of a special Turkish-EU partnership. She admits that enhancing stability at EU borders is a “sufficient reason for finding a golden middle way [compromise] in relations with Turkey”. However, she stressed that Turkey's EU membership and the possible strengthening of the EU's role in the world has an indirect benefit for Latvia. Moreover, because the “risks from Turkish EU membership are large and benefits for the EU and especially for Latvia are mediated” Turkish EU accession should be replaced by a special partnership.⁸

Vaidere echoes the argumentation of the critics of Turkish EU integration who point out that Turkey could bring instability into the EU because it borders with Iraq, Iran, Syria, Georgia and Armenia.

It has to be noted here that EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP) is still decided in unanimity, but internal divisions – in particular relations between Cyprus and Turkey – cast a shadow of a doubt on whether unanimity on CFSP issues can be achieved if Turkey joins the EU.

2. Turkey and EU's defence capacity

Latvia - as a new NATO member state and an ally of the US - believes that Turkish EU membership would benefit not only European defence capacity but would also strengthen Latvia's position on the future shape of the European security and defence policy (ESDP). This is an argument that is specific to the new EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe, but it does not come up in European debates that often.

⁶ “Turcija Eiropas Savienībā” (Turkey in the EU), Pēteris Timofejevs, DELFI www.delfi.lv, 9 October 2005

⁷ “Ārpolitika pēc saprāta un satversmes principiem” (A foreign policy according to common sense and constitution), interview with Artis Pabriks, Public policy portal Politika.lv, 19 July, 2005
<http://www.politika.lv/index.php?id=7942>

⁸ “Turcija – lielākā ES dalībvalsts?” (Turkey – biggest EU member state?), Inese Vaidere, Diena, 15 December, 2004

As to the first part of the argument, the supporters of Turkish EU membership stress that Turkey has been a NATO member since 1952. Turkey's army is the second largest army in NATO after the army of the United States of America.⁹ In the long run, the size and quality of Turkey's armed forces could be a considerable plus for Europe's defence policy. This is why some experts have said that, "when it comes to security policy, Turks believe that the EU needs them more than they need the EU"¹⁰. Latvia also attaches great importance to Turkish support in NATO regarding the protection of Latvia's air space as Turkish planes have been patrolling the air space over the Baltic States.¹¹

As to the second part of the argument, Latvia has a strong interest in continued EU-NATO cooperation, not in seeing the development of ESDP as somehow weakening NATO and transatlantic ties. Turkish EU membership is perceived as strengthening the cooperation between the EU and NATO while maintaining a strong transatlantic lobby within the EU.

Thus, the 2006-2011 strategy for Latvian foreign affairs explicitly says that Latvia supports the strengthening of the military capacity of European countries and the EU, "based on the consideration that the ESDP is not an alternative to NATO, the ESDP's role has to develop in harmony with transatlantic relations, avoiding duplication and securing a close cooperation between the EU and NATO".¹² The document also states that Latvia and Turkey cooperate within NATO and have "common foreign policy interests in enhancing European security and stability".¹³ Strengthening the ESDP and EU-NATO ties is something that Latvia "as a small country strongly stands for because we are not interested in a useless use of resources and we want both organizations to complement each other."¹⁴

In addition to the above-mentioned arguments, some believe that having Turkey in the EU would diminish security risks coming from some Islamic countries. This is why, according to some experts, security reasons are the main argument behind Latvia's support for Turkish EU membership, i.e. it would give the EU a possibility for

⁹ Turkey has approximately 800 thousand personnel in its armed forces. Source: BBC

¹⁰ "The economics of Turkish accession", Katinka Barysch, in "Why Europe should embrace Turkey", Katinka Barysch, Steven Everts, Heather Grabbe, Centre for European Reform, September, 2005, pp.28

¹¹ "Latvia's Interests and Fears Regarding Turkey's Accession to the European Union", Ph.D. Nils Muižnieks, speech at the conference "Turkey in the European Union: What Does Latvia Have to Say?" in Riga, Latvia, 28 April, 2006

¹² "Latvijas ārpolitikas pamatnostādnes 2006-2010.gadam (Informatīvā daļa)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005 <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Arpolitika/pamatnostadnes/> last accessed in December, 2006, pp.

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¹³ Latvia's Foreign Ministry statement on Turkish-Latvian relations, ministry's website <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Arpolitika/divpusejas-attiecibas/Turcija/> last accessed in December, 2006

¹⁴ "Turcija un Eiropas Savienība: izaicinājumi un iespējas" (Turkey and the EU: challenges and opportunities), Einārs Sēmanis, in a speech at the conference "Towards United States of Europe: Future Challenges and potential Solutions" at the University of Latvia, 8-9 December, 2004

a dialogue with the Islamic world. But if accession negotiations with Turkey were not to start and Turkey were “marginalized, the question of Turkey becoming closer to Islamic block [of countries] would arise again” implying larger security threats to the EU.¹⁵

3. Turkey as energy security provider

Finding energy alternatives to minimize dependency from Russia became a popular argument in the EU after the energy crisis in January 2006, as approximately 30% of natural gas used in the EU is imported from Russia.¹⁶ In addition to that, the Russian oil dispute with Belarus of January 2007 further strengthens the perception of Russia as an unreliable energy provider.

In this context Turkey is seen as a possible energy corridor between the East and the West because Turkey is situated right next to the regions that produce and hold huge reserves of oil and natural gas. Experts say that there are several conditions that have to be fulfilled before Turkey can become the major transit country of energy that it could be.¹⁷ However, experts agree that Turkey has a large potential to help Europe to secure its energy imports.

This is a widely used argument in Latvia not only because of the energy crisis of January 2006 but also because, due to historical reasons, a part of Latvia’s population is very sensitive to being dependent on Russia. Yet, Latvia is the most dependent on Russian energy out of the three Baltic States.¹⁸ This is why Ankara is often mentioned as a way to escape that dependency from Moscow. For example, an article in one of the biggest Latvian dailies stressed that the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline “today is the only artery independent from Russia for transporting oil” and, according to the article, “Turkey would guarantee energy reserves for Europe from Central Asia if new projects for pipelines were implemented.”¹⁹

Turkey’s potential as an energy transit country is highly valued, with the need for energy security and the diversification of energy resources being mentioned even in

¹⁵ Quoting Peteris Ustubs, the foreign affairs advisor to Latvian prime minister, in “Turcijas uzņemšana apdraudēsot ES identitāti” (Turkish accession would endanger EU’s identity), Agnese Margēviča, Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze, 3 October, 2005

¹⁶ See, e.g. “Turkey opens pipeline to skirt Russia”, Reuters, 16 July, 2006

¹⁷ See, e.g. “Consequences of Turkish membership for the EU and its neighbourhood”, Keman Kirişçi, at the conference “What next for Europe?” in Helsinki, 13 June, 2006, http://www.upi-fija.fi/fin/tilaisuudet/tepsa/prof_kemal_kirisi/# last accessed in December, 2006

¹⁸ Latvia is the only Baltic country that depends on energy imports. Up to 50% of power consumed in Latvia comes from Lithuania, Estonia and Russia. Source: Latvia’s Ministry of Economy

¹⁹ “Par ko vēl jārunā Turcijas sakarā” (What else should be talk about in the case of Turkey), Modris Ziemeļš, Latvijas Avīze, 14 October, 2005

Latvia's foreign affairs strategies.²⁰ The Latvian prime minister has also explicitly said that the Turkish EU membership could provide energy security.²¹

4. Turkey as a possibility for EU's economic growth

Turkey's economic potential is another argument often used by those in favour of Turkish EU membership. The International Monetary Fund rated the Turkish economy as the 17th largest in the world in 2006.²² Turkish foreign trade has grown and hyperinflation has been brought under control. Moreover, according to UN data, there were over 73 million people living in Turkey in 2005.²³ This means that by the time of EU accession Turkey would be larger than any other EU member state with a large and fast growing consumer market.

Argumentation that Turkey is not developed enough to join the EU does not sound fair when one compares Turkey's economic performance with the data from the new EU member states 10 years before they joined.²⁴ Turkey also has a strategic location for economic relations.

But experts stress that Turkey's economy currently is divided into two parts – a hugely inefficient agricultural sector, and a highly modern and competitive manufacturing and services sector.²⁵ In addition to that, Turkey already has had a customs union agreement with the EU since 1995, which is why “with respect to trade in goods, Turkey is almost a part of the Single Market already”.²⁶ Therefore, experts say that the direct impact of Turkish EU membership to other EU members could be small. Yet, an open market in services would mean that EU companies could buy Turkish businesses, for example, banks, transport, telecom or energy companies, thus increasing competition, lowering prices, boosting efficiency, bringing benefits to businesses and consumers, translating into a large benefit from Turkish EU membership to the whole EU.²⁷

²⁰ “Latvijas ārpolitikas pamatnostādnes 2006-2010.gadam (Informatīvā daļa)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005 <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Arpolitika/pamatnostadnes/> last accessed in December, 2006

²¹ “Premjers: Turcijas uzņemšana varētu nodrošināt enerģētisko drošību”, LETA, 4 October, 2005

²² World Economic and Financial Surveys, World Economic Outlook Database, International Monetary Fund, April, 2006

²³ World Statistics Pocketbook 2005, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Statistics in Brief (Ser. V), No.30, September, 2006

²⁴ In 2004 Turkish per capita income was less than 30% of the EU-15 average. Poland's per capita income in 1994 (10 years before accession) stood at 35% of EU average.

²⁵ Turkey's agricultural sector employs one third of the total labour force but generates only 12% of GDP. Source: “The economics of Turkish accession”, Katinka Barysch, in “Why Europe should embrace Turkey”, Katinka Barysch, Steven Everts, Heather Grabbe, Centre for European Reform, September, 2005

²⁶ “The future of Turkish-EU Trade Relations: Deepening vs Widening”, Sinan Ülgen and Yiannis Zahariadis, CEPS EU-Turkey Working papers No.5, August, 2004

²⁷ “The economics of Turkish accession”, Katinka Barysch, in “Why Europe should embrace Turkey”, Katinka Barysch, Steven Everts, Heather Grabbe, Centre for European Reform, September, 2005

However, this argument is not often used in Latvia. On the contrary, local politicians say that from an economic perspective “Latvia has nothing to fear” from Turkish EU accession, because Turkey and the EU already have a free trade agreement and a customs union.²⁸ In fact, with the current trade agreement Latvia has a negative trade balance with Turkey of around 22 million Euros. Turkey is only the 58th largest export partner for Latvia - only 0,04% of all products exported from Latvia go to Turkey.²⁹ Thus, economic relations between Latvia and Turkey are not very active and it seems that Latvian officials and businessmen don’t see Turkish EU accession as a possibility for Latvian companies to invest and start their businesses there.

What is more worrying for Latvia – in economic and financial terms – is the fact that Turkey would receive a large proportion of EU structural funds, which - as a result - other EU members, notably Latvia, would lose.³⁰ For example, Latvian MEP Roberts Zile has said that Turkish EU membership would not influence Latvia’s national interests in the EU but Latvia could expect less financial assistance from EU structural funds as soon as Turkey joins the European block.³¹

The same argument goes for the application of the EU’s common agriculture policy in Turkey. On this Latvian officials have said that budgetary questions will be agreed on by all EU member states, including Latvia, and that, “Turkey will receive the financial support that EU budget will be able to give”.³²

5. Turkish immigration potential to Europe

Contrary to the demographic trends of Europe where the working age population and the population as a whole is shrinking and will continue to do so, Turkey is experiencing a completely different demographic trend. In the EU-25, according to estimates from the EU’s Economic Policy Committee, the population is projected to rise from 457 million in 2004 to a peak of 470 million in 2025, and thereafter decline to 454 million in 2050, due to low fertility rates and longer life expectancy. This reduction in the proportion of the working-age population is a threat to Europe’s standard of living.

²⁸ Peteris Ustubs, the foreign affairs advisor to Latvian prime minister, in “Turcijas uzņemšana apdraudēsot ES identitāti” (Turkish accession would endanger EU’s identity), Agnese Margēviča, Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze, 3 October, 2005

²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Arpolitika/divpusejas-attiecibas/Turcija/>, last accessed in December 2006

³⁰ According to International Monetary Fund estimates, in 2006 Latvia will lose the status of the poorest EU member state to Poland (comparing GDP per capita). Yet, Latvia still remains one of the poorest in the EU. Source: LETA, 18 September, 2006

³¹ “Latvijas eiroparlamentārieši atbalsta ES privilīģēto sadarbību ar Turciju” (Latvian MEPs support a privileged cooperation between the EU and Turkey), BNS, 15 December, 2004

³² “Turcija un Eiropas Savienība: izaicinājumi un iespējas” (Turkey and the EU: challenges and opportunities), Einārs Sēmanis, in a speech at the conference “Towards United States of Europe: Future Challenges and potential Solutions” at the University of Latvia, 8-9 December, 2004

On the other hand Turkey, according to UN estimates, will soon have over 80 million inhabitants and shows no sign of shrinking. Turkey's population is growing at approximately 1,5% a year.³³ That means that the economy needs to create 500,000-800,000 new jobs every year just to keep unemployment at its current level.³⁴

This is something that many EU countries look at with concern, i.e. the push factors of Turkey's immigration potential. In addition to the fast growing population, one has to remember that if the Turkish agriculture sector were modernized, it would leave a large number of workers unemployed. Experts also point out that two-thirds of the Turkish population has only a basic education, or none at all, that less than one-quarter of Turks have completed secondary education, and that less than 10% have a university degree.³⁵ This means that Turkey has a large pool of low skilled workers that might want to look for better prospects in European countries.

According to the highest estimates, 4,4 million people might emigrate from Turkey – if there were no limits to the free movement of labour - and that accounts for 0,7% of the EU-28 population of more than 570 million.³⁶ This would mean that the number of Turks already living in the EU would at least double.³⁷

Those in favour of Turkish EU membership see this as a positive challenge. They stress the benefits of labour migration and how it could help alleviate the problems of Europe's shrinking working age population. The danger of having a crisis of pension systems and slowing growth is a reality which Turkey's growing population could help the EU to solve, while at the same time alleviating some future labour market shortages.³⁸

At the present time the immigration potential from Turkey is not seen as a benefit in Latvia but rather a large disadvantage from Turkish EU accession. Stories of the unsuccessful integration of Turks, mainly in Austria and Germany, definitely have contributed to the cautious attitudes in Latvia, although they are not the main reason for Latvia's concern. One has to understand that attitudes towards potential immigrants in general (not just from Turkey) are very negative due to the Soviet

³³ World Statistics Pocketbook 2005, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Statistics in Brief (Ser. V), No.30, September, 2006

³⁴ "The economics of Turkish accession", Katinka Barysch, in "Why Europe should embrace Turkey", Katinka Barysch, Steven Everts, Heather Grabbe, Centre for European Reform, September, 2005, pp.35

³⁵ Ibid., pp.37

³⁶ EU-25 plus Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia. Source: "Economic aspects of Turkey's quest for EU membership", Daniel Gros, CEPS policy brief No 69, April, 2005

³⁷ There are already around 3 million Turkish residents in the EU, almost 80% of whom live in Germany and most of the rest in France, Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium.

³⁸ "The economics of Turkish accession", Katinka Barysch, in "Why Europe should embrace Turkey", Katinka Barysch, Steven Everts, Heather Grabbe, Centre for European Reform, September, 2005, pp.40

immigration policies.³⁹ In addition, “an incident in the mid-1990s when Kurdish asylum-seekers arrived in Latvia left a lasting imprint on the Latvian psyche, and Kurds have to a certain extent become symbols of potential refugees”⁴⁰. As a result, around 40% of Latvians say that they should not be allowed to live in the country, while 45% would permit Kurds and Muslims in general to enter Latvia only as tourists.⁴¹

It should come as no surprise then that immigration is a taboo for mainstream politicians.⁴² But that does not mean that discussions on these topics are non-existent. An article in one of the biggest newspapers in Latvia in 2004 implied that the potential of Turkish immigration to Latvia is very small. “Those who frighten Latvia with the Turkish invasion of our country after their possible EU membership should be reminded of one historical fact. After the Russian-Turkish war in 1878 around 40,000 Turkish soldiers ended up in Russian captivity and more than 100 of them were sent to Cesis [Latvian city]. Not being able to get used to the raw Baltic climate, they started to get ill and many soon died.”⁴³

But Latvian MEP Inese Vaidere believes that the poverty in Turkey will push Turks to look for better life prospects, including in Latvia. “They will come even to the poorest country of the EU,” Vaidere believes, adding that even Latvia’s cold winters would not be an obstacle.⁴⁴

This opinion is echoed in a publication by the weekly magazine “Nedēļa” that has interviewed the head of the Asian study program at the University of Latvia, Leon Gabriel Taivan. He says that Muslim immigrants would flood Europe in 50, 100 years because right now the dominating force in Europe is a “suicidal attitude to give in” to Islam. He alleges that Turks will fight for no limits to the free movement of labour and

³⁹ The USSR moved workers - mainly Russians – to the peripheral areas of the Union, like the Baltic countries to work there and Russianize the local populations. As a result, today approximately 35% of Latvia’s population is Russian.

⁴⁰ “Latvia’s Interests and Fears Regarding Turkey’s Accession to the European Union”, Ph.D. Nils Muižnieks, speech at the conference “Turkey in the European Union: What Does Latvia Have to Say?” in Riga, Latvia, 28 April, 2006

⁴¹ “Etniskā tolerance un Latvijas sabiedrības integrācija” (Ethnic tolerance and integration of Latvian society), Inese Šūpule, Līga Krastiņa, Inguna Peņķe, Jolanta Krišāne, Brigita Zepa, Baltijas Sociālo Zinātņu Institūts, 2004

⁴² Some years ago Turks and Kurds were often mentioned in the campaigns of extreme left and extreme right activists. For example, Alfreds Rubiks (a former Communist Party leader and still active in politics) in an interview to Dienas Bizness in 2002 said that the EU sees Latvia’s poorest Eastern region Latgale as a convenient place for Kurds and Turks to live. In addition, a right-wing anti-EU non-governmental organization Klubs 415 in its website until 2004 said that they had not “the slightest desire to see the development of regions [in Latvia] inhabited by Turks and Kurds.” Source: “Latvia’s Interests and Fears Regarding Turkey’s Accession to the European Union”, Ph.D. Nils Muižnieks, speech at the conference “Turkey in the European Union: What Does Latvia Have to Say?” in Riga, Latvia, 28 April, 2006

⁴³ “Turcija – par vai pret?” (Turkey – in favour or against?), Modris Ziemeņš, Latvijas Avīze, 2 December, 2004

⁴⁴ In an interview with PROVIDUS in July, 2006

as a result Turks would come to Latvia because “nature does not accept emptiness and Latvia is a very empty land”.⁴⁵

Latvian officials in the meantime stress that most likely there would be a transition period for the freedom of labour agreed with Turkey. “In addition to that, the Commission’s recommendations also include a clause that every member state can limit the free movement of labour every time job seekers from Turkey seriously endanger the labour market of that EU country.”⁴⁶

Part II

European identity and Turkey

1. Turkey, EU and multiculturalism: What is European and what is Turkish?

Many Europeans think about Turkish EU accession through the lens of the question “is Turkey European”? Those who have been to Turkey as tourists or on business often say it is nothing like a European country, citing customs and fundamental values upon which the EU is based and what they did not find in Turkey, i.e. full respect for the rule of law, democracy, human rights, the rights of minorities, and the equality of men and women.

Those in favour of Turkish EU membership say that EU enlargement is the most effective policy tool because it is “a mechanism for extending EU’s values”.⁴⁷ Others have expressed their doubts on whether enough progress is at all possible in Turkey with regard to human rights, stressing the point that in Turkey the cohesion of the nation-state traditionally has taken priority over the rights and liberties of individuals.⁴⁸

As to the debate in Latvia, officials have pointed out that Turkish EU membership would enrich the multilingual and multicultural identity of the EU, and be a signal that the EU is not “a closed Christian club” and that the “clash of civilizations is not an inescapable fate of human kind”.⁴⁹ Turkish EU accession would give a positive signal to Muslims all around the world and would erase the arguments for terrorists to contra distinguish the West against the Islamic world “because we could prove that

⁴⁵ “Mēs, eiropieši, esam pašnāvnīki”, Sallija Benfelde, Nedēļa, 26 September, 2005

⁴⁶ “Turcija un Eiropas Savienība: izaicinājumi un iespējas” (Turkey and the EU: challenges and opportunities), Einārs Sēmanis, in a speech at the conference “Towards United States of Europe: Future Challenges and potential Solutions” at the University of Latvia, 8-9 December, 2004

⁴⁷ “What values for Europe?”, Michael Emerson, in “Policy Perspectives: Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe”, IPF 2006, pp. 22

⁴⁸ See “EU-Turkei: vor schwierigen Beitrittsverhandlungen”, Hainz Kramer, SWP Studie, May, 2005

⁴⁹ “Turcija un Eiropas Savienība: izaicinājumi un iespējas” (Turkey and the EU: challenges and opportunities), Einārs Sēmanis, in a speech at the conference “Towards United States of Europe: Future Challenges and potential Solutions” at the University of Latvia, 8-9 December, 2004

Europe is a place where - based on the values of democracy and freedom - different religions can co-habit.”⁵⁰

Other officials believe that “Turkey is like a bridge between Asia and Europe” and that Turkey is not as conservative as other Islamic countries.⁵¹

But voices outside of the official domain are less optimistic. For example, Atis Lejins, the director of the Latvian Institute of Foreign Affairs, has said that the European public is concerned about an EU identity crisis that could arise due to the EU expanding too far out of the borders of the European culture.⁵² Lejins also says that Austrians are not alone in their scepticism towards Turkish EU membership because of value-based reasons, and in reality other EU countries, too, were hiding behind the Austrian position hoping that accession negotiations would take forever and Turkey would never join.⁵³

To some in Latvia, Turkish EU membership is also linked with the question of Latvian identity. “We have to count on the fact that sooner or later there will be a large Turkish community in Latvia, there will also be Muslims from other cultures. Will we – a small nation – be able to secure our identity or will we disappear?”⁵⁴

Apart from opinions on the general ‘European-ness’ of Turkey, Latvians are also concerned about human rights, in particular the Kurdish issue and Turkey’s attitude towards the Armenian genocide, as well as freedom of expression. Since Latvia suffered mass repressions during the Soviet era, “many identify with the Armenians. Moreover, freedom of expression was the first freedom to have been won in Central and Eastern Europe, and Latvia tends to adopt maximalist stances with few, if any restrictions defended”.⁵⁵

For example, an article in one of the biggest Internet portals in Latvia compares Turkey to Russia. “Today’s Turkey is a country that still does not acknowledge the killings and deportations of hundreds of thousands of minority representatives (mostly Armenians and Kurds) that happened in the last century in the name of the idea of a super power.”⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Latvia’s Honorary Consul to Turkey Asli Ulukapi in an interview to Diena, “Ceļā uz Eiropu” (“On the way to Europe”), Ilze Arkliņa, Diena, 21 June, 2006

⁵² “Turcijas uzņemšana apdraudēsot ES identitāti” (Turkish accession would endanger EU’s identity), Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze, Agnese Margēviča, 3 October, 2005

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Ieguvumi un zaudējumi” (Advantages and disadvantages [of Latvia’s EU membership]), Kurzemnieks, 2 May, 2006

⁵⁵ “Latvia’s Interests and Fears Regarding Turkey’s Accession to the European Union”, Ph.D. Nils Muižnieks, speech at the conference “Turkey in the European Union: What Does Latvia Have to Say?” in Riga, Latvia, 28 April, 2006

⁵⁶ “Pašnāvnieku saiets Luksemburgā”, (A get-together of suicides in Luxembourg), Krišjānis Kalnciems, DELFI, 29 September 2005, <http://www.delfi.lv/archive/article.php?id=12394103> last accessed in December, 2006

Arguably, similar thinking can also be found in the Latvian parliament, which has condemned the Armenian genocide and has asked Turkey to be admitted to the EU only after it recognizes the Armenian genocide. 71 deputies in the 100-seat Saeima were in favour of this proposal in 2005.⁵⁷

Another article criticising the Turkish reforms on the way to EU accession serves as a good example that Latvians are very sensitive when it comes to limiting basic freedoms: "To please Europe, Turkey has started to act in a way that is reminiscent of Soviet-style atheism propaganda where ones own traditions are broken and religious people who are not loyal to the current regime are haunted. (...) It all looks like a rather violent taking of the society in a direction where it does not want to go at all, or that the society is taken in that direction at a speed that it can not stand. The changing of traditions and political culture is a long process and, as political theorists say, this cannot be implemented in any democratic society – it has to happen in the society itself."⁵⁸

At the same time others believe that the prospect of EU membership is a good instrument to improve the human rights situation of the Kurdish minority.⁵⁹

2. Turks in the EU and Latvia: happily ever after?

There is no data on the number of Turks living in Latvia but as the smallest minority recorded in Latvia are Estonians (a little over 2500 people in the 2.3-million populated Latvia), it is safe to assume that the number of Turks living in Latvia is very small.

Yet, surveys reveal that Latvians are rather intolerant to immigrants and different religions. For example, almost half of Latvia's inhabitants (45% of Latvians and 41% of minority representatives) say they don't want to live next to Muslims.⁶⁰ But 52% of Latvians and 59% of non-Latvians supported the statement that "Muslim opinions and traditions can be dangerous for Latvia's population".⁶¹

Although until now no physical violence against Muslims has been recorded in Latvia, local Muslims have complained about verbal assaults, for example, being called terrorists. Media coverage of Muslims includes statements like, "there are very few

⁵⁷ The vote took place on 28 April, 2005, but there was no further movement on this proposal after it was handed to Saeima's Foreign affairs committee.

⁵⁸ "Latviešu rūpes par Turcijas nākotni", (Latvian concerns about Turkey's future), Baiba Lulle, Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze, 7 September, 2005

⁵⁹ "Turcija Eiropas Savienībā" (Turkey in the EU), Pēteris Timofejevs, DELFI, 9 October, 2005

⁶⁰ "Kāpēc latvieši nevēlas kaimiņos musulmaņus?" (Why Latvians don't want Muslims as their neighbours?), Marina Krupņikova, policy analyst from the Latvian Centre for Human Rights, Public policy portal Politika.lv, May, 2005, <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?id=4833#01>

⁶¹ "Etniskā tolerance un Latvijas sabiedrības integrācija" (Ethnic tolerance and integration of Latvian society), Inese Šūpule, Līga Krastiņa, Inguna Peņķe, Jolanta Krišāne, Brigita Zepa, Baltas Sociālo Zinātņu Institūts, 2004, pp.16

Muslims in Latvia and thus they should not cause us any problems” or “show public disloyalty” - demonstrate that the society is wary, to say the least.⁶²

A recent media discourse analysis suggests that journalists were also reproducing prejudices. This research found that stories with negative attitudes most often involved Muslims, and that stories featuring Muslims very rarely contained positive images.⁶³

Analysing ethnic tolerance and integration patterns, researchers have found that in general Latvians feel and act like “the endangered majority” whereas Russians can’t be considered as a typical minority.⁶⁴ As a result, Latvians are rather unsociable, they don’t communicate with the representatives of other nationalities. Russians, on the contrary, are more open and easily communicate with other nationalities.⁶⁵

According to experts, this precautious attitude towards immigrants and the opinion “that each nation should live in their homeland”⁶⁶ can be largely attributed to the feeling of being endangered as well as the consequences of Soviet migration policy.⁶⁷ As a result, in spite of Latvia having a multi-ethnic population for many decades, “many people still hold a culturally homogeneous society as a norm and an ideal”.⁶⁸

This can be seen in local media coverage. For example, one of the most popular Internet portals published the following article: “Would you want to live next to a family where the husband more or less regularly rapes his wife, or where sons give a beating to their mother or sisters? Or maybe you would be fine with giving a part of your tax money to financially help these fathers and sons to be more prosperous? Disregarding your answer, Latvian government a couple of days ago decided on your behalf and has expressed its support for the start of negotiations with Turkey about its possible accession to the EU. Turkey, for your information, is a country where the majority of society (at least the male society) believes and in their actions proves that violence against a woman is absolutely acceptable. If these negotiations finish

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Only 8% of stories featuring Muslims contained positive images, while 47% of stories with negative attitudes involved Muslims. Source: “Neiecietības izpausmes un iecietības veicināšana Latvijā”, Ilze Šulmane and Sergejs Kruks, Īpašu uzdevumu ministra sabiedrības integrācijas lietās sekretariāts, 2006

⁶⁴ Russian is mother tongue for approximately 37% of Latvia’s inhabitants, thus knowledge of the Latvian language is not necessary in many spheres of social life. Many have got used to the privileged status of the Russian language that it enjoyed in the Soviet times.

⁶⁵ “Etniskā tolerance un Latvijas sabiedrības integrācija” (Ethnic tolerance and integration of Latvian society), Inese Šūpule, Līga Krastiņa, Inguna Peņķe, Jolanta Krišāne, Brigita Zepa, Baltas Sociālo Zinātņu Institūts, 2004, pp.14

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Due to Soviet migration policy, many non-Latvians were sent to live in Latvia. As a result, there is a large Russian-speaking minority and Latvians have for decades felt like the endangered nation.

⁶⁸ “Etniskā tolerance un Latvijas sabiedrības integrācija” (Ethnic tolerance and integration of Latvian society), Inese Šūpule, Līga Krastiņa, Inguna Peņķe, Jolanta Krišāne, Brigita Zepa, Baltas Sociālo Zinātņu Institūts, 2004, pp.16

smoothly, Turkey's non-violent and violent citizens will get the right to either live close to you, according to the EU's principle of the freedom of movement for persons, or they will – living in their fatherland – receive benefits from the co-funded projects of the EU (and thus also Latvia).⁶⁹

The article refers to the data from a 2004 Amnesty International report according to which every third woman in Turkey is a victim of violence in the family.⁷⁰ Therefore, the author says that violence “is a norm in Turkish society” which the improvement of living conditions would not be able change. The author also alleges that hoping for the younger generation to live according to different values – also due to Turkish EU integration - would be “totally naïve” because of the “overall violent environment” in Turkey. In another article the same author writes, “the idea of a secular Turkish society has only existed in the minds of some abstract “scientists” and irresponsible politicians”.⁷¹

Odstraněno: writes that

Replying to the above-mentioned allegations, the portal published another author arguing in favour of Turkish EU accession. Stressing that in Turkey the church is separated from the state, the author also says that nobody can forbid anyone to practice a religion in his or her private life, and that the religiousness of private individuals can not be a serious argumentation against Turkish EU accession.⁷²

Those in favour of Turkish EU membership believe that “prejudices” about Turkey “disappear” as soon as Latvians visit Turkey “and with their own eyes see that it is a modern, dynamic country that develops, of course, not without any problems”.⁷³

It is interesting to note here that Turkey is one of the most popular vacation destinations for Latvians and that direct flights from Riga to Istanbul go every other day. However, as the surveys mentioned-above reveal, the image of Turkey as a European country is not prevailing yet.

Part III

Local debates on Turkish EU membership and future enlargement of the EU

1. Official statements

⁶⁹ “Asiņainā kandidātvalsts”, (Bloody candidate country), Krišjānis Kalnciems, DELFI, 13 December, 2004, <http://www.delfi.lv/archive/article.php?id=9790121> last accessed in December, 2006

⁷⁰ “Turkey: Women confronting family violence”, Amnesty International, 2 June, 2004, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur440132004> last accessed in August, 2006

⁷¹ “Pašnāvnieku saiets Luksemburgā”, (A get-together of suicides in Luxembourg), Krišjānis Kalnciems, DELFI, 29 September 2005, <http://www.delfi.lv/archive/article.php?id=12394103> last accessed in December, 2006

⁷² “Turcija Eiropas Savienībā” (Turkey in the EU), Pēteris Timofejevs, DELFI, 9 October, 2005

⁷³ An interview with the ambassador of Latvia to Turkey, Ivars Pundurs, “Turcijas laužas uz ES” (Turkey forces itself towards the EU), Ināra Mūrniece, Latvijas Avīze, 28 April, 2005

Bilateral relations between Latvia and Turkey are friendly. There have been numerous bilateral diplomatic visits, including at the highest level.⁷⁴ As a result, official statements from the Ministry of Foreign affairs say that Latvia supports further EU enlargement towards South Eastern Europe. “From our own experience we know how important the European perspective has on the stability of democracy, development and increasing a nation's welfare. Only close cooperation between states – both regional and in a European framework – can give them unity, regional development, security and peace. Latvia is ready to help these [candidate] countries in their growth because she [Latvia] is able to appreciate the importance of such help in the road towards EU membership.”⁷⁵

However, no explicit mentioning of Latvia's support for Turkish EU membership can be found in the strategic document on Latvia's foreign policy for 2006-2010.⁷⁶ But when describing Latvian-Turkish relations the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs says, “Latvia supports Turkey's drive towards the EU”.⁷⁷ Latvia was also among the countries that supported the opening of accession negotiations between Turkey and the EU.⁷⁸

This has given grounds for speculation about whether support for the Turkish EU accession bid equals support for Turkish EU membership. However, Latvian minister of Foreign Affairs Artis Pabriks has explicitly said in the media that, “Latvia supports Turkish EU membership”.⁷⁹ Calling Turkey Latvia's ally Pabriks has said that trading with allies – in other words not supporting Turkish EU accession – is not possible.

Supporting this argument, the starting of accession negotiations was believed to enhance peace and stability in the region,⁸⁰ and give EU accession countries (not mentioning Turkey in particular) a strong motivation for implementing political, economic and social reforms.⁸¹

2. Statements of political parties

⁷⁴ The president of Turkey visited Latvia in 2002, and Latvian president went to Turkey in 2004.

⁷⁵ Website of the Latvian Foreign Affairs ministry, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/eu/ES-paplasinasanas/> last accessed in December, 2006

⁷⁶ “Latvijas ārpolitikas pamatnostādnes 2006-2010.gadam (Informatīvā daļa)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005 <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Arpolitika/pamatnostadnes/> last accessed in December, 2006

⁷⁷ Website of the Latvian Foreign Affairs ministry <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Arpolitika/divpusejas-attiecibas/Turcija/> last accessed in December, 2006

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ “Ārpolitika pēc saprāta un satversmes principiem” (A foreign policy according to common sense and constitution), interview with Artis Pabriks, Public policy portal Politika.lv, 19 July, 2005 <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?id=7942>

⁸⁰ Website of the Latvian Foreign Affairs ministry <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Jaunami/PazinojumiPresei/2005/Septembris/29-2/> last accessed in December, 2006

⁸¹ “Latvijas ārpolitikas pamatnostādnes 2006-2010.gadam (Informatīvā daļa)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005 <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Arpolitika/pamatnostadnes/> last accessed on December, 2006, pp. 9

No political parties currently in the Latvian parliament mentioned whether they support or oppose further EU enlargement in their programmes for the 2006 elections.⁸² Possible Turkish EU accession is also not mentioned. What follows is a narrative of statements indirectly linked to EU enlargement and the possible Turkish EU accession from politicians and parties.

The ruling conservative People's Party (TP) mentions EU enlargement in their pre-election program for the European Parliament in 2004 where TP pledges support for EU accession of "countries that are friendly to Latvia". Although there is no elaboration on the "friendly countries", the TP strongly opposes the start of negotiations about EU accession with Russia. TP would also not allow "uncontrolled immigration" in Latvia and would be against any moves that would weaken NATO.⁸³

The second coalition party, Christian conservative Latvia's First Party (LPP) says that it supports "building more unity" within the EU.⁸⁴ LPP program for the European Parliament elections elaborates that "only a united Europe can secure Latvia's future. At the same time, the European integration process cannot create threats for the cultural, regional, religious and linguistic identity of the Latvian population". LPP also supports "a united and effective common European foreign and security policy that would strengthen the EU's role in the world, at the same time not allowing the weakening of the transatlantic ties with NATO and the establishment of twin security structures."⁸⁵

Another coalition party, the Green's and Farmer's Union (ZZS) in its program for the 2006 elections only said that it supports the development of the EU "as a union of countries with integrated economic, monetary and common security systems".⁸⁶

The opposition party, conservative New Era (JL) has said that it supports the spreading of democracy, freedom, the rule of law and market economy to all of Latvia's neighbouring countries. JL also thinks that Latvia should cooperate with countries that have expressed their willingness to join the EU and NATO, sharing with them Latvia's experience of the integration process.⁸⁷ The party sees the EU as

⁸² Only the programs for elections in October 2006 and the main declarations of parties are being analysed here as the question of Latvia's successful accession to the EU was dominating the agenda in earlier elections.

⁸³ "Tautas Partijas rīcības programma darbībai Eiropas Parlamentā", http://www.tautaspartija.lv/lat/par_ko_mes_esam/eu_parlaments last accessed in December, 2006

⁸⁴ "Latvijas Pirmās Partijas programma 2006", http://www.lpp.lv/new/data/file/LPP_programma_2006.doc#_Toc41898977 last accessed in December, 2006

⁸⁵ "LPP 4000 zīmju programma Eiropas Parlamenta vēlēšanām", http://www.lpp.lv/new/index.php?section_id=102&article_id=315 last accessed in December, 2006

⁸⁶ "ZZS programma", <http://www.lzs.lv/?sad=velesanas&asad=programma> last accessed in December, 2006

⁸⁷ "The program – declaration of values of New Era", <http://www.jl.lv/page.php?id=2617> last accessed in December, 2006

a strong, capacitated and united Europe that has to take “a significant place in international politics, and in securing peace and stability in the world”.⁸⁸ In addition, JL supports the strengthening of NATO “that is and will remain the most significant security guarantee in Europe and the world”. Thus, European security and cooperation policy should be developed “in harmony with transatlantic relations deepening strategic cooperation between the EU and NATO”.⁸⁹

Latvian MEP – elected from JL - Aldis Kuskis has said that he is against starting accession negotiations with Turkey because it was not in Latvia’s interests.⁹⁰ His colleague, MEP Valdis Dombrovskis has been less sceptical and has said that Turkish EU membership could not be ruled out if Turkey fulfils the criteria. Yet, he would also support the idea of a favoured partnership.⁹¹

Odstraněno: starting accession

The opposition alliance For Human Rights in a United Latvia (PCTVL) in its program for the European Parliament elections said, “EU enlargement to the East and partnership with Russia must be directed towards establishing a common political and economic space between Vladivostok and Lisbon”. Only then, according to PCTVL, would Europe be able to compete with America and East Asia. “Europe has to globally enhance such a world order where mass violence, terrorism and the catastrophic poverty of large populations is not possible.”⁹² Similar wording was included in party’s program for the 2006 Latvian parliamentary elections.⁹³

The nationalistic conservative party For Fatherland and Freedom/ LNNK⁹⁴ does not mention EU enlargement or the future of the EU in its programs. Yet, its member Latvian MEP Inese Vaidere has been the most active politician speaking out on the question of Turkish EU membership. She is also a member of EP’s Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Vaidere prefers a special partnership between Turkey and the EU instead of full Turkish EU membership.⁹⁵ She believes the EU has enough problems to deal with and should not take up another huge project like the accession of Turkey. Vaidere thinks that the official position of Latvia supporting Turkish EU membership bid is

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “Latvijas eiroparlamentārieši atbalsta ES privilīģēto sadarbību ar Turciju” (Latvian MEPs support a privileged cooperation between the EU and Turkey), BNS, 15 December, 2004

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “PCTVL programma dalībai EP vēlēšanās”,

http://www.pctvl.lv/?lang=lv&mode=party&submode=program&page_id=171 last accessed in December, 2006

⁹³ “PCTVL program of action”,

http://www.pctvl.lv/?lang=lv&mode=party&submode=program&page_id=749 last accessed in December, 2006

⁹⁴ It was in opposition until the 2006 October elections. Now it is the fourth cabinet party.

⁹⁵ Vaidere has published several opinion pieces in the national media in Latvia but the opinions described here were expressed in a meeting (with PROVIDUS) on July 7, 2006

hasty. At the same time she said that behind closed doors there seems to be a consensus in Latvia and in some other European countries that is similar to Vaidere's viewpoint, i.e., that the EU should be more cautious about a possible Turkish EU membership and should rather work on a special partnership. As to the two main risks coming with a possible Turkish EU membership, Vaidere named migration from Turkey and changes in structural fund policy towards Central and Eastern European EU members getting less financial support due to Turkey being a large and poor country which requires more financial assistance.

Vaidere thinks that many European leaders who officially back Turkish EU membership bid are simply "willing to be the good guys" while knowing that the actual decision on whether or not Turkey should be accepted in the EU will have to be taken in 10-15 years, by a new generation of politicians. Speaking of future EU enlargement, Vaidere also said that it does not make sense for Latvia to open the doors for Turkey while keeping them closed for Ukraine. She was also pessimistic about the pace of the reforms in Turkey, especially in regard to stopping human rights violations. "The only thing that happens quickly in Turkey is population growth," she said hinting that necessary reforms take much more time.

Another problem with possible Turkish EU membership is its borders - in particular those with Syria, Iran and Iraq - that would constitute a bridge to illegal migration. On top of that, Turkey was opposing the Ankara agreement and public opinion in all EU states which are largely in opposition to Turkish EU membership. Hence, for Vaidere the only argument for why talks about Turkish EU membership continue was the promise that the EU made to Turkey in 1963. "Of course, we can not turn down Turkey", Vaidere said, which is why she thinks the best way to proceed would be a special partnership deal that would motivate Turkey to continue the reform process as well as "coming closer to European values".⁹⁶

Another MEP and a member of TB/LNNK Roberts Zile has also said that he favoured Ukrainian EU membership rather than the EU membership of Turkey.⁹⁷

3. Public opinion

Latvians are more supportive of further EU enlargement in comparison to the public opinion in the old EU member states. However, the latest Eurobarometer poll results also reveal a significant decrease in support. According to the survey, 54% of the respondents were in favour, 30% against. In comparison, the Eurobarometer polls of

⁹⁶ "I.Vaidere aicina meklēt jaunus ES paplašināšanās mehānismus" (Vaidere calls for new mechanisms of EU enlargement), Baltic News Agency, 15 March, 2006

⁹⁷ "Latvijas eiroparlamentārieši atbalsta ES privilēģēto sadarbību ar Turciju" (Latvian MEPs support a privileged cooperation between the EU and Turkey), BNS, 15 December, 2004

Autumn 2005 showed that 62% of Latvians were in favour of further expansion of the European block, and only 26% were against.⁹⁸

Eurobarometer 64 (Autumn 2005), a more detailed analysis focusing on the possible EU membership of separate countries, revealed that Latvians were also more sceptical about Turkish EU membership than other new member states. Latvian data was more in line with the average parameters of the EU-25. Only 31% of the respondents in Latvia were in favour of Turkish EU membership while 51% were against it. The average data from the 10 new member states was 38% in favour and 44% against, in comparison to 29% in favour and 57% of the respondents in EU-15 against the Turkish EU accession.

It is safe to assume that the favourite country for EU membership from the Latvian perspective is Ukraine as 57% of Latvians supported Ukrainian EU membership and only 25% were against. At the same time Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia and Montenegro got on average only 40% of Latvians' support for the eventual EU accession.

Returning to the Turkish accession, the latest polls also reveal that the Latvian support for Turkish EU membership had dropped significantly (by 5%) while the opposition to Turkish EU membership had increased (by 7%).

When asked whether respondents would support Turkish EU membership if it fulfils all EU requests in the fields of economy and democracy which would most likely happen in 10-20 years time, only 28% in Latvia said they would, while 41% said they would still be against.⁹⁹

Similar conclusions can be made from a local survey where respondents were asked for their reasons to support or oppose Turkish EU accession.¹⁰⁰ 26% of those who support Turkish EU accession said, "if Turkey wanted to join, it should" and 16% thought all countries were equal, therefore it was Turkey's right to join as well. Every tenth respondent named Turkish economic growth for his or her reason to support Turkey's EU accession. In addition to that, 9,2% said they had nothing against

⁹⁸ Eurobarometer 65, First results, July 2006

⁹⁹ In a special Eurobarometer survey EU citizens were asked, "once Turkey complies with all the conditions set by the European Union, would you support/ oppose the accession of Turkey to the European Union?" 35% of the respondents in Latvia would support Turkish EU membership, 47% would be against it. These results are close to the average of EU-25 (39% in favour, 48% against). The survey also found that the majority of Europeans interviewed (52%) see the accession of Turkey as mainly in the interest of the country itself. 20% would see a mutual interest to both the EU and Turkey for its entry in the European Union. See "Attitudes towards European Union enlargement", Special Eurobarometer, European Commission, July 2006 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_255_en.pdf

¹⁰⁰ SKDS and NGO think-tank the Baltic Forum conducted a three-question survey on Latvian's attitudes towards Turkey and its possible EU membership in February 2006. The survey was commissioned by the Representation of the European Commission in Latvia and presented at the conference "Turkey in the EU: What Does Latvia Have to Say?", organized by Baltic Forum, the European Commission Delegation to Latvia, and the European Parliament Information office, in Riga, Latvia, 28 April 2006

Turkish EU membership if it fulfils the criteria, while 8,2% stated that Latvia had not been developed and still was accepted in the EU. Only then came the argument that other countries of the EU would benefit from Turkish accession (6%) and that the EU would become bigger and stronger (5,8%). 3,8% of respondents said they liked Turkey and Turks, while 3,1% said Turkey was a rich and developed country.¹⁰¹

When asked about their reasons for opposing Turkish EU membership, the biggest pool of respondents said it was on religious grounds (31%). One third of the respondents also named foreign culture and mentality as the reason for their opposition. Only 8,6% said Turkey was not a European country and 8,3% said there were already enough Turks (Muslims) in Europe. Paradoxically, concerns about human rights, women's rights and democracy were small – 6% of respondents named that as an obstacle. Other reasons mentioned were that “Turks are too aggressive and unpredictable”; that Turkish EU membership would raise terrorism threats; that Turkish EU membership would cause problems for the EU and that Turkey was a too poor and undeveloped country. Only 4% said they feared the inflow of workers from Turkey.¹⁰²

Conclusions

One could have expected to find a kind of solidarity in the new EU member states towards all EU candidate countries because “we have been there, too”, i.e. we know very well how it was to wait on the doorsteps of the EU before accession. However, public opinion polls as well as politicians’ statements show that this solidarity is directed towards Ukraine, less towards the Balkan countries, and even less towards Turkey. The main reason for this seems to be hidden in the belief that Latvians see Turkey and its development as very different to the development and the character of the other potential EU member states (Ukraine, the Balkan countries). The “otherness” of Turkey – including political issues like torture, treatment of the Kurds, the Armenian question, and the role of the army – is certainly a reason for the cautiousness of Latvians. Today, for many Latvians, just like other Europeans, Turkish EU accession seems “a step too far – politically, geographically and psychologically”.¹⁰³

In addition to that, there are many unknown variables about Turkish EU accession. First, there are questions about Turkey’s reform process. Second, there are

¹⁰¹ SKDS, February 2006

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ “From drift to strategy: the case for Turkey’s accession”, Heather Grabbe, in “Why Europe should embrace Turkey”, Katinka Barysch, Steven Everts, Heather Grabbe, Centre for European Reform, September 2005, pp.15

questions about the EU's need to change not only but also due to Turkish accession. Should these questions not be answered in a sufficient way, a special partnership between the EU and Turkey might become more popular not only in Germany, France, Austria and Cyprus, but also in Latvia and even Turkey itself.

Regarding issues that will remain of particular interest to Latvia and could influence Latvian public opinion on Turkish EU membership, it is predictable that energy security and Turkey's human rights record will be the two most important ones. While the first argument is likely to make Latvians more supportive of closer Turkish ties with the EU, in regard to the second, events like court cases against writers for allegedly 'insulting Turkishness' are likely to make Latvians even more sceptic. In addition, fears of the immigration potential from Turkey are likely to contribute to the scepticism. On this topic, no major change in public opinion could be expected, given the unwillingness of mainstream politicians to discuss it and the historic reasons for the sensitivity towards immigrants.

Another conclusion to be drawn from the Latvian debates on possible Turkish EU membership could be that there is a need for more debate. As the arguments used in Latvia demonstrate, there is a lack of understanding of the reasons why Turkish EU integration was started in the first place. This is understandable given that Latvia is a new EU member state and thus has not been part of Turkish-EU relations since the beginning. But this is a good reason for asking local politicians to explain the arguments in favour of Turkish EU membership from the EU's and Turkey's perspective, not just mentioning the promise that an older generation of European politicians made in 1963. Is Turkish EU membership needed to strengthen EU's role in the world, is it needed for economic growth potential, is it needed for the future vision of the EU as a more diverse unity? These are big questions that should be debated.

In Latvia one could hope for more discussions even among cabinet members now that the party For Fatherland and Freedom/ LNNK has joined the coalition, with its member MEP Inese Vaidere favouring a special partnership between Turkey and the EU.¹⁰⁴

Explaining the reasons for Turkish EU membership is important also from another aspect – the fact that each member state has the right to veto the opening and the closure of each negotiating chapter. This means that there is room for debate between the public at large, different stakeholders and the government. Should there

¹⁰⁴ Although there are no written statements from TB/LNNK on Turkish EU accession, MEP Inese Vaidere has said that her position on Turkish EU membership is in line with the party's position. Source: Inese Vaidere speaking at a conference "Turkish accession to the EU: On Track or Derailed?", organized by PROVIDUS, in Riga, 23 November, 2006

not be enough progress made on the commitments by both sides – Turkey and the EU - Latvia as much as any other member state can use the right to slow down the process. The EU also keeps the right to suspend the negotiations altogether, in the event that the Commission, or one third of the member states, see a “persistent breach... of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law” in Turkey. Thus, there is still some room for control and a need to explain the use of this control in the negotiation process - or on the contrary, the continuation of negotiations in spite of everything.

To this end, Turkish EU membership is not only a public relations exercise persuading EU’s citizens that Turkey is just like Europe, because Turkish EU accession is inevitably linked to two other questions: EU’s identity and legitimacy - or the fact that “a union of democracies” should not ‘impose’ continuing enlargement on unwilling electorates”.¹⁰⁵

Finally, if one looks at both the EU and Turkey as they are today, critics of Turkish EU membership anywhere in the world – not just in Europe or Latvia - easily could conclude that Turkish accession would be a mess. The latest developments surrounding the Ankara protocol and the issue of Cyprus only adds to their position. But possible Turkish EU accession is many years away. In 10-15 years there will be a different Europe, a different Latvia and a different Turkey – something that the citizens of the new EU member states might understand better because they themselves have felt how a country can change in just 15 years. Thus, if voters ask for more accountability from their politicians and politicians do a better job in explaining the reasons for Turkish EU membership, and the reform process goes on, in ten years the European public and Turkish citizens, as well as the sceptics of the Turkish EU membership idea anywhere else in the world could well have very different material for forming their attitudes.

¹⁰⁵ “An asset but not a model: Turkey, the EU and the wider Middle East”, Steven Everts, in “Why Europe should embrace Turkey”, Katinka Barysch, Steven Everts, Heather Grabbe, Centre for European Reform, September 2005, pp.48