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# FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

## Latvia

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## 1. History of EU-Turkey Relations<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. *Quid pro quo* – the history behind Latvia’s support for Turkey

Historically, Latvia has been supportive of Turkey’s integration in the EU. The diplomatic relations between the two countries date back to 1925 and, importantly, Turkey was one of the countries that never acknowledged the annexation and subsequent incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union. Turkey was also a staunch supporter of Latvia’s NATO membership. This explains the Latvian government’s positive stance towards Turkey’s EU aspirations, and the friendly dialogue between the two governments. To an extent, this can be defined as a mutual *quid pro quo* policy, and is illustrated by the Latvian Foreign Minister’s Edgars Rinkevics’ statements during the meeting with the Turkish government representatives in Ankara on 29 September 2016, when he once again stressed that “Latvia highly values the fact that Turkey never recognized its occupation.”

Latvia’s official/traditional position has remained unchanged: Turkey is still perceived as an EU candidate state, although it has problems with opening new chapters in accession negotiations. The Latvian political elite sees this as a problematic issue in the Turkey-EU relations, but there are no major repercussions for the Turkey-Latvia relations. During the Latvian Foreign Minister’s visit to Ankara in autumn 2016, both sides discussed not only cooperation within NATO, bilateral economic and political relations, but also relations between Turkey and the EU, and the attempted coup of 15 July 2016. The Latvian Foreign Minister condemned the attempt to overthrow Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s regime and expressed condolences to the victims of the terrorist attacks in Turkey, while implying that it is crucial to respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of people. The minister also reaffirmed Latvia’s support for Turkey’s further European integration and opening of new chapters of negotiations as long as the EU’s criteria are met. Crucially, the Latvian government believes that from a long-term perspective, in spite of the consequences of Brexit and the US Presidential election, Turkey’s membership is also in the interests of the EU.

Despite the Erdoğan presidency’s low democratic records and authoritarian leanings, there have been no considerable changes in the Latvian position towards Turkey’s EU and NATO membership. The official belief is that also in the future the EU and NATO will continue to cooperate with Turkey, perhaps tactically adjusting their approach, because Turkey is too important geopolitically, economically, and strategically, and also has a strong military capacity. Turkey’s EU membership does not hold a prominent place in Latvia’s political debate, i.e. among the government parties and the opposition. The opposition is largely unconcerned with the issue. To some extent, this can be attributed to the lack of substantial progress in Turkey’s EU

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<sup>1</sup> The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

negotiations and the geographical distance between the two countries. But the preoccupation of Latvian society with other, more burning issues – such as its own integration in the EU, security issues, Ukraine crisis etc. – is probably the main factor setting the tone of the debate. This also explains why Latvia has been a frontrunner regarding the Eastern Partnership countries, but has never been overly concerned with the EU's Southern neighborhood.

With regard to the Latvian public, the situation to a certain extent reflects the political debate. The majority of people have a neutral attitude towards Turkey, Turkish people and Turkey's membership in the EU, at least such was the stance until the refugee crisis in 2015 and the attempted coup in 2016. There are no statistics on how these attitudes have changed since then, but mass media generally talk about Turkey in the terms of these issues. This is likely to reflect on general opinion, but is unlikely to affect Latvia's official stance towards Turkey's EU integration considerably.

## **1.2. Change of narrative**

There is a distinction between narratives of the elites/government and of the public opinion. Regarding the position of the elite, it is an interest-based approach focusing on Turkey as an economic, geostrategic partner and – relating to the identity and culture dimension – to an extent as a cultural bridge between West and the Middle East. 2016 was a tipping point however, since the interest-based narrative about Turkey joining the EU in the same way as other candidate states have done has irreversibly ended. The populist and anti-immigration sentiments behind Brexit and Donald Trump's election reflect the growing nationalism and intolerance in Europe and globally. The identity policies and Islamophobia will take (and have already taken) a more prominent role also in the Latvian official narrative, just like they have on a global scale. Statements by imprudent EU and US politicians incite anti-Islam ideas, ignoring the fact that the Muslim world like the Western world is highly heterogeneous.

Therefore, it is also very probable that the public narrative regarding Turkey will change in the near future. Until 2016, the Latvian society accepted the elite's position regarding the EU and NATO enlargement without much reservation, but 2016 has brought around new trends that will likely lead to radicalization of opinions and worsening of the attitude towards Turkey. This growing public leaning towards defining Turkey under terms of the "otherness" narrative, although not an entirely new phenomenon, is something that the political elite should keep in mind.

## **1.3. Refugee crisis and economics**

The Latvian government traditionally considers Turkey to be an important economic partner outside the EU in such sectors as pharmaceuticals, food industry, timber industry, transport, logistics and tourism. However, as stated above, Latvia is highly integrated within the EU and is not dependent on trade with Turkey, despite the growing trade between the two.

Currently the most crucial policy area discussed regarding the EU-Turkey relations is political cooperation and the refugee issue, the solution of which is currently considered a number one priority for the EU. This coincides with the above-mentioned changes in narratives. The society is demanding loyalty from Turkey in exchange for its EU integration. However, if Turkey fails to contain the refugee flow to the EU, and the EU is not ready to respond to a new flow of refugees, the relations with Turkey and the narrative will change.

## **2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations**

### **2.1. The main concerns regarding the EU-Turkey relations**

The differences in political and ideological orientations of Turkey and the EU have always been present, but due to the prevailing narrative until 2016, they were not outspoken. The current discussions in the Turkish Parliament and Erdoğan's announcements regarding Turkey's interest in joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, attempts to introduce a presidential system in Turkey, as well as human rights breaches will likely lead the Latvian government (and the EU) to express their concerns. This is not to say that the concerns about political and ideological situation in Turkey are new, but the Turkish government's own actions are likely to legitimize public condemnation of these actions, and for that Turkey should also blame itself, not just the growing Islamophobia.

As stated above, the Latvian society was not too concerned with Turkey's membership in the EU until 2015/16, and the issue generally was excluded from the national agenda. Hence the general opinion was largely in compliance with the government's position or alternatively rather neutral towards the Turkish people and Turkey's membership. The Latvian society has always had some concerns with Islam and its perceived incongruity with democratic and Christian values. However, the current authoritarian trends in Turkey, as well as the increasingly widespread Islamophobia seem to have taken these arguments from the level of mere populist statements to the general feeling in the society. Therefore, despite the unchanged Latvian government and elite position, people's stance towards Turkey's potential membership is increasingly negative.

### **2.2. Dangers of a differentiated integration**

There have been no discussions in Latvia on changing the EU's approach to Turkey yet, and due to the prevailing shock from the 2016 events, an alternative model has not yet been developed or discussed. The only alternative at the moment is the scenario that was already set out by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. It envisaged introducing a privileged partnership in case the situation in Turkey deteriorates. However, there are also concerns from the Latvian perspective on whether such an approach would be successful and whether it would not push Turkey closer to Russia. Although rapprochement of Russia and Turkey is possible, from the historical

perspective such “romance” between Russia and Turkey is not likely to be long lasting. Their relations are strongly affected by gas interests, and once the US shale gas lobby will gain its access to the European market, the “pipeline diplomacy” will have a much smaller impact.

### **2.3. Concerns over the undemocratic developments in Turkey**

The undemocratic developments in Turkey are certainly the main issue influencing the current debate in Latvia on Turkey’s EU membership. For a long period of time, media seldom reported on Turkey, but the increasing amount of human right breaches, especially after the failed coup, and Erdoğan’s authoritarian aspirations create an increasing concern about Turkey’s potential membership. Additionally, the extremely negative Latvian perception of refugees, which is further stirred up by media and more radical political forces, which use the religious factor as an argument against the potential refugee integration (and even their willingness and ability to integrate) in the Latvian society, has translated into considerable Islamophobia. This has grown into an openly discussed suspicion against any predominantly Muslim country. Turkey is no exception, and its ability to adjust to the EU “values” is considered unlikely by the majority of the general public.

## **3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene**

### **3.1. The Russian factor in Latvian foreign policy**

Latvia is aware that Turkey was expecting more support from the EU concerning a privileged status, speeding up the accession talks and many other issues. But, understanding its own weak position, Erdoğan’s regime opportunistically sought closer relations with Russia. From the Latvian perspective, this rapprochement is considered dangerous, as Latvian relations with Russia are deeply suspicious at best of times.

This is especially important in relation to the Syria crisis and other conflicts in the Middle East. As NATO member, Turkey is seen as the main ally of Latvia and the EU in settling the crisis in Syria, the constant lack of clarity on Turkey’s stance towards Russia is causing unease in Latvian political elite and society. To an extent, the low point in Turkey-Russia relations after the shooting down of the Russian jet in late 2015 by the Turkish military was seen in a bizarrely positive light by the general public in the sense of the perspective of “the enemy’s enemy is my friend”. Overall, however Latvia has always been much more concerned with the Eastern Partnership, and certainly the settlement of the conflict in Ukraine is one of its foreign policy priorities. However, it would be an overstatement to say that it has left a considerable impact on the discussion about Turkey’s EU membership.

### 3.2. Geopolitics matter

Turkey is geopolitically extremely important as a partner of Latvia and the EU. Turkey is crucial due to its comparatively good relations with Israel and the potential role in settling the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, as well as relations with Iran. Turkey has both the historical experience and the military expertise and playing it smart it could continue to develop as a geopolitical partner of the EU and Latvia. It is hard to say whether this cooperation will also develop on a bilateral level between Latvia and Turkey, but both countries already cooperate successfully within the NATO structures.

On the other hand, if the EU wants to work with Turkey instead of pushing it away, it is crucial to give it a clear message that the EU itself is also interested in Turkey's geopolitical security. Ahmet Davutoğlu, as the father of the current Turkish foreign policy has failed with his ideas of avoiding conflicts with neighbours. Instead, the last years' Turkish foreign policy could not hinder negative developments – conflicts in Iraq and Syria escalated, tensions in relations with Greece, and even with Russia emerged. Because of these tensions Turkey is also interested in cooperation with the EU, while Erdoğan's own stance seems to be the biggest enigma that might affect the whole project.

### 3.3. Refugees and populism

The refugee crisis, the Brexit vote in UK, as well as Donald Trump's election as the US president mark the end of the post-Cold War order. In the words of one of the Latvian parliamentarians, "2016 will be remembered as the year when the period of peace and liberal ideas ended." The growing populism and Islamophobia like elsewhere in the world has left its imprint on Latvian society. Although the narrative of Turkish otherness to the "Europeans" and their values is not new to Latvians, the current state of the world is likely to only severe the generally negative attitude towards Turkey's prospective integration with the EU.

### Links & Further Readings:

- <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/turkey>
- <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-latvia.en.mfa>