



## INTERVIEW WITH VALDIS BIRKAVS, CLUB OF MADRID MEMBER

[Translated from Russian]

### “Ukraine is too big for small dreams”

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Internet-conference with Prof. Valdis Birkavs – politician, who brought Latvia into EU and NATO. Mr. Birkavs was **Latvia's Prime Minister in 1993-94**, and then was Minister of Foreign Affairs in the period of the most important external political changes. Now Professor Birkavs is a member of the Club de Madrid, which unites 57 [now 69] former leaders of state and government of democratic countries.

**Divanovich** Do you think there is a future for the organization of the “Community of Democratic Choice” and if so, on what grounds could this new regional initiative concentrate to consolidate its strength, in order to bring a real added value?

**Valdis Birkavs** Many new initiatives are born and then die. Even the ones that were born with common sense may die. The fate of an organization, including that of a “Community of Democratic Choice” depends on the people who are involved in that forum and on the organization also. What seems to me of greatest importance is that the forum has to find its focus. Focusing on everything means focusing on nothing. In my opinion, the most important issue, especially taking into account the experience of the countries that have entered into the EU and those that want to enter, is focusing not on the entry to the EU itself, but more on the process of preparing to enter.

Your politicians, just like us in our time, pay most attention to the fact of entering itself. Ukraine, Georgia, have to do everything that is necessary for entering the EU for their own benefit, not for the EU's benefit. Entering the EU finishes the process and this is absolutely not a goal, but more of a tool. EU with its example to other countries, those who want to enter, supposedly gives them some kind of bicycle or maybe even more complex – a good car. But in order to drive it, you need to be prepared. We have been studying for a long time and painfully. And Ukraine needs to know most probably our mistakes, then our progress. If you made a mistake, it's important the next time not to make the same one, though perhaps a new one – because you can't avoid making mistakes anyway.

I will name a few of such mistakes. Politicians pound their chest and say – “The most important thing is to enter the EU.” This is the first mistake. The most important thing is to get a country *ready* for entering. The second mistake is to perceive those who do not want Ukraine to enter the EU almost as enemies. In reality, they are partners, and their views are extremely important. Not in order to reject the EU. But in order to get the country even more ready to enter it.

For me, of course, it was easy to work. We did not have a strong opposition to entering the EU. Jokingly, I can say that it would have been better if there had been a strong opposition (there was some) – then we would have been better prepared. This would have been an additional argument, in order to achieve even better conditions for entering.

The third mistake was that our officials, arriving back from Brussels, often clapped their hands and said, “We were considered the best.” But this kind of acknowledgement often means in reality that we agreed with all of the ideology of the euroburocrats, and not that we were



pushing in the end for the best interest of our country.

I don't think that all of the leaders that were involved in this process will be as open as I was in this manner, because a person likes to praise himself and be praised.

Those are the main topics for the Forum.

We were, of course, very much motivated with our own internal Baltic competition – we always wanted to look better than our neighbors. In every Baltic country, it seems that its neighbor had done something better. Competition adds an additional stimulus; however, sometimes it brings some harm to quality.

**Taras** How did Latvia react to our revolution? What are the perceptions of Ukraine in Latvia now?

**Valdis Birkavs:** You know, I admit, I was on good terms with former President Kuchma, I knew your foreign affairs minister very well, and I always followed very closely events in Ukraine. And maybe this will sound strange to you, but I always believed in Kuchma's European orientation. I can say the same about Udovenko and Tarasyuk. The latter was always more a European-oriented politician in Ukraine.

But it's also understandable, that things in the Ukraine did not go as smoothly as anticipated by conversations, wishes, and dreams. There is a classic well-defined system of "restrain and counterbalance" in a democratic government – this is where one of the branches of the power holds back and controls the other. In reality, roughly stated, there is one real interpretation of "restrain and counterbalance" – the people hold back the politicians, so they don't lie as much, and the politicians try to hold back the people, so they don't go out on the streets. It seems that this very balance in the Ukraine was disturbed, and the result – the Orange Revolution.

In Latvia the Orange Revolution was perceived maybe even with some nostalgia – they recalled our Singing Revolution. And the nostalgia is a normal thing. Because the most beautiful moments in the life of a society are the days just before obtaining freedom. When the scent of freedom is in the air, when you can feel it, when victory is almost there. And we understood that the people in Ukraine, those who wore the orange colors, are now finally happy; and, of course, journalists asked me "how will the people's dreams come through?". My answer was, genuinely, based upon my own experience. I said that of course there will be disappointment. The hope will always be there, but real change will not come so quickly. And that it's important that this enthusiasm, the desire to change the situation, does not leave either the politicians or the people.

**Petro** What were the main difficulties in discussions with the EU in the process of entering? Who was the main ally? Was there an opposition: country-members, parties? With whom and which were the bigger difficulties?

**Valdis Birkavs:** There was only one difficulty. We could not exactly identify what was the national interest of Latvia. Because, having had a discussion on over 30 issues – the entire economy, finance, social life – in every direction, you can't achieve the fulfillment of all the wishes in all directions of the transition period, and in all the directions of major assistance.

And, I would say, that right now for the Ukraine is an important time to form the government's national interest – and not just generally, but in concrete areas. With a perspective for the coming decades. Right now the foundations of Ukraine are being formed – in manufacturing and education and in everything. Entering into the EU is in line with the national interests of Ukraine, but this itself is not yet the national interest – it must be formed. In sectors where it is not formed, the European position is just accepted and that is it. Create a dream – not the American Dream, not the European Dream, a Ukrainian dream. Ukraine is too big for a small



dream.

Listening yesterday to president Yuschenko at the Forum, I thought to myself, that even though the speech sounded a little dull, there is a vision – a Baltic-Black Sea regional vision, that is joining with Europe via transportation corridors and at the end with the EU. I think this is a big dream. If there is such a dream, then things will be easy through negotiations.

In 1995, under active support of the President, I had to convince 11 parliamentary parties to sign a memorandum of one goal. This was right after elections – when parliament was still very fragmented. But before this – in April 1995 – we managed to confirm in Parliament the Conception of the Political Development of Latvia, which ends this year, and, believe it or not, it will be over this year and it has been fully completed. And there is not a new one, by the way.

Now, about countries that have helped us. What I am going to say is often taken as a joke, but this was important. The country that stimulated the most our entrance into the EU and NATO was Russia. Every time, when Russian politicians would voice a negative opinion over the behavior of Latvia, my voters literally forced me to act more proactively. Russia helped in one more aspect. I spoke to employers, trying to convince them to diversify their market, because many of them were oriented only towards Russia. Many times there was an ironic smile in the answer, I can earn a million in Russia, and I can do the same in the EU, but in the EU the inflexible quality standards just drive me crazy. Luckily, Russia defaulted – within the course of half a year our external trade balance continued to grow and very quickly towards the EU. I support a thousand times the increase of the trade with Russia, but the market must be diversified. I think right now we are too dependent on the EU and it's time to think about diversification.

**Galina** Dear Mr. Birkavs, Ukraine wishes to replace the Partnership Cooperation Agreement ending on January 1, 2008, with a "New Enhanced Agreement" (according to Action Plan EU - Ukraine). Could such a new Agreement foresee a perspective for Ukraine to join European Communities? How do you think this will come about?

**Valdis Birkavs** It's clear that the path for the Ukraine to enter into the EU will be long, and will face all the complications of entering the EU. The plan of preparation with the EU will get more complicated and more detailed. Many people think that a Partnership Cooperation Agreement is just a piece of paper, that doesn't mean anything; the same could have been said about the Enhanced Agreement, if Partnership Cooperation Agreement had not been implemented. I would say that one of the big surprises for me during the preparation of my country for entering the EU, was how clearly, well thought out, and intelligently the EU followed everything and provided help to execute these plans. I'll say wholeheartedly, that our plans seemed to me like soviet five-year plans, that were written and not executed. In life, everything luckily ended up being different. And the execution of the plan completely depends on the Ukrainian side. Moreover, I will say that right now the EU, the USA, and the world finance organizations, consider Ukraine's euopreparation one of the biggest priorities. And I want to emphasize -the euopreparation- not the entering, because they didn't yet swallow us ether.. And therefore, when the time comes and the EU will solve its own problems, then the time will come for Ukraine.

**Yuri** Which steps taken by Ukraine in cooperation with the EU were accepted from members of the EU as the best ones, and which as the worst, during this year?

**Valdis Birkavs** I think that perceptions of the Orange revolution itself were positive, as the chance towards a European Ukraine. The change of government and the break in the camp of supporters of the Orange Revolution were watched with caution and interest, and Ukraine's movement towards a market economy was also very positively perceived, which was reflected in EU recognition of Ukraine as becoming a country with market economy. But, in my opinion,



the EU understands that the next election the table is almost fated for Ukraine, as was the Orange revolution. I hope that the Ukrainian people also understand that. And let the people work – don't change them so fast. In Latvia the governments changed, but the politics didn't. Following Euro politics – this is what is important.

**Tata** Have the representatives of old Europe expressed their doubts on the possibility to surpass the consequences of past totalitarianism, even if forced, in the process of entering the EU?

**Valdis Birkavs** Our past totalitarian still haunts us, it haunts me personally. But this makes us richer not in terms of money, but in terms of experience. We shouldn't be ashamed of our past. We need to consciously overcome that, which bothers us. But there are many things that we, having lived under two regimes – totalitarianism and now freedom, are able to see more clearly than old Europe. We can see much better than old Europe and we value that much more than they do.

**NGO "Europeanchoice" Oleg Zhivotovski** Dear Mister Valdis!

In your view, what information regarding European integration is necessary today for the citizens of small towns and villages in the Ukraine to erase the fear before final elections on the selection of a European process of development?

Thank you for your answer!

Oleg Zhivotovski leader of the organization "European election."

**Valdis Birkavs** This is the first hard question. It seems to me that the people of Ukraine don't know and don't understand the working mechanisms of the EU. They only know that people live better there. But these mechanisms need to be understood, because one of the main principles of the EU is to listen to what the people say.

If you want to achieve something in the EU, people listen to you and especially they listen to the views of non-governmental organizations. It is necessary to construct strong lobby groups in the positive sense of the word: lobbying is one of the main facets of European culture. But for the rural citizen, it's very important to know concrete things. I will give a few examples: the most powerful force that was afraid of the EU was our farmers. The same thing happened in Poland, Estonia and other countries. And now it is exactly the farmers who get the largest subsidies. Farmers, residents of small conservative towns, are afraid of everything new. For this reason, it seems to me that we need to abolish these fears with practical examples from our countries.

**Keymaster** What do you think can be the main obstacle for Ukraine to enter the EU? And into NATO? Do you see Ukraine on track against these obstacles, which may be too difficult for it to overcome? To what degree does Russian black mail impact the position of European alliance in the question of the Ukraine entering NATO?

**Valdis Birkavs** I believe there are a few important demands that must be met before a country is admitted into NATO: the presence of a strong democracy with a market economy, rightful government and reforms in the defense sector. Ukraine could soon become a member of NATO – in any case, faster than it can become a member of the EU. But this would require very serious steps in the reform of the defense sector. And at the end, this will be a political decision of the members of NATO, more than a mere homework task for Ukraine itself. I think that Ukraine would play in NATO the same role that to a greater extent Turkey or Poland is playing. And, naturally, new problems such as the war on terrorism have appeared as important issues, in order, for the Ukraine to become a member of NATO. When in February 1995 I announced Latvia's intention to join NATO, people pointed fingers at me saying "are you crazy, why NATO?". And later one of our prime ministers said "none of us believed it, only Birkavs was



running around excited." What seems to me especially important is to watch over the political thought of the USA. My belief was based on the concept of the US vision of a global security system, and on a very consistent self-determination and the political openness of President Clinton with respect to Russia. This was seen by many in Latvia, and I even received offers to build a monument for Clinton in Riga.

**Bellochka** Do Latvians have some negative feelings towards entering European structures? In other words- are there some minuses and, if there are, what are they?

**Valdis Birkavs** Of course, there are. The first and most important minus, felt by the people in Latvia, was the growth of inflation. It has currently reached 7%. This realistically delays our entering into Europe. But the cause of inflation is the fast flow of European money, higher exports to EU, involving numerous Latvians who are working now in EU countries, in money transactions. In sum, the cause of inflation is the growth of prosperity. Another really bad thing is the departure of the qualified work force to the EU, so we will be inviting Ukrainians to work in Latvia. I am already looking for them, especially for construction, where we are experiencing a boom. And thirdly, of course not all the plants were ready to adjust to the often very hard demands of the EU, demands on quality, sanitary conditions etc. And this brought bankruptcy, not too massive, but nevertheless. Or this example: a fisherman on the old ship that he privatized caught fish and made a living. But the ship did not meet the standards of the EU. He was offered a large compensation, but the ship had to be cut into pieces and the fisherman had to give up his profession. The EU offers the requalification, but people don't want to change their way of live. This is what awaits Ukraine.

**Vladis Birkavs** In Soviet-Latvian relations it seems to me that Latvia lost the chance of significant improvement in relations or, at least, substantial enlargement in opportunities for expanding relations. In 1998 one journalist asked me when we will improve relations with Russia? I answered on 22 November 2002 at 5 in the evening. The journalist was surprised. I said that I can only be wrong by a few hours. This was the time that NATO was to decide over the fate of our membership. In my view, Latvia, after entering into NATO and EU, could behave more freely with Russia without fear and looking back at the past. I was wrong. Moreover, politicians were becoming braver in presenting claims to Russia. I would see the development of our relations at the present stage in a completely different way. But now this perspective is lost because of the refusal to sign an agreement over the borders. With an agreement over the borders it is necessary to have a referendum, and this, of course, will be used for its own purposes by radically aligned parties. That is why more time is now necessary for us to have a new opportunity to improve relations.

Could Russia hurt the integration of countries in the Baltic – Black sea region? Yes, it could. There are too many varying interests of governments, who are entering into the virtual region: too many internal tensions that can be used by those who don't want such collaborations. And of course, Russia has a lot of experience and resources. Will Russia hurt this? I don't know. In my opinion, the countries of this region may hurt more its creation than Russia.