

Parliamentary Elections in Latvia: More of the Same, Please

Parliamentary elections in Latvia have always been the central event of the political life. The country has no directly elected president, nor upper chamber, or federal parliaments. It means that the power is concentrated in the 100-seat Saeima, elected directly by the population in almost purely proportional elections with the party list system and a five per cent threshold. This institution is powerful, not to say omnipotent – it elects the State President, confirms the government, adopts the legislation, and controls the executive.

The elections of the 12th Saeima took place in a friendly, co-operative atmosphere, and did not bring any fundamental changes. The turnout was 58.8 per cent, which means a slight decrease from the last elections of 2011, when 59.8 per cent of Latvian citizens turned up for elections. However, this decrease cannot be interpreted as a sign of growing political passivity, since these numbers also include those numerous Latvians who have possibly left the country during the last years. Immediately after the election, the State President, Andris Bērziņš, stated that the work of the current right-wing ruling coalition has been appreciated by the electorate and its mandate has been renewed. This statement might be regarded as true, since after the election the current ruling coalition will continue. However, some second thoughts about the future of Latvian democracy have also been provoked by the recent election. In this review, we will first turn to brief description of the

election results. Then, we will come to possible ruling coalitions and to future developments. And, finally, we will turn to some remarks concerning the long-term developments of Latvian democracy, especially, to the fragmentation of the political landscape and to the prevailing role of the ethnic cleavage in it.

Results and Interpretations

As expected, this year's elections did not bring any significant surprises. Since 2009, the country is led by the centre-right coalition dominated by the strongly pro-European „Unity” party. This party recently changed its long-term Prime Minister, Valdis Dombrovskis, who left Riga for Brussels to become the EU Commissioner. Currently the „Unity's” Prime Minister is Ms. Laimdota Straujuma, who has been responsible for leading the government since January 2014. „Unity” was rewarded by the electorate with 21.76 per cent of vote. It is a rather good result, taking into account the unpopularity of the austerity measures introduced by „Unity” since 2009, as well as the extensive negative campaigning of „Unity's” rivals, who this time got involved in rather nasty smearing practices. Most probably, „Unity” will retain its dominating position in the government, and will continue with its center-right, pro-European policies.

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Party	Percentage of voters (Seats out of 100)
"Concord"	23,13 (24)
"Unity"	21,76 (23)
Union of Farmers and Greens (ZZS)	19,62 (21)
National Alliance (NA)	16,57 (17)
"From My Heart To Latvia" (NSL)	6,88 (7)
Regional Union of Latvia (LRA)	6,55 (8)
All the rest	5,49

The second party of the current ruling coalition is the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), who got 19.62 per cent of support. It is a non-ideological party; it's rather traditionalist resides mainly on the Latvian countryside. The party usually avoids ideological confrontations and has been a minor member of most Latvian coalitions ever since its founding in 2002. It has some popular and well-regarded politicians, like the current Minister of Defense Raimonds Vējonis, the charismatic and independent-minded businessman Guntis Belēvičs, and others. The main reputation problem of ZZS is connected with its candidate for Prime Minister – the Eurosceptic Mayor of the Ventspils port city and a talented populist Aivars Lembergs, who admittedly has been involved in the large-scale corruption affairs during the 1990s. Nevertheless, the ZZS did very well during this year's election, increasing its number of seats from 14 to 21.

Also the third partner of the current coalition did well in the election. The

right-wing nationalist National Alliance (NA), a rather noisy party with a slight extremist flavor, got 17 mandates (14 in 2011). This party presents itself as the main defender of the ethnic Latvian nation. It is responsible for most of the hardline policies directed against the Latvian Russophones. The current geopolitical instability, caused by the Russian annexation of Crimea and war in South Eastern Ukraine might have helped this party to increase its electorate, since questions of national security and relations with the Russian Federation have always played significant role in Alliance's ideology. The inclusion of NA is usually regarded as a safeguard for any ruling coalition, especially, concerning the issues of national identity, language, and geopolitics. Hence it has been part of most ruling coalitions since 1990s.

The centre-left party "Concord" with 23.13 per cent of support and 24 seats is the formal winner of the election. However, it will be left out of the ruling coalition. "Concord" has actually lost about 20 per cent of support since 2011, when it could boast a parliamentary faction of 31 members. In Latvian politics, the "Concord" is usually seen as the "Russophone party". This time "Concord" didn't campaign on the ethnic ticket. Its program is leftist in the socio-economic sense and addressed also to the ethnic Latvian voters. Moreover, during the recent years the "Concord" has done a lot to get rid of the image of the "ethnic Russian party" and to become more like Western-style Social Democracy. This approach has recently been rather successful in Riga, where the city mayor Ušakovs, who was also the party's

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candidate for Prime Minister, acquired a considerable popularity with his socially-oriented policies. Nevertheless, this transformation has had only limited success. Despite “Concord” addressing the ethnic Latvian audience with socio-economic issues, its Latvian rivals usually emphasize “Concord’s” position regarding the role of Latvian language and history, as well as its ambiguous attitude towards the Russian Federation. “Concord” still has a partnership agreement with Vladimir Putin’s “United Russia” party, as well as with the Communist party of China. Moreover, the party didn’t condemn the Russian involvement in Crimea. For these reasons, “Concord” does not have any credible partners on the Latvian side of the political spectrum, and will not be included in any ruling coalition in the nearest future.

Possibly the greatest surprise in these elections was the fact that two splinter parties, “From my Heart to Latvia” (NSL) and “Regional Alliance of Latvia” (LRA) succeeded to pass the 5 per cent threshold and got parliamentary representation with accordingly 7 and 8 seats. Both these parties have no previous political experience. Their background is rather diverse, and both parties rely mainly on populist slogans rather than on elaborated policy proposals. The leader of NSL, Inguna Sudraba, is the former head of the State Audit Office, an independent-minded accountant with no previous political experience. The success of LRA, in its turn, was based on the popularity of an eccentric stage actor, a talented public figure and extreme populist Artuss Kaimiņš, already nicknamed „Latvian Zhirinovsky”. It is doubtful whether any of the ruling parties would want such a coalition partner.

Coalitions and Offices

As stated before, the next ruling coalition will consist of three parties, „Unity”, ZZS, and NA, with a possible addition of the LRA. However, this does not mean that the next government will look identical to the previous one. First of all, the distribution of power among the three senior parties will be more equal than before. The relative weight of the Greens and Farmers, as well as that of the National Alliance has increased – in the 11th Saeima these parties had correspondingly 13 and 14 seats only. Moreover, although the „Unity” has now improved its formal result, compared with its 20 seats in 2011, during the legislature period of the 11th Saeima it “swallowed” the populist „Zatlers’ Reform Party” with its 22 seats, which helped the „Unity” to dominate the ruling coalition. Now, however, the time of asymmetric domination is gone, and the „Unity” will be more dependent on its partners. It might get complicated, especially, concerning the previous record of the Greens and Farmers, who have often opposed “Unity” on questions of legality and good governance.

As for division of the spheres of responsibility between the government parties, the talks are going on, and no clear settlement has yet been reached. However, “Unity” will most probably retain the posts of Prime Minister, as well as ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Finance, Education and Science, and Health. The last two sectors are especially important, since they badly need reform, constantly postponed because of lacking political support. ZZS will get Defense, Environment and Regional Development Agriculture, Welfare, and Transportation – the last being

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particularly important for this party because of Lembergs' interest in transit and port administration. The NA would be responsible for ministries of Economy, Culture, and Justice. However, since regarding ministerial posts a lot of horse-trading is still taking place behind the scenes, this settlement might change in the nearest future.

The possibility to include the left-wing "Concord" in the ruling coalition was discussed after 2011 parliamentary elections. This time, however, such possibility is not seriously debated. The isolation of "Concord" from the executive has since become deeper. It usually concerns three fundamental differences between the political representatives of the Latvian majority and the Russophone minority. They concern language, citizenship, and geopolitical orientation. The language issue is perceived as a fundamental matter of identity by most Latvians, and any proposal that might challenge the official status of the Latvian language is perceived as a threat to the Latvian statehood itself. The "Concord", however, supported the February 2014 referendum on the introduction of Russian as the second state language, initially proposed by a rather marginal Russophone extremist group. This should have been a fatal mistake, since the referendum lead to a clear ethnic polarization not only in political circles, but also in wider society. Moreover, after this referendum none of the relevant Latvian parties even talks about "Concord's" possible inclusion in the ruling coalition. "Concord" also expresses an openly skeptical attitude towards the official historical narrative of the Latvian state, which serves as the basis of the citizenship policy – the so-called 'continuity doctrine'. Finally, "Concord" still has a partnership agreement with Vladimir Putin's "United Russia" party, which looks

increasingly strange against the background of the Ukrainian situation. The party has not been able to distance itself from its partners in the Russian government. This reluctance has been interpreted by the party's political rivals as a threat to Latvian national security. In fact, the "Concord's" position on geopolitical issues is always identical with that of the Kremlin. For that reason the party is regarded not only as ethnic Russian, but as increasingly pro-Kremlin – a perception not exactly beneficial for a possible partnership with Latvian parties in the national government. For all these reasons "Concord" will most probably stay in the opposition for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

The 2014 parliamentary elections have produced no paradigmatic shifts in Latvian politics. On the one hand, this might be interpreted as a good result: internal stability and economic development is what one wants in times of regional and global instability. In terms of economic performance, Latvia has done rather good under the "Unity" government (2009-2014), and, as one might argue, no significant changes are needed. On the other hand, there are some deeper problems. First of all, the public sector in Latvia still needs much reform – especially, in fields of education, science, and health. Now, after the election, the ruling coalition of "Unity", ZZS, and NA ostensibly has the mandate to implement such unpopular but desperately needed reforms. However, since the ruling parties have no consensus to implement anything, the momentum might be lost. This is a deeper problem of Latvian politics: the extreme fragmentation and "feudal" division of spheres of

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influence among the ruling parties without any common vision about the country's future. Possibly because of ineffective and irresponsible political performance, Latvian democracy suffers from severe legitimacy problems. Only around 10 per cent of the population trusts the parliament and government; civic cynicism and passivity are wide-spread; polls show a broad popular dissatisfaction with the democratic development of the country.

This applies also to the isolation of the Russian-speaking minority. On the one hand, the Russian-speaking "Concord" is justifiably isolated from the executive in Latvia because of its anti-democratic stances and support for the Russian annexation of Crimea. But, on the other hand, ethnic Latvian politicians have mainly ignored the fact that a considerable proportion of the country's inhabitants are alienated from the state, from its basic values and democratic process. Unfortunately, these problems are endemic for Latvian democracy, and one cannot expect that they will be solved by the newly elected parliament. What one needs, is a more open and democratic political culture, which could be developed only over longer periods of time.