The 2010 Latvian parliamentary elections

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1. Introduction

Latvia's sixth post-independence parliamentary election was held on 2 October 2010 during a period of tremendous economic uncertainty. Latvia was arguably the country hardest hit by the global recession: GDP dropped by a staggering 18% in 2009. The election represented a victory for the Unity electoral alliance, led by Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, which captured 31% of the vote. Dombrovskis and his coalition partners were returned to power despite deep cuts to public employment and entitlement programs made at the behest of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU). The election also witnessed the ascent of the Russian-speaking Harmony Centre (SC), which trailed Unity with 26% of the vote. Throughout the campaign, pollsters predicted that SC would gain the largest share of the vote. This raised speculation that an ethnic minority party might form, or at the very least join, the next coalition government—something that has not happened since Latvia regained independence in 1991. The actual twists and turns of coalition government formation—in which the minority party was invited into the government then rejected—read like a primer in the politics of coalition formation.

2. Background

Centre-right parties—which have governed Latvia since the collapse of the Soviet Union—faced a severe legitimisation crisis going into the October 2010 parliamentary election. Opinion polls showed support for most political parties, including long-standing governing parties, falling beneath the 5% threshold necessary to gain seats.

The crisis facing governing parties was fuelled by the dramatic effects of the 2008–2009 global recession, which had seen unemployment reach nearly 20%. However, dissatisfaction with ruling parties arguably preceded the economic crisis. The Kalvītis (People's Party, TP) government fell in November 2007 in the so-called "umbrella revolution," in which demonstrators braved heavy downpours to protest against the firing of Aleksejs Loskutovs, the head of the anti-corruption bureau. In early 2009, the Godmanis (Latvia's First Party/Latvia's Way, LPP/LC) government collapsed after the "penguin revolution"—a series of demonstrations in Riga's old town that turned violent. And while neither event was on the same scale as the "colour" revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the term "revolution" does capture the crucial role that popular mobilisation played in the downfall of the two coalition governments. Previously, Latvian governments generally fell because of differences among coalition partners and the strategic exit of one or more political parties, not as the result of public demonstrations.

Collapsing popular appeal necessitated the hasty formation of electoral alliances. "Unity" [*Vienotība*] brought together parties supporting the incumbent government of Valdis Dombrovskis, including the prime minister's New Era (JL), the Society for a Different Politics (SCP), and the Civic Union (PS). A group of intellectuals who had been active in the umbrella revolution were to join Unity's PS faction before the election. This group was led by the former editor of the *Diena* newspaper, Sarmīte Ēlerte. The People's Party (TP) and Latvia's First Party/Latvia's Way (LPP/LC) joined forces under the label For a Good Latvia (PLL). Former President Guntis Ulmanis, who had left active politics in 1999, was chosen to head that alliance. The constituent parties of the PLL ticket represented business interests and were led by two of Latvia's three "oligarchs": Vice-Mayor of Riga, Ainārs Šlesers, of LPP/LC; and three-term Prime Minister, Andris Šķēle, from TP. Consolidation also took place on the nationalist right with For the Fatherland and Freedom/Latvia's National Independence Movement (TB/LNNK) fusing with the more radical All for Latvia (VL).

3. Electoral system

Latvia elects a unicameral parliament, or *Saeima*, using an open list system of proportional representation. The 100 members are elected in five multimember districts: the capital, Riga, and the provinces of Kurzeme, Latgale, Vidzeme, and Zemgale. Parties present a separate list of candidates in each district. Following a change to the electoral law in February 2009, candidates are no longer able to run in more than one district. This helped to accelerate party consolidation because the ruling out of multiple candidacies meant that some parties would have struggled on their own to find sufficient plausible

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candidates. Voters can manipulate party lists by casting multiple preference votes, by adding a plus (+) next to any candidate they like and a minus (−) next to any candidate they dislike. The balance of positive and negative preference votes determines the ultimate ranking of candidates on the party lists. The Sainte-Laguë electoral formula is then used to calculate the number of seats won by individual parties in each district (Davies and Ozolins, 2004).

Latvia's electoral system is relatively open. This means that elections are normally contested by a large number of parties. There were thirteen contenders in 2010 (down from nineteen in the 2006 election). It also means that new parties can make meteoric progress: in every post-independence election apart from 2006, the party gaining the largest number of seats was a newly-formed party. This fluidity of the party system is accompanied by very high levels of electoral volatility at the individual level. Only half of respondents in 2010 told pollsters that they planned to vote for the same party as in the previous election. The one exception to electoral volatility is the relatively consistent support for ethnic minority parties. While changing their names and swapping in and out of electoral alliances, these parties have retained their core support. Minority voters, mainly Russian speakers, made up one-quarter of the total electorate at the 2010 election.

4. Campaign

Predictably, Latvian voters told pollsters that they were mainly concerned with economic issues. Chief among these was the record level of unemployment. Even the conservatively-estimated official unemployment rate of 15% at the time of the election was nearly double the previous record high of the late 1990's. Other economic concerns included a crumbling health care system, growing arrears for utilities, rising consumer debt, and draconian cuts to pensions, state-sector wages, and welfare programmes. Economic problems were also behind a new wave of Latvian emigration, much of it to countries such as the UK and Ireland which were themselves severely affected by the global slowdown.

Political parties tried to address voters' economic concerns but their promises – often repeated from previous election cycles – were either vague or simply unrealistic given the dire fiscal situation. The familiar pledge that Latvian families would have the economic wherewithal to raise three children rang especially hollow in this election. Several parties proposed changes to Latvia's system of taxation, which depends heavily on regressive income and value-added taxes. Promises were made across the political spectrum to create a more equitable tax base, either through property taxes on the wealthy or by making other tax rates more progressive. These promises were easier to make, and hence less useful for voters, because budget negotiations take place at the end of the year – that is, after the election. Whatever politicians promised in the meantime, the demands of Latvia's international creditors meant that this budget was likely to be dominated by budget cuts and tax increases.

Economic dependence on bailouts from international organisations did become a campaign issue. Most political parties—including Unity, which had negotiated many of the agreements to pare down the Latvian budget deficit—signalled their willingness to ask for concessions from the IMF and EU. The PLL (For a Good Latvia) alliance was most critical of the governing coalition, claiming that secret protocols had been signed between the Latvian government and Latvia's international donors to privatize key publicly-owned companies after the election. Unity denied this. World Bank president Robert Zelik added fuel to the fire during a visit to Latvia in August. He asked whether the participants in a New Deal-like works programme were paid 100 lati (or roughly $200 dollars) per day. Participants in the programme, which is financed by the European Union, actually received only 100 lati per month. Opposition parties pounced on this remark, using it to highlight the government's dependence on out-of-touch international organisations.

Another important election issue concerned whether Latvia should strengthen economic and political ties with its eastern neighbours, including Russia. Harmony Centre (SC) and PLL both argued that Latvia, in integrating with the West, had neglected potentially lucrative markets in the East, where Latvian products are better known and seen as high in quality. Unity sought to turn SC's lead in the polls to its advantage by claiming that a Harmony Centre victory would threaten Latvia's membership in NATO and the EU. While SC leader Jānis Urbanovičs repeatedly pledged his intention to keep Latvia firmly integrated into both western alliances, his case was undermined by close ties to Russian politicians.

This Unity tactic is illustrative of its general approach which was to emphasise its two-party contest with Harmony Centre. Analysts and ordinary voters alike remarked that Unity's "the Russians are coming!" electoral strategy was a crude effort to divert attention from the difficult economic situation and the government's draconian budget cuts (LETA, 2010a). The centrepiece of this strategy was a "poll" that Unity volunteers conducted across Latvia, asking voters whether they would prefer to see the incumbent Dombrovskis or the SC's Urbanovičs as prime minister. Other parties protested at the exclusion of the other leaders and few had any faith in the scientific validity of Unity's poll, especially when it reported that over 70% of respondents had chosen Dombrovskis. According to more independent and rigorous measures of public opinion, the prime minister designate of the Green and Peasant Union (ZZS), Aivars Lembergs, was the most popular politician in Latvia. Lembergs is the long-serving mayor of Ventspils—a port on the Baltic Sea—and Latvia's third "oligarch." Currently awaiting trial for corruption, Lembergs was not running for a seat in parliament.

The election campaign was exceedingly negative and personal. Two weeks before the election, a book was published on PLL prime minister designate Ainārs Šlesers including the sensational revelation that Šlesers's father had killed his mistress. Šlesers called an impromptu news conference in which he shed tears. Private banking records showing huge sums of money being transferred to Aivars Lembergs's son were also leaked during the campaign. These attempts at character assassination are examples of what has in regional parlance become known as "black PR" (Ledeneva, 2006: 28–57).

5. Results

Given the extent of public disillusionment with political parties and parliament, there were expectations that many potential voters would stay away from the polls. These concerns were not realized. Some 64.1% of eligible voters turned out, which was slightly higher than the 62.2% turnout in the previous 2006 election. Table 1 shows the results of the 2010 and 2006 elections. When comparing these results, three subgroups emerge: winners, maintainers, and losers. The two big winners in the 2010 race were Unity and Harmony Centre. Unity's 31% was the second highest vote share achieved by any contender in the post-independence period. This result was also nearly double the New Era vote in 2006 and is a particularly impressive performance for an incumbent in dire economic circumstances. It is unclear whether voters gravitated to Unity for its economic pragmatism or its anti-Harmony Centre electoral campaign. The other big winner was Unity's rival, Harmony Centre, which also nearly doubled its vote compared with the 2006 contest and won more seats in parliament (29) than the leading party in that previous election.

The Green and Peasant Union (ZZS) and the nationalist All For Latvia alliance maintained similar levels of support from the previous election. ZZS improved its vote share a little from 17% to 20% and its seat tally from 18 to 22. Benefiting from solid support in rural areas, it was another member of the governing coalition to avoid being punished at the polls. The nationalist alliance received a slightly smaller percentage of the vote in 2010 than had its component TB/LNNK and VL parties when running separately in 2006. The former was a member of the Dombrovskis government, whereas VL had failed to gain seats in 2006. Their failure to make progress in 2010 suggested that the nationalist parties' attempts to frame the economic problems in ethnic terms had been unsuccessful.

Table 1
Latvian Parliamentary Election Results, 2010 and 2006.

	2010		2006	
	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats
Unity	31.2	33		
New Era (JL)			16.7	18
Harmony Centre (SC)	26.0	29	14.4	17
Green and Peasant Union (ZZS)	19.7	22	16.7	18
All for Latvia (VL)-TB/LNNK	7.7	8		
All for Latvia (VL)			1.5	0
TB/LNNK			6.9	8
For a Good Latvia (PLL)	7.7	8		
People's Party (TP)			19.6	23
LPP/LC			8.6	10
PCTVL	1.4	0	6.0	6
Others	4.2	0	9.3	0
Totals	100.0	100	100.0	100
Eligible voters[a]	1,489,595		1,448,039	
Votes cast[a]	954,150		901,173	
Turnout (%)[a]	64.1		62.2	

[a] Excludes overseas voters. Source: Central Election Commission (www.cvk.lv)

The biggest losers in the 2010 contest were the PLL alliance and the other Russian-speaking party, For Human Rights in a United Latvia (PCTVL). The constituent parties of the PLL coalition, the People's Party and LPP/LC, had received 28% of the vote and 33 seats in 2006, the former being the biggest vote-getter in that election. In 2010, they garnered a scant 8% of the vote and 8 seats. PCTVL, which had barely surpassed the electoral threshold in 2006, failed to cross it in 2010 and thus lost all of its seats. This can partly be attributed to Harmony Centre's dramatic success. SC, however, did not simply steal votes from PCTVL. Unlike PCTVL, Harmony Centre had retooled itself as a social democratic party and ran on economic rather than ethnic issues. This approach was well suited to turbulent times during which minority voters—like Latvian voters as a whole—were preoccupied by economic matters.

While voters did not punish governing parties as expected, they did change—through preference votes for individual candidates—the composition of parliament. Voters threw out familiar figures, including some ministers, preferring candidates with little political experience. Nearly half of sitting members of parliament lost their seats in 2010. The effect of the anti-incumbent wave was especially dramatic for the Unity and VL-TB/LNNK electoral alliances. Civic Union, with sixteen seats, became the largest bloc within Unity. Many of the new Civic Union deputies were from the group of intellectuals around Sarmīte Ēlerte. The prime minister's New Era party, which gained eighteen seats in 2006, was left with only twelve. Nationalist voters also favoured candidates from the insurgent VL faction over the career politicians from TB/LNNK, the former taking six of the nationalist alliance's eight seats. There were rumours that VL had instructed its voters to cross out TB/LNNK candidates from their ballots. Newly-elected VL members of parliament included an 86-year-old veteran of the Latvian Legion, which fought the Red Army under the Waffen-SS, and a 22-year-old proponent of deporting Latvia's Russian-speaking population.

At a time of political discontent and draconian budget cuts, the re-election of the incumbent coalition partners might seem puzzling to the outside observer. This outcome stems in part from Latvia's ethnically-based party system. Left parties, at least those with a credible chance of gaining seats in parliament, have mainly Russian-speaking electorates. This is the main reason why Latvia, unlike neighbouring Lithuania, has never had an ideological turnover of power. Left parties with an ethnic Latvian electorate—including various iterations of the Social Democratic Workers' Party—last gained seats in the 1998 election. Ethnic Latvian voters with leftist political views must either cross the ethnic cleavage and vote for a Russian minority party, or waste their votes by voting for smaller ethnic Latvian leftist parties with little chance of gaining representation.

However, it would be wrong to assume that Latvia has a rigid ethnic party system (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 302–306). More than 40% of Harmony Centre's candidates in 2010 were ethnic Latvian, including the leader Jānis Urbanovičs. As previously mentioned, SC tried to brand itself as a social democratic party rather than as a "Russian" or "minority" party. In both the local elections in 2009 and the

parliamentary election of 2010, SC aggressively courted ethnic Latvian voters with economic appeals. Centrist Latvian parties have also eagerly wooed minority voters. In the 2010 contest, no party did this more assiduously than PLL, Ainārs Šlesers being particularly popular among Russian-speaking voters due in part to his willingness to speak to them in Russian. Unusually for Latvian elections, PLL also actively recruited prominent Russian-speaking candidates to fill its party lists. These included Mihails Gavrilovs (manager of the Aldaris brewery), Aleksejs Šeiņins (editor of the Russian-language newspaper *Chas*), and theatre director Gaļina Poliščuka. Every other name at the top of the PLL list in the Riga electoral district was a Russian speaker.

6. Outcomes

Table 2 shows the composition of the five different coalitions proposed by Prime Minister Dombrovskis in the three weeks following the 2010 election, with parties listed ideologically from left to right. Because of SC's lead in the polls, most parties—with the exception of the nationalist VL-TB/LNNK alliance—had already stated during the campaign their willingness to see SC in the next government. After Unity's victory, Prime Minister Dombrovskis initially voiced his preference for maintaining the make-up of the outgoing government. The three-party coalition of Unity, ZZS, and VL-TB/LNNK that he announced on 8 October was a surplus majority coalition (i.e. it included at least one party that was not needed for a majority) and would have held a commanding 63 seats out of 100.

However, on 14 October, after consultations with Latvian President Valdis Zatlers, Dombrovskis announced his intention of instead forming a grand coalition. The proposed "national unity" government included all political parties except PLL and would have held 92 seats. There was much speculation about Dombrovskis's surprise (and historic) offer to invite SC into government. After the election, many commentators – including former President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga – had reacted positively to the idea of SC joining the government (Dubkov, 2010; Glukhikh, 2010; Meļķis, 2010). In line with Arend Lijphart's (1977) prescription of grand coalition governments for multi-ethnic societies, they suggested that the inclusion of a Russian-speaking party in government could foster reconciliation across ethnic groups. A grand coalition would also have made it easier for Dombrovskis to pass more politically difficult budgetary measures.

Other analysts, however, viewed Unity's overture to SC as unworkable (Ladziņš, 2010). Grand coalitions are rare in part because of the difficulty of getting ideological divergent parties to agree on common policies. It was particularly unclear how the nationalist alliance and the Russian-speaking Harmony Centre could work together. Moreover, Dombrovskis's invitation to SC did not come without strings. The party was instructed that it had to accept the status of Latvian as the sole official language and to acknowledge the 1940 Soviet occupation of Latvia before negotiations could proceed. SC responded that it was open to discussion on all future government policies but saw no need for the party to take a stance on sensitive ethnic and historical matters (Fridrihsone, 2010). The grand coalition invitation was then rescinded. SC's failure to agree to the government's nationalist principles appears to have been only part of the story. There was also discord within the Unity alliance. Three members of the Civic Union (PS) – which contains a number of politicians who share VL-TB/LNNK's nationalist concerns – had threatened to leave Unity if SC joined the coalition (LETA, 2010b).

After the collapse of the grand coalition idea, on 18 October Dombrovskis proposed a two-party, minimal-winning coalition with the Green and Peasant Union. An invitation was later extended to VL-TB/LNNK to join a surplus majority coalition, with the proviso that the nationalist alliance distance itself from public statements its members had made about deporting ethnic minorities and eliminating minority-language public instruction. When VL-TB/LNNK agreed to these conditions, on 21 October Dombrovskis invited them to join the coalition. It is unclear why Unity felt the need to include the nationalist alliance in government given that Unity and ZZS together held 55 seats. One possibility is that the Civic Union flexed its increased muscle within Unity: members who had threatened to leave if SC participated in the government may also have lobbied for VL-TB/LNNK's re-inclusion in the coalition. While Western European politicians have gone to great lengths to exclude extreme-right parties from office, there is no parallel taboo in Latvia: nationalist parties have been involved in ten of Latvia's fourteen post-independence governments.

In any case, Dombrovskis finally reverted to the minimal-winning coalition with the Green and Peasant Union. The decision that VL-TB/LNNK would not be included in the government was announced on 25 October and its timing, during negotiations over ministerial portfolios, suggests that it was driven by distributional concerns. The move can also be attributed to fractures

Table 2
Coalition governments proposed in post-election negotiations.

Dates	Coalition type	Party (seats)					Total seats
		SC (29)	ZZS (22)	PLL (8)	Unity (33)	VL (8)	
		Centre–left	Centre	Centre-right	Centre-right	Extreme-right	
8–13 Oct	Surplus majority		X		X	X	63
14–17 Oct	Grand coalition	X	X		X	X	92
18–20 Oct	Minimal winning		X		X		55
21–24 Oct	Surplus majority		X		X	X	63
25 Oct-	Minimal winning		X		X		55

within Unity. The Society for a Different Politics (SCP) faction threatened to leave Unity if the nationalist alliance, whose members were described as "radical extremists" by SCP member and former Foreign Minister Artis Pabriks, was to join the government.

The average lifespan of a Latvian government in the post-independence period is only fourteen months. This leaves open the possibility for Harmony Centre to join a future government before the next election, perhaps in a left-of-centre, minimal-winning coalition (of 51 seats) with the Green and Peasant Union. This would solidify the ZZS's position as the kingmaker of Latvian politics.

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