



Notes on Recent Elections

The 2011 parliamentary election in Latvia

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1. Electoral system

Latvia, a parliamentary republic, has a unicameral parliament referred to as the *Saeima*. The *Saeima* consists of 100 members, elected to what are usually four-year terms by proportional representation. The country is divided into five electoral districts – Riga, Vidzeme, Latgale, Zemgale, and Kurzeme – and, depending on the respective population bases of these electoral districts, they elect between 13 and 29 parliamentarians. A threshold is in place, which requires national parties to secure at least 5% of the nationwide vote in order to be represented in the *Saeima*. Elections are generally scheduled to take place on the first Saturday of October, following the conclusion of each term. However, due to popular support in a special referendum on the premature dissolution of parliament, an exception was made by holding an early election in the middle of September 2011, three years prior to the expiration of the parliamentary term and thus only a year after the previous election.

Following a parliamentary election, the President of Latvia is responsible for nominating the Prime Minister. It is then incumbent upon this nominee to form a coalition that will form a government and hold the majority of seats in the *Saeima*. A vote of confidence is held in the *Saeima* in order to determine whether this coalition government will have the support of a majority of parliamentarians for the four-year term before the next election. If the *Saeima* votes

to approve the government, then the President's nominee becomes the Prime Minister.

2. Pre-election environment

The September 2011 parliamentary elections emerged amid considerable controversy regarding allegations of corruption in a number of Latvia's political parties. The national anti-corruption agency had opened a probe against a number of public officials, including Ainārs Ieslers. Ieslers was a parliamentarian at the time, a member of the electoral alliance Latvia's First Party/Latvian Way and a former transportation minister. On 26 May, parliament voted against a request from the general prosecutor to lift Ainārs Ieslers' immunity to allow a search of his home as part of the investigation (Eglitis, 2011a).

In response, the then President Valdis Zatlers invoked his powers under Article 48 of the Constitution to initiate a referendum on the dissolution of the *Saeima*. If more than 50% of voters were to approve, the *Saeima* would be dissolved and elections would be called. However, under Article 50, if the referendum were to fail then the President would be required to resign immediately, with the *Saeima* electing a replacement to serve out the remainder of the presidential term.

Concerns over the executive branch of government taking on so much power as to subordinate the other branches of government – the legislature and the judiciary – have been a recurring theme of Latvian politics since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. "Latvia's first post-Soviet president, Guntis Ulmanis, expanded his influence beyond the institutional powers of the presidency... Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga played a similar role in 1999 when she sent back

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to parliament a controversial law that was said to overly promote the Latvian language to the disadvantage of minorities" (Sprudz, 2001, p.155). Similarly, some concerns arose over whether President Zatlers was pressing for a more active presidency in the Latvian political system. Indeed, for the first time in Latvian history, an indirectly-elected president had invoked the office's power to call for the dissolution of parliament – a power open since the re-assertion of Latvian independence but that had not yet been used. Nonetheless, 94.3% of the ballots cast in the referendum were in favour of the dissolution of parliament and an immediate election. Voter turnout in this landslide was only 44.7%, however. It is not clear whether this indicates that Latvian voters did not see the necessity for the referendum or that they believed that the referendum would pass by a significant margin regardless of their participation.

Ultimately, Valdis Zatlers would not be the one to set the final date for the election after the approval of the referendum. On 2 June 2011, with the current presidential term expired, the Saeima held a presidential election. While Valdis Zatlers stood for re-election to a second term, the Saeima instead decided to elect Andris Bērziņ to this office.

3. Parties and campaigning

A total of thirteen parties and electoral alliances fielded candidates for election, with President Andris Bērziņ scheduling the vote for 17 September 2011. Many of these parties and electoral alliances had participated in elections prior to 2011. However, there were two exceptions. Following his unsuccessful bid for re-election to the presidency, Valdis Zatlers announced on 23 July 2011, the same day as referendum to dissolve parliament, that he would establish a new party. This new party was called Zatlers' Reform Party (ZRP), with Valdis Zatlers as leader. ZRP enjoyed significant levels of support from the outset, a survey indicating that 17.5% of eligible voters intended to cast their ballots for ZRP in the upcoming parliamentary election (BNS, 2011). Zatlers announced that ZRP would be directly opposed to three particular parties – the Union of Greens and Farmers, Latvia's First Party/Latvian Way, and the People's Party – that he alleged were most prone to corruption and were influenced by "the oligarchs" (LETA, 2011). Roughly two weeks after the formation of the ZRP, the People's Party was disbanded and so did not participate in the 2011 parliamentary election.

The other newly established party, "Freedom: Free from Fear, Hate, and Anger", is a recent movement with its base in the coastal city of Ventspils. In the wake of the presidential election and referendum, it established its core aim as substantial constitutional reform, including the direct election of the president (Straumanis, 2011a). This party secured only 0.2% of the vote in the election, however, failing to achieve the 5% threshold necessary to secure representation in the Saeima.

Aside from these newly-formed parties, the other parties or electoral alliances to secure support in excess of the 5% threshold were Harmony Centre, Unity, the National Alliance, and the Union of Greens and Farmers.

Harmony Centre is a grouping of leftist parties that was established in 2005. Its principal members are the People's Harmony Party and the Latvian Socialist Party, with its leader, Nils Usakovs, coming from the former and currently serving as Mayor of Riga. Leftist organizations like Harmony Centre have generally had difficulty maintaining political legitimacy in the past as "many Latvians viewed the leftist parties as willing to compromise on the language and citizenship questions to the advantage of Russian-speakers" (Bugajski, 2002, p.106). And Harmony Centre has been regarded with particular suspicion by many Latvians as the electoral alliance shares a cooperation agreement with the United Russia Party in the Russian Federation.

Unity was first established as an electoral alliance between the New Era Party, the Civic Union, and the Society for Other Politics in 2010. However, on 6 August 2011, the electoral alliance was formally transformed into a single party. Some observers have asserted that Unity was formed as a means to unite centre-right forces in Latvia as a counterweight to the increasingly popular Harmony Centre (Ozolins, 2010). Since its inception, one of Unity's key leading figures has been Valdis Dombrovskis, who has served as Prime Minister since 2009.

National Alliance (officially, the National Alliance "All for Latvia! – For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK") was initially formed as an electoral alliance in 2010, bringing together two parties – All for Latvia, and For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK – to represent Latvia's ethnonationalist right-wing. On 23 July 2011, the date of the referendum on the dissolution of parliament, it was announced that that electoral alliance would also be merging to form a single party. Despite this consolidation, the leadership of the National Alliance remains formally shared between two individuals: Gaidis Bērziņ (no relation to President Andris Bērziņ) and Raivis Dzintars.

The last of the five parties to secure a significant level of support in the 2011 parliamentary election is the Union of Greens and Farmers. The Union is an electoral alliance that consists of two parties: the Latvian Farmers' Union, and the Green Party of Latvia. The Union of Greens and Farmers rose to prominence not long after its establishment in 2002. However, it has since suffered from a series of corruption-related scandals. Aivars Lembergs, the Mayor of Ventspils, was arrested in March 2007 on charges of bribery, money laundering, and tax evasion (Freedom House, 2008). For the 2011 parliamentary elections, the Union was led by Raimonds Vējonis. President Andris Bērziņ was also nominated for his office by parliamentarians from the Union of Greens and Farmers.

Latvia's First Party/Latvian Way had previously held seats in the Saeima but failed to maintain its presence after securing less than the required 5% support from Latvian voters. Initially, the organization was formed as an electoral alliance between Latvia's First Party, Latvian Way, and the Vidzeme Union in 2006. The decision was taken to merge into a single party in 2007. Ainārs Ieslers has led the party since 2009 despite currently being under investigation on corruption-related charges.

The campaign itself was largely low-key in the lead-up to the election, intensifying only in the final week. Much

of the political discourse revolved around the economic situation. Latvia was particularly badly hit by the global financial crisis, with a steep contraction in Gross Domestic Product in 2009 following what had been years of double-digit economic growth rates. These economic woes led to mass protests in the winter of 2008–9, culminating in violent riots in Riga that saw 25 people injured and 106 arrested (Barry, 2009). In light of this, proposing solutions to the ongoing economic troubles in Latvia was high on the agenda during the 2011 parliamentary election campaign.

In line with Latvia's commitments as a participating State of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), international observers were invited to monitor the election. Therefore, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) deployed a Limited Election Observer Mission (LEOM) to assess the election environment but not to conduct comprehensive and systematic observation of proceedings on polling day (OSCE/ODIHR, 2011). This level of observation is consistent with previous deployments by those organisations, even prior to Latvian accession to the European Union.

4. Results

In the 2011 parliamentary elections, voter turnout reached an all-time low for a parliamentary election at 59.5%. This was more than five points down on the percentage just a year earlier. On a longer view, turnout has fallen sharply since the 71.2% recorded in the 2002 parliamentary elections, and participation has declined not only in national but also in local and European Parliament elections.¹

Those who did vote generated an outcome that represents a possible shift in the political landscape of Latvia. The newly established Zatlers' Reform Party, led by the former president Valdis Zatlers, received the second largest vote in the election, securing 22 seats in the Saeima (Table 1). Harmony Centre, meanwhile, won the highest level of support in the election, but this represented only a marginal increase – a gain of two seats – from the 2010 parliamentary election. Perhaps as a result of the corruption scandals that preceded the election, Latvia's First Party/Latvian Way and the Union of Greens and Farmers both received significantly diminished mandates. The Union of Greens and Farmers lost roughly a third of its support, losing nine seats in the Saeima. Latvia's First Party/Latvian Way, on the other hand, lost almost all of its support, fell below the threshold and so now no longer has any representation whatsoever in the Saeima.

5. Government formation

Talks on the formation of the new government began in earnest almost immediately after the election. Unity, which

Table 1

Results of the 2011 parliamentary election in Latvia.

Party	Votes (%)	Change since 2010	Seats	Change since 2010
Harmony Centre	28.4	+1.8	31	+2
Zatlers' Reform Party	20.8	N/A	22	N/A
Unity	18.8	–13.1	20	–13
National Alliance	13.9	+6.0	14	+6
Union of Greens and Farmers	12.2	–7.9	13	–9
Latvia's First Party/Latvian Way	2.4	–5.4	0	–8
For Human Rights in United Latvia	0.8	–0.7	0	–
Last Party	0.5	–0.4	0	–
For a Presidential Republic	0.3	–0.4	0	–
People's Control	0.3	–0.1	0	–
Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party	0.3	–0.4	0	–
Freedom: Free from Fear, Hate, and Anger	0.2	N/A	0	–
Christian Democratic Union	0.2	–0.1	0	–
Total	100.0		100	
Turnout	59.5	–5.2		

had been the leading party in government prior to the election, opened talks with Zatlers' Reform Party (ZRP), given their similarly centre-right ideology. These talks then expanded to encompass a potential 'grand coalition', involving also Harmony Centre and the National Alliance. Had this proposed government been formed, this would have left only the Union of Greens and Farmers in opposition. ZRP and Unity moved quickly to secure an agreement on this 'grand coalition' or, as Zatlers styled it, a "national consolidation" government, which would see Valdis Dombrovskis of Unity returning to his post as Prime Minister. A state visit by President Andris Bērziņš to the United States of America from 20 to 25 September allowed the parties themselves to take some initiative in building a coalition around which the new government could be formed. However, these talks broke down when the National Alliance asserted that it would not support any government that includes Ministers drawn from Harmony Centre. At the same time, Harmony Centre asserted that it could not support any government that did not include Ministers drawn from its own party, citing its strong level of support at the polls as a basis for the party's necessary presence in government (Petrova, 2011).

With a workable compromise between the National Alliance and Harmony Centre seeming impossible, and with the government formation talks dragging on, an agreement was eventually reached between Unity, ZRP, and the National Alliance. This agreement excluded Harmony Centre and the Union of Greens and Farmers from government. However, this agreement did not see the end to the intrigue surrounding the formation of the new government. Initially, it was not clear how committed ZRP was to this coalition agreement. Headed by former Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, the new government would hold 56 seats in Parliament (Straumanis, 2011b).

¹ The denominator for these turnout figures does not include the predominantly Russian-speaking non-citizens, who make up roughly 16% of the adult population.

While this would give the new coalition a majority in the 100-seat Saeima, the narrowness of that majority raised doubts about Zatlers' capacity to enact his plans for the country. A key plank in his election platform had been constitutional reform, but amending the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia would require a 67-seat majority (Eglitis, 2011b).

The coherence and unity of the proposed government was further challenged when six newly-elected ZRP parliamentarians staged a rebellion over the issue of who would be appointed as the new transport minister. Klāvs Olteins, Elīna Siliņa, Gunārs Rusiņš, Jānis Upenieks, Viktors Valainis and Jānis Junkurs all announced that they were resigning from ZRP and would sit as independents in the new Saeima. This would have left the proposed governing coalition at only fifty seats, holding on to a majority by a single seat. With the proposed coalition fraying, President Andris Bērziņš called on Unity, ZRP, and the National Alliance to broaden their efforts to form a government that could last the three years until the next scheduled election without failing on a confidence motion. His initial proposal was that Jānis Dūklavs, the former agriculture minister and a former member of the Union of Greens and Farmers, be included in the coalition government. Not only would that provide it with a broader mandate but it would have secured the support of the Union of Greens and Farmers in the Saeima. However, the leaders of all three parties in the proposed government, Valdis Zatlers in particular, objected to this arrangement (President of Latvia, 2011).

Shortly after, a new agreement was reached on a "50 + 6" model, which would include the six former ZRP parliamentarians supporting the coalition but not included in government as ministers. On 25 October, Parliament voted in favour of this configuration for government, with Valdis Dombrovskis of Unity returning to the position of Prime Minister. Valdis Zatlers was conspicuously missing from the list of ministers in the new government, although Unity and ZRP received the bulk of Cabinet appointments as the National Alliance received a few key posts for its role in the coalition. Instead, Valdis Zatlers made an unsuccessful bid for the post of Speaker of the Saeima. Solvita Āboltiņa, a leader within Unity and the former Speaker of the Saeima, was re-elected as a compromise candidate (Eglitis, 2011c).

While the 2011 parliamentary election led to a further reduction in the number of parties or electoral alliances with representation in the Saeima, this consolidation of the political system does not appear to have translated into greater coherence. If the intrigue of the five weeks of government formation talks that followed the election has

demonstrated anything, it is that the political instability that preceded the election is set to continue. It will take considerable compromise on the part of all parties for the current government to implement the reforms necessary for bringing Latvia out of economic crisis while also maintaining the confidence of Parliament for the remaining three years of its mandate.

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