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# The 1998 parliamentary election in Latvia

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## 1. Electoral system

The Saeima is a unicameral parliament of 100 seats, all directly elected. The country is divided into five multi-seat constituencies, with seats allocated according to population size. Vidzeme, with the largest population, has 26 deputies; Riga 24; Latgale 20; Zemgale 16; and Kurzeme, the smallest constituency, has 14 deputies. To qualify for a Saeima seat, a party list must win at least 5% of the total national vote. The Sainte Laguë electoral formula is applied in all five constituencies. Preferences voting is used to determine which candidates on a party list occupy the seats won by the party in a constituency.

A modified 'closed' party list system is used in Saeima elections. Voters receive the ballots of all the parties standing for election in their constituency; the ballot papers also list all the candidates nominated by each party in their constituency.

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Voters select the ballot paper for their favoured party, and have the option of modifying the list. This is done by placing a '+' against a candidate's name to indicate support, and/or by crossing out the name of any candidate they dislike. Voters may exercise this option for any number of the candidates on their party's list. Party hopefuls may be named as candidates in more than one constituency. Leading party figures, in particular, tend to be listed in all constituencies, in order to capitalise on name recognition to draw electors to the party's list.

The number of seats won by each party is determined on the first ballot count; votes for parties below the 5% national threshold are discarded. A second count orders the candidates of the successful parties according to elector's preference votes. The highest polling names on the lists of winning parties are offered Saeima seats. Thus successful candidates may be offered a choice of constituency seats. In cases where a candidate has been successful in more than one constituency, the winner must choose one seat, declining others, giving the next candidate on the list the opportunity to take up the seat.

The modified party list system has come in for some criticism. The main problem is the 'divorce', or distance, between office-holders and their constituency. Party lists are drawn up at the national level, with leading candidates allocated to constituencies on the basis of national preferences. Hence, Saeima deputies are not closely tied to their constituency nor to the idea of serving their constituents. Some deputies have adopted a 'constituency service' approach to their role, but this has not yet become general practice. There has been discussion of methods to strengthen the constituency link in the Latvian electoral system, but no generally accepted proposals have yet emerged.

## **2. Party lists**

Altogether 21 party lists contested the 1998 election; some of them were coalitions formed to give participants a greater chance of breaking through the 5% threshold. Between them, these lists nominated 1,083 candidates; 73% were men, and 75% had higher education qualifications. Three-quarters of candidates were between 30 and 60 years of age, with one-third between 40 and 50 years old. There was a substantial turnover of Saeima deputies, with around 70% of seats changing hands. Six party lists gained seats in the new Saeima, with no other parties coming close to the 5% threshold (Table 1).

Public opinion polls reported in the Latvian press, and in government bulletins, rarely included sample size and reliability figures, but there is a consistency in the patterns reported during the run-up to the 1998 election. Most of the party lists that won seats in the 1998 election led consistently in public opinion polls during 1998, and their support appeared to solidify as election day approached. The steady growth in support for the leading parties came from the erosion of support for the small parties, and from the ranks of undecided voters, rather than in the form of strong swings between the winning parties.

There was considerable common ground on policies between all these party

Table 1  
Legislative election results, 1998 and 1995<sup>a</sup>

	1998		1995	
	Votes (%)	Seats (100)	Votes (%)	Seats (100)
People's Party	21.2	24	–	–
Latvian Way	18.1	21	15.0	17
For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Conservative Party (FFF/LNNK)	14.7	17	17.7	22 <sup>b</sup>
National Harmony Party	14.1	16	5.6	6 <sup>c</sup>
Latvian Social Democratic Alliance	12.8	14	5.6	5 <sup>d</sup>
New Party	7.3	8	–	–
Democratic Party ('Saimnieks')	1.6	0	15.3	18
People's Movement for Latvia (Siegerist's Party)	1.7	0	15.0	16
Latvian Unity Party	0.5	0	7.2	8
Farmer/Christian Democrat combined list	–	–	6.1	8
Other lists (12 in 1998, 10 in 1995)	8.1	0	12.5	0

<sup>a</sup> Electorate 1.4m (1995, 1.3m), Turnout 71.9% (1995, 71.9%), Valid ballots 69.2% (1995, N/A). Source: Latvian Saeima website: <http://kastors.saeima.lv>

<sup>b</sup> 1995 figures are the total votes and seats won by For Fatherland and Freedom and the coalition in which the Latvian National Conservative Party was the largest grouping.

<sup>c</sup> 1995 figures are for the People's Concord Party, the central group in the National Harmony Party.

<sup>d</sup> 1995 figures are for the Latvian Socialist Party, the central group in the Latvian Social Democratic Alliance.

groups, but, in broad terms, the parties can be arrayed along a left–right spectrum. The Latvian Social Democratic Alliance and the National Harmony Party stand to the left, FFF/LNNK is furthest to the right, the People's Party and Latvian Way are more moderately conservative, and the New Party attempts to carve out a centrist position. In particular, there appears to have been, late in the campaign, a strong growth in support for the Latvian Social Democratic Alliance, and for the National Harmony Party. Their standing in an August poll reported by the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was 5.7% and 4.0% respectively, but, in the event, the combined vote for these two parties, the most left-leaning in the Saeima, was 26.9%.

Although the two left parties, campaigning on greater social investment, made a good showing, it was the self-styled conservative and liberal party lists that gained most votes and most seats. The lead parties might have seemed natural coalition partners. In their pre-election literature, the People's Party, FFF/LNNK, and Latvian Way, described themselves, respectively, as 'conservative, centre-right wing', 'conservative, right-wing, liberal economic programme', and 'liberal wing'. Despite FFF/LNNK taking a much stronger line against the citizenship referendum than the other two, the three parties had much in common in broad policy terms. This potential

partnership, however, foundered on a clash of leadership personalities. Thus the government emerging from the election was not a majority administration, and did not include the party with the most seats.

Nine party lists had been successful in the 1995 election, but the shifting, collapsing, and re-structuring of political coalitions in Latvian politics make it difficult to trace the political genealogy of those nine parties and the six lists that won parliamentary seats in 1998. For example, in 1995, the Latvian Farmers' Union campaigned on a combined list with the Christian Democrats, together gaining 6.1% of the vote, eight seats, and ministerial positions. In 1998, however, the Farmers' group campaigned as a separate list, attracted only 2.5% of the vote, so failed to gain any seats. Again, the Green Party won seats from its coalition with the Latvian National Conservative Party in 1995, but almost disappeared in the 1998 election. Meanwhile the Conservative Party in this coalition (LNNK) allied itself with For Fatherland and Freedom in 1997 to retain a hand on power.

Among the groups that had collapsed since 1995 were the People's Movement for Latvia (Siegerists's Party), and the Democratic Party (Saimnieks). The former was probably affected by the behaviour of its charismatic leader, Siegerists: his continued involvement with controversial politics in Germany, including membership of a right-wing group barred from entering Israel, highlighted his inability to lead the party in developing coherent policies. 'Saimnieks' may also have suffered from its connections with Siegerists's Party. Having been elected in 1995 on a moderate left platform, 'Saimnieks' took the pragmatic decision to co-operate with the right-leaning Siegerists's Party, thereby undermining the public's faith in both parties. When 'Saimnieks' withdrew from the governing coalition in March 1998, claiming they could work more closely with Moscow to resolve issues between Latvia and Russia from outside the government, their public support slipped further. Support for both of these parties fell from over 15% in 1995, in each case, to less than 2% each in 1998.

### **3. Party orientations**

Latvia is still striving to establish a pattern of steady economic development, to achieve international political integration, and to normalise long-term relations with Russia in the wake of its independence. Latvian membership of the World Trade Organisation, on the cards before the election, and finalised in early 1999, is just one step in that direction. Long-term plans for the integration of Latvia's Russian-born population as full Latvian citizens have been on every recent election agenda. This issue was heightened by the simultaneous holding of national elections and the referendum on citizenship law. All the various party coalitions are concerned with these policy issues, sometimes with only moderate differences in approach. All the parties support entry to the European Union, and most consider NATO membership essential for Latvia's future. Most would agree, too, with the carefully worded aim of 'good neighbourly relation with Russia' expressed by the New Party. There are also generally shared perspectives on the need to develop Latvia as a competitive,

economically developed, country, providing a rising standard of living and enhanced quality of life for its population.

There were some considerable changes in the outlines of Latvian party politics between the 1995 and 1998 elections. The People's Party emerged from this process of change and development. It was founded by former the prime minister Andris Skele, who gathered together several former ministers and senior figures who were seen as reliable in the midst of national political flux. Locating itself as a 'conservative, centre-right wing party', the People's Party describes its principal values as 'Family, Nation, Morality'. Its economic goals were simple and clearly stated: by the middle of the first decade in 2000 two working parents should be able to support and educate three children. The target was to be achieved by economic liberalisation to stimulate growth, by increasing competition, ending state monopolies, and balancing the budget, yet maintaining essential social security support.

The major party of the right is For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Conservative Party (FFF/LNNK). Formerly two separate parties now merged into a single structure, it continues to signal its origins by using both former party names in tandem. It portrays itself as a 'nationalist and conservative political party', promoting careful economic policies, the development of strong Baltic co-operation facing towards the west and away from Russia, and encouraging electors to vote in the referendum to rescind the more generous citizenship laws. It is notably the party most suspicious of Russia. Latvian Way, the longest established (1993) of the parties successful in 1998, is a centrist grouping emphasising Latvian heritage combined with a pragmatic understanding of external pressures on Latvia to become a responsible member of the international community, particularly in respect of the multi-national character of Latvia's citizenry. Its seniority, its efficient campaign machinery, and its ability to command ministerial positions in every Latvian administration to date gives Latvian Way considerable credibility with the electorate..

The Latvian Social Democratic Alliance, along with the National Harmony Party, stand at the other end of the Latvian political spectrum from FFF/LNNK. The National Harmony Party favour a generous extension of citizenship, and, in particular, promotes warmer relations with Russia and CIS countries. Both parties advocate redistributive economic policies, with the Social Democratic Alliance, especially, promoting higher pensions and expanded investment in other areas of social support.

#### **4. Party leaders**

In Latvia's still fluid political system, parties often form around charismatic leaders. The People's Party was formed around Andris Skele, a tough and successful prime minister who introduced balanced budgets and had considerable influence on Latvia's fiscal policy. In the 1998 election the New Party was the vehicle for Raimonds Pauls, a popular musician turned politician. Although the New Party is increasingly perceived as a coherent centre-left party, based on its social and foreign policies, its leader's popularity and name recognition when the party first emerged

remains important. The significance of both Pauls and Skele is indicated by the strength of voter preferences indicated on the ballots. Half of the voters for the People's Party gave '+' votes to Andris Skele, and 43% of New Party voters indicated '+' for Raimonds Pauls.

Personality has not been so important to the other parties, but is still significant. Anatolijs Gorbunovs and Vilis Kristopans received 40% and 34%, respectively, of preference votes among supporters of Latvian Way. Former prime minister Guntars Krasts received 35%, and Maris Grinblats 31%, of the preference votes among FFF/LNNK candidates. Janis Adamsons and Gundars Bojars, both Social Democratic Alliance candidates, received 32% and 27%, respectively, of '+' votes from their party supporters. Supporters of the National Harmony Party gave Janis Jurkans 31% of their preference votes.

## **5. Government formation**

The People's Party (24 seats), Latvian Way (21), and FFF/LNNK (17) were the largest parties in the 1998 Saeima, and were generally considered close enough to form a coalition. The People's Party was frozen out, however, due to personal antipathy between Skele, leader of the People's Party, and Kristopans, leader of Latvian Way. Moreover, FFF/LNNK harboured suspicions of Skele due to the way he handled the privatisation of Latvian state assets. Meanwhile, Skele had ruled out any co-operation with the Latvian Social Democratic Alliance (14 seats). President Ulmanis thus became convinced that Skele could not form an administration, so called on Kristopans to attempt to form a government that would command enough cross-party support to survive in the Saeima for the immediate future.

Kristopans brokered an administration in which Latvian Way, FFF/LNNK, and the New Party (eight seats) shared ministerial and policy-making positions. The 46 Saeima seats held by these parties did not constitute a majority, but the arrangement was given tacit support by the Latvian Social Democratic Alliance. The National Harmony Party indicated its opposition to this minority administration when its deputies not only abstained from the relevant vote, but walked out of the chamber when it was called. Only the People's Party voted outright against establishing the new administration.

Although the conservative and centre parties maintained their grip on the administration, the left-wing parties made considerable gains in seats. The National Harmony Party and the Social Democratic Alliance went from a combined total of 12 seats in 1995 to 30 seats in 1998, whereas the conservative and nationalist FFF/LNNK lost support. The referendum may well have played a part in this.

## **6. The referendum**

The referendum proposed to make it easier for non-Latvians to gain full citizenship, although tests on the constitution, the history of Latvia, and the Latvian

language remain. The vote was close, but 54% of the valid votes supported the changes. Citizenship is a highly charged issue in Latvia, and the referendum was expected to intensify its importance in the election. The conservative-leaning parties might have been expected to capitalise on the issue; FFF/LNNK mounted a particularly strong campaign against the referendum proposals. In the event, the aggressiveness of the FFF/LNNK campaign appears to have lost the party votes; its vote slipped to 14.7%, 3 percentage points lower than its 1995 vote. With external pressure from international organisations, such as the European Union, to adopt a more inclusive attitude towards its Russian-heritage population, so easing tensions with Russia, the argument has been accepted by most political leaders, and by a small but important majority of voters.

Latvian politics from the end of Soviet domination up to the 1998 election was typified by political parties with fluid and indistinct outlines, emerging, collapsing, combining, and reforming, with few points of continuity. During the 1990s political parties emerged, and collapsed, around charismatic leaders; deputies have shifted between political parties, and formed new ones; existing political parties have merged, and split apart. Many observers expected the 1998 election, like the other Latvian elections of the 1990s to introduce a further shifts of this kind. This has not happened. Well into the parliamentary term the party blocs in the Saeima remain stable, policy debate is conducted on party lines, and there is no rush to form new, alternative groupings. It appears that Latvian voters and their deputies are moving towards a pragmatic concentration on a limited number of parties, which are beginning to appear a long-term presence in the Saeima.

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## The parliamentary election in Estonia, March 1999<sup>☆</sup>

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On 7 March 1999, Estonia held its third free parliamentary election since the

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<sup>☆</sup> The author conducted interviews in Estonia during the summer of 1999 with Tunne Kelam MP (PPU), Ingvar Pärnamäe MP (PPU), Mari-Ann Kelam MP (PPU), Jarmo Laur (International Secretary, Moderate Party and Advisor to the Minister of Nationalities), and Olav Raju MP (Centre Party).

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