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Donatella M. Viola

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LATVIA

Jānis Ikstens

Figure 23.1 Map of Latvia
1 Geographical position

Latvia is located on the eastern rim of the Baltic Sea, bordering Estonia in the north and Lithuania in the south. The country also shares a once-disputed border with the Russian Federation and has a direct border with Belarus. Latvia has two major ice-free harbours that make it an attractive centre of logistics. The rate of urbanization in 2009 reached 67.8 per cent of the population.

2 Historical background

The Republic of Latvia was established on 18 November 1918 in the territory of several provinces of the Russian Empire inhabited primarily by ethnic Latvians. The country’s constitution,
Latvia

patterned after the Weimar Constitution, provided for universal suffrage and a parliamentary system. During WWI, the Latvian industrial sector was heavily hit and most of its equipment was transported to the inner regions of Russia. As a result, Latvia became a flourishing agrarian country. The Great Depression, along with a lack of democratic experience amongst voters, could be seen as the cause of the breakdown of democracy in Latvia in 1934. The Soviet occupation in 1940 began an extensive process of the physical extinction of Latvia’s population that resulted in profound changes in the ethnic composition of Latvia and Latvians becoming a near-minority by the 1980s. As a result of WWII and targeted policies of the Soviet regime, the share of ethnic Latvians fell from 77 per cent in 1935 to 52 per cent in 1989. According to the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, ethnic Latvians constituted 59.2 per cent of Latvia’s population whilst Eastern Slavs, including Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, made up 33.9 per cent in 2009.

3 Geopolitical profile

Latvia regained its independence as a consequence of the collapse of the USSR in August 1991. The traumatic experience of Soviet occupation turned Latvia into a committed Western ally, aiming at full membership of the European Union and NATO. Both of these goals were achieved in 2004 after complex accession processes.

The withdrawal of ex-Soviet troops from Latvian soil in the first part of the 1990s was greatly facilitated by transatlantic partners. This may have contributed to the formation of a rather special relationship between the three Baltic countries and the United States, as expressed in the US-Baltic Charter signed by the Presidents of all four countries in January 1998. Furthermore, a seeming lack of internal cohesion in the EU’s policy towards Russia further prompted Latvia to turn to the US for political support, since some West European countries were forging bilateral ties with Latvia’s natural resource-rich neighbour.

4 Overview of the political landscape

Latvia based its struggle for independence on the principle of the legal continuity of the former republic. This approach was crucial in adopting a parliamentary system that closely resembled the institutional arrangements before the 1934 coup.

The Saeima, a unicameral Parliament, is solely entrusted with law-making, whilst the cabinet depends on the confidence of the Parliament. The President and all judges are chosen by the Parliament. Although the Saeima’s role as a law-making body has been notably diminishing, its powers of appointment make it a key political institution (Ikstens, 2008). Consequently, parliamentary elections are regarded as the most important political event during the four-year electoral cycle. Parliamentary elections are based on a party list proportional representation system. In order to prevent party proliferation, as had occurred prior to the 1934 coup, a 5 per cent electoral threshold was introduced from 1995. This has helped to reduce the number of political parties represented in the Parliament after the restoration of independence.

As of 1 October 2009, 51 political parties were officially registered, and at least 14 of them have an explicit local or regional orientation. However, only seven slates overcame the electoral threshold in the 2006 parliamentary elections. The number of relevant parties in the Parliament has oscillated between five and seven over the years.
To simplify, national parties can be placed in a two-dimensional space where the first axis of competition is related to ethnic matters, Latvians versus Eastern Slavs, and the second is linked to socio-economic issues. The former dimension grew out of the pro-/anti-independence stances of political organizations in the late 1980s and early 1990s and notably altered the ethnic structure of Latvia’s population during the 50 years of Soviet occupation. The latter developed later, partly in response to hardships caused by the social and economic transition from a Soviet-style planned economy. However, linkages between parties and their supporters remained underdeveloped as bright promises by strong leaders became the cornerstone of capital-intensive election campaigns to mobilize the support of increasingly disillusioned voters who maintained openness towards new entrants into the political arena despite several spectacular failures by newcomers. Moreover, corruption, vote buying, and flagrant violations of campaign regulations led to further alienation between parties and citizens that culminated in 2007–2008 when public trust in political parties slipped into single digits and public participation in demonstrations and pickets grew palpably.

In view of both Latvia’s constitutional traditions and the legal requirements for holding elections to the European Parliament (EP), a party list proportional system was introduced ahead of the 2004 EP elections, and the whole country was defined as a single electoral district. Also, the 5 per cent electoral threshold and the principle of changeable candidate lists were retained. Only registered political parties or associations thereof are allowed to field candidates. Each voter has the right to cross out any number of candidates of his preferred list or put a ‘+’ next to the name of any candidate on his preferred list. However, a voter may not write in a candidate from a another list. Hence, voters have a profound influence over the final sequence of candidates and the composition of the elected candidates.

Each candidate has to be at least 21 years of age on the day of EP elections. Parties have to comply with campaign spending limits that were substantially increased before the 2009 elections to reach nearly €200,000 per registered list of candidates.

5 Brief account of the political parties

At its time of establishment, a well-defined Latvian nation did not exist in the Republic of Latvia. Its population consisted of a majority of ethnic Latvians and a diversity of ethnic minorities, comprising about a quarter of local residents. A liberal citizenship law did not exclude any significant groups from the body politic, and this could be seen in the composition of the fractured Parliament. Up to 25 parties at a time had been represented in the 100-seat Saeima in the inter-war period, with numerous parties holding just one or two mandates. Coalition-building in those circumstances was notably challenging, despite the fact that this wealth of parties tended to cluster into five major groups: agrarian parties; Social Democratic and Communist parties; religious parties; Liberal centrist groups; and parties of ethnic minorities. The latter, holding around 20 per cent of Saeima seats, were not welcome coalition partners and their coalition potential was low. It is often asserted that parliamentary fragmentation between the two World

Table 23.2 Number of slates and parties at national elections in Latvia: 2002–2010

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<td>Slates</td>
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<td>Parties</td>
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Source: Central Election Commission of Latvia, 2006; Šilde, 1982.
Wars caused short-lived governments and ultimately led to the breakdown of democracy in 1934 (Misiunas and Taagepera, 1993).

A competitive multiparty environment began to re-emerge in Latvia in 1988 as a consequence of Soviet liberalization policies. In particular, the glasnost policy facilitated the ascendance of the national independence issue to the top of the political agenda in Latvia. This issue swiftly divided Latvia’s population into two large groups, protagonists and antagonists of independence, that gave rise to two corresponding blocs of political organizations. After the failed coup d’état in August 1991, this line of division transformed into an ethnic cleavage separating ethnic Latvians and representatives of Eastern Slavic minorities, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Parties such as the National Harmony Party and the Equal Rights movement...
became the most prominent advocates of Slavic interests, whilst a myriad of parties claimed to represent ethnic Latvians.

Socio-economic issues rose to prominence in the mid-1990s. Whilst Slavic parties tended to profess left-of-centre values, Latvian parties offered a wide variety of economic outlooks ranging from neo-liberal platforms rooted in the so-called Washington consensus ('Latvia’s Way'), to old-fashioned Social Democratic programmes (Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Latvia), and populist exclamations (Siegerist Party, Unity Party). Regardless of economic problems, the socio-economic cleavage has not been as decisive in structuring voter preferences as the ethnic cleavage.

Despite a clearly pronounced cleavage structure and a 5 per cent electoral threshold, the turnover of political parties at the parliamentary level has been high. No less than a third of deputies and no less than a quarter of factions have failed to re-elect. This is likely to be related to weak linkages between parties and voters as well as high and unfulfilled expectations of economic prosperity amongst voters.

A more restrictive electoral system, introduced in 1993, has helped to reduce the number of political parties represented in the Saeima. It also has decisively contributed to the creation of pre-election alliances consisting of several smaller parties that otherwise would have little chance of clearing the electoral threshold.

6 Public opinion and the European Union

Although Latvia’s citizens strongly supported the country’s admission to the European Union in the 2003 referendum, Latvia has been one of the most Eurosceptic nations. According to Eurobarometer 71 (June 2009), only 25 per cent of Latvia’s citizens called the country’s membership in the European Union a good thing.

The above diagram demonstrates that an above-average amount of scepticism has been rather consistent through the years. The demographic groups that have more positive feelings about Latvia’s EU membership since the early 2000s include younger people, particularly those up to 25 years old, people with a higher level of formal education, and people with higher incomes. However, it is important to note a change of mood amongst the two largest ethno-linguistic groups. Whilst Latvians displayed a more sceptical attitude towards the EU up until the latter part of the 1990s, their perception of EU membership gradually became more positive as the accession process progressed. However, the Eastern Slavs lost their initial enthusiasm about EU membership and their older and lesser-educated segments now constitute strongholds of Euroscepticism in Latvia’s society. Although the Russian-language media’s discourse may have contributed to the attitudinal change, no methodologically sound studies of this factor have been made public. On the other hand, ethnic Latvian concerns about the fate of their culture and identity may have receded in face of the growing international influence of Russia and the resultant concerns about the security of the country.

Whilst Latvia’s membership in the European Union is decreasingly frequently seen as a good thing, the public’s trust in EU institutions is higher than that in domestic institutions of government. Particularly devastating are trends of trust in political parties; the share of people trusting parties has been in the single-digit range since 2007. Similarly, trust in the national Parliament and the cabinet of ministers has fallen from 18 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, in spring 2007, to a mere 6 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively, in summer 2009. However, trust in the less well-known European institutions is higher. In spring 2007, 47 per cent of respondents said they trusted the European Union, 43 per cent trusted the European Parliament, and 42 per cent trusted the European Commission. In summer 2009, these figures had slightly
Despite the sceptical attitude of the general public towards the European Union, party elites have been more positive about the EU and also internally more united on this issue. Regardless of cabinet composition throughout the 1990s and 2000s, government commitment to joining the EU remained firm. Although there existed pronounced differences between ‘Latvian’ parties and political organizations claiming to advocate the interests of Eastern Slavs on the eve of accession, those have somehow weakened and lost topicality. Only marginal political groups profess outright Euroscepticism, and they cannot be considered important by any measure. The ratification of the Lisbon Treaty by the Saeima was not accompanied by any significant public debate or discussions within the Parliament, which not only reflects a degree of elite cohesion but also the significance of EU-related issues in Latvian politics.

7 National and EP electoral systems

Article 6 of the Latvian Constitution stipulates that ‘the Saeima shall be elected in general, equal and direct elections, and by secret ballot based on proportional representation’. Following this,
the 1922 Saeima election law did not envisage any thresholds, nor did it provide any other formal hurdles to marginal political organizations. Although a refundable security deposit of 1,000 lats for each candidate slate was introduced in 1925, the number of political organizations represented in the Saeima decreased only gradually.

Fearing a highly fractured Parliament, the 1992 law on elections to the fifth Saeima was considerably more resolute, as an electoral threshold of 4 per cent of all votes was introduced. Further, a security deposit in the amount of 50 minimum wages for each registered candidate slate was to be paid to the account of the Latvian Central Election Commission. The electoral threshold was deemed insufficient in 1995 when the Saeima raised it to 5 per cent. The security deposit was set at 1,000 lats (about €1,500) per slate per district.

A number of marginal politicians claimed that Article 6 of the Satversme does not provide for any proportionality restrictions and that there were no thresholds before the breakdown of democracy in 1934 was dismissed by the Latvian Constitutional Court, stressing that electoral thresholds exist in many countries and this measure has a legitimate aim: the creation of a stable, functioning executive (Satversmes tiesa, 2002).

The 1922 Legislative Election Law offered a particular version of flexible party lists. Any voter was entitled to cross out any number of candidates on his favourite slate and add a corresponding number of candidates from other slates registered in the respective electoral district. This option was increasingly popular, as 20 per cent of all voters in 1922 used it, but this figure rose to 35.5 per cent in 1931 (Šilde, 1976).

The post-1991 election laws reduced the degree of flexibility but retained the opportunity for voters to indicate their personal preferences by crossing out any number of candidates on their preferred slates or giving a ‘plus’ to their favourites on the same slate. This has caused modest intra-party competition and individual campaigning. However, a majority of Latvia’s citizens seem to underestimate the power of this system and maintain that the current electoral system should be replaced by one that provides a closer link between the voters and the elected and fosters accountability amongst parties and individual deputies. A March 2006 opinion poll showed that only 26 per cent of Latvian residents were satisfied with the current electoral system. Moreover, 37 per cent of respondents favoured a first-past-the-post system, and another 15 per cent preferred a mixed system.

Another modification aimed at electoral consolidation was related to people eligible to submit candidate slates. The 1922 election law was notably liberal and admitted any group of citizens that could provide signatures of at least 100 adult Latvian citizens along with the list of candidates. The 1992 election law retained the aforementioned liberal approach but the 1995 election law stringently provided that only registered political parties or associations thereof could submit candidate slates. An extension of the parliamentary term from three years to four years in 1997 was also seen as a move to stabilize the government.

Only adult citizens of Latvia are eligible to vote in national, municipal, or European elections. There are more restrictions for people wishing to run for an elected office. Former KGB officers, as well as people active in the Communist Party after 13 January 1991, are barred from contesting elections (Ikstens, 2008).

The Latvian Parliament notably amended the existing voting procedures to address issues related to electing Members of the European Parliament. The Saeima passed not only a separate law on elections to the EP, but also a law on the voter registration (VR) list and revised legislation that regulates party and campaign finance. A citizen of an EU country must be at least 18 years old to be eligible to vote and at least 21 years old to run for the European Parliament in Latvia. The Saeima allowed former KGB officers and people active in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union after 13 January 1991 to run in the EP elections, although they are still excluded from
running in parliamentary or municipal elections. Furthermore, a citizen must be included in the voter registration list, following a set procedure, in order to be able to vote. This new register was set up for the first time to comply with 93/109/EC and enable citizens of other EU member countries to vote in Latvia. The VR is based on data compiled in the register of residents, which, in turn, aggregates information about the official place of residence of a citizen that does not necessarily match with the actual place of residence. As a consequence of this innovation, citizens had to go to a certain polling station to vote, in sharp contrast to the previous practice of walking into any polling station across the country. However, advance voting is possible, as is changing one’s affiliation with a particular polling station.

Only officially registered political organizations or associations thereof have the right to submit lists of candidates for EP elections. The Latvian Central Election Commission (CEC) registers only those lists of candidates, submitters of which have transferred a deposit of 1,000 lats (about €1,500 Euros) to the CEC.

The elections are held under a proportional system and the whole country constitutes one district. Only those lists that have gained the support of at least 5 per cent of votes cast are eligible to obtain EP seats. The number of seats is calculated employing the Saint-Lagué method. As the system of flexible candidate lists is used in Latvia, the list of deputies actually elected to the EP is finalized after the ‘+’ and ‘−’ given to each candidate by voters are counted. Parties have to comply with certain campaign spending limits and reporting requirements.

8 A glance at the EP and national elections

The 2006 parliamentary elections were the first national elections held after Latvia’s accession to the European Union. Compared to the 2002 elections, the turnout dropped more than ten percentage points to reach 61 per cent. The sharp decrease was seen not only as a sign of disillusionment with party politics, but also as a consequence of economic emigration from Latvia after it became a member of the European Union; voter turnout outside Latvia was mere 22.4 per cent.

Activities associated with election campaigning started early, as some steps taken by the governing coalition in the autumn of 2005 could be regarded as electioneering. The first campaign ads were placed on the web as early as April. The main issues of the 2006 campaign were inflation and emigration from Latvia. Both received substantial media coverage and analysis, whilst parties contributed to the discussion in a modest way. Any noteworthy references to EU-wide issues were absent from the campaigns.

Most party energy seemed to have gone into advertising. The 2006 campaign saw a substantial use of third-party advertising on behalf of the People’s Party and the alliance between the First Party of Latvia and ‘Latvia’s Way’. This innovation appears to have been closely linked to the introduction of campaign spending limits. A rather skilful negative campaign was launched against Avers Limbers, the powerful mayor of Ventspils, whose party Latvijai un Ventspilij allied with the Union of Farmers and Greens (ZZS) and who was the ZZS candidate to the Prime Minister’s position. Heavy advertising aided the People’s Party in winning the elections and helped the alliance between the First Party of Latvia and ‘Latvia’s Way’ to gain ten seats in the Saeima. Russian-language television bias is believed to have helped the ‘Harmony Centre’ to gain the upper hand in its rivalry with the ‘For Human Rights in United Latvia’ bloc, a once-powerful umbrella organization of Eastern Slavic political parties.

These characteristics run in contrast to the 2009 EP campaign, where fairly limited funding was used and the campaign itself was rather peaceful and uneventful. However, the focus on domestic issues draws the two elections together.
The 2009 European elections

European Parliament elections in Latvia were held on Saturday, 6 June 2009, concurrently with the local elections to choose representatives of the newly created municipalities. Seventeen slates were submitted and registered for the elections by the CEC to compete for eight EP mandates. Should the Lisbon Treaty be ratified, Latvia’s representation in the EP would be extended to nine deputies. As these elections were held concurrently with the municipal elections, the turnout was considerably higher than in 2004 and reached 53.7 per cent of registered voters, compared to 53.8 per cent of registered voters in municipal elections, and 41.3 per cent in the 2004 EP elections. According to the official CEC data, turnout in the EP elections tended to be higher in and around major urban centres. This is a reverse trend from the 2004 elections, when turnout tended to be higher outside major urban centres, apart from the capital city of Riga, where the turnout level was slightly above 44 per cent, signalling a slightly higher share of ethnic Latvians turning out to vote in 2004.
9.1 Party lists and manifestos

All major parties and a number of junior challengers fielded their candidate lists, offering voters a rather wide choice. Four parties quite openly targeted Eastern Slavic voters: ‘Harmony Centre’, ‘For Human Rights in United Latvia’ (FHRUL), the Osipov Party, and ‘For the Motherland!’ Of the four, only FHRUL had an incumbent representative in the European Parliament – Tatyana Zhdanok. The cornerstone of the FHRUL platform was the protection and further expansion of the rights of ethnic minorities, with a particular emphasis on the consolidation of the Russian diaspora in Europe which, according to the platform, was notably furthered by Zhdanok by means of creating the EU Russian-speakers Alliance. The party promised to continue its activities aimed at ‘informing residents of other countries about the Russian minority in Latvia’ (FHRUL, 2009). The party also set the goal of granting Latvia’s non-citizens voting rights in municipal and European Parliament elections as well as the same legal requirements for employment in another EU Member State. The party pledged loyalty to the European Free Alliance and a plethora of minority organizations. It also advocated the deepening of EU integration by launching a transfer of welfare and education policies to Brussels. FHRUL also called for closer cooperation with Russia by means of setting up a joint Nordic-Russian energy market and establishing a visa-free travel regime between Russia and the EU.

The Osipov party, named after its leader, is at times seen as an extremist fringe competitor to FHRUL. This political organization tried to ride the wave generated by the deepening economic crisis by blaming both Latvia’s political establishment and the EU bureaucracy for the country’s problems. The party positioned itself as populist and clearly against the EU when calling for compensation for the economic and humanitarian losses suffered by Latvia during the process of EU accession. Similar to the FHRUL, the Osipov party advocated the interests of Eastern Slavic minorities and Latvia’s non-citizens but went further by promising to do ‘everything possible’ to grant the Russian language the status of an official language in Latvia.

An even stronger strain of Eastern Slavic populism can be detected in the electoral platform of the ‘For the Motherland!’ party. Not only was its platform as brief and pro-Slavic as the Osipov party, but it also promised to get the European Parliament to pass a resolution urging Latvia to grant citizenship unconditionally to all non-citizens within a three-year time frame. ‘For the Motherland!’ also pledged to support petitioners against Latvia in the European Court of Human Rights. Moreover, it opposed US military ambitions in Europe and the deployment of US missile shield components in Poland and the Czech Republic.

The ‘Harmony Centre’ (HC) party emerged as the most moderate of the four and the one that placed the highest premium on social welfare issues. Although the HC noted in its platform the eradication of all kinds of discrimination and the adoption of a binding EU-wide document on minority rights and linguistic pluralism along with granting Latvia’s non-citizens voting rights in the municipal and European Parliament elections, its main focus was the strengthening of the EU’s social dimension. In particular, the HC endorsed the EU-wide regulation of the minimum wage, pensions and social benefits, access to health care, and housing. This party also supported increased government regulation of the global financial markets in view of the world financial crisis. Like some of its Slavic competitors, it endorsed deeper EU integration.

The other 13 parties were not explicitly pro-Slavic and appeared to be more geared towards the ethnic Latvian vote. The right-of-centre ‘New Era’ party, that had become part of the governing coalition a few months before the elections and held the post of Prime Minister, fought to retain its two-deputy EP representation by offering a rather conventional platform: the accelerated economic development of Latvia by means of lower taxes and more generous EU funding for projects in Latvia. It also promised to work towards the equalization of farm
subsidies between new and Old Member States and the levelling out of health care standards throughout the Union. This party advocated a joint EU energy policy aimed at increasing energy efficiency and decreasing the EU’s dependence on Russian energy supplies. That coupled well with the party’s stated concern for the environment and further development of a knowledge-based society.

The main rival of the ‘New Era’ party on the domestic political scene and its main coalition partner, the People’s Party, spoke of a crisis of values and offered a package of what it recognized as Conservative values: liberty, family, solidarity amongst states, and Latvian national identity. The operationalization of these values led to something familiar: more generous EU funding, the equalization of farm subsidies, the diversification of energy supplies, and energy efficiency. However, the People’s Party also emphasized stricter rules for immigration and paid more attention to measures aimed at strengthening Latvian national identity amidst the processes of globalization and Europeanization.

Another participant in the ruling coalition, the ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’/LNNK union (FF/LNNK), has had a long-standing image as the most Nationalist party amongst mainstream political organizations, and it postulated the country’s economic and social development as subordinated to the overall goal of protecting and strengthening Latvian national identity. It reanimated softly protectionist slogans, but heavily criticized protectionist attempts by Old Member States. The standard promises of diversification of energy sources and a swifter influx of EU funding into Latvia’s economy were coupled with a rejection of the EU’s federalization and the granting any voting rights to Latvia’s non-citizens.

Yet, the FF/LNNK might have lost its trademark issue of fighting the consequences of Latvia’s occupation to the Civic Union (CU), established by politicians who split away from the FF/LNNK and ‘New Era’ in early 2008. Ģirts Valdis Kristovskis and Inese Vaidere, who were at the helm of anti-occupation activities in the EP, became core members of the CU. Although the CU did emphasize the occupation issue, it also fielded the standard slogans on the diversification of energy resources, more generous EU funding, the equalization of farm subsidies, and the de-bureaucratization of the EU. However, it highlighted the need for fair competition and free markets, but stricter regulation of financial markets, the implementation of an EU Baltic Sea Region strategy, turning Riga into the centre of the Baltic region, and a strong transatlantic partnership.

The ‘Everything for Latvia!’ party, small but youthful and quite visible on the web, consolidated the occupation issue as its raison d’être, but somewhat lacked the sophistication of the FF/LNNK and the CU; it oscillated between legalistic and normative statements about the obligations of Russia and EU Member States with regard to addressing the consequences of Soviet occupation. It endorsed protectionism and a tougher immigration policy, but objected to a federal EU and the Lisbon Treaty.

However, the most pronounced anti-European view was manifested in the platform of the Party of Action, a political reincarnation of ‘Eurosceptics’ party that suffered a miserable defeat at the polls in 2004. It heavily and extensively criticized the terms of Latvia’s accession to the EU, as well as the feeble defence of Latvia’s national interests in Brussels, but offered nothing more than autarchic policies that would somehow lead to the development of knowledge-intensive industry in Latvia.

An association of minor parties under the joint name of Libertas.lv and led by incumbent MEP Guntars Krasts voiced a more sophisticated Euroscepticism drawing on the Libertas platform and criticizing Brussels for excessive bureaucracy and lack of transparency and accountability. It pledged to remove obstacles to the free market and entrepreneurship within the EU and echoed familiar themes about a joint EU energy policy and the equalization of farm subsidies.
Latvia

The Union of Greens and Farmers lacked innovation and spoke diplomatically about the equalization of farm subsidies, but explicitly criticized the gradual disappearance of local farm produce from the shelves of the country’s grocery stores. It also called for a sustainable energy policy co-financed by EU funds, refused deeper EU integration, and showed concern for the ethnic identity of Latvians.

The Union of the First Party of Latvia and ‘Latvia’s Way’ offered a mix of strong pro-business slogans, such as an increase in export subsidies, the introduction of the euro as of 2012, the opening of labour markets in all EU countries by 2012, and an increase in emission quotas, with Conservative social values, such as family and religion, along with the standard issue of a joint energy policy.

The Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Latvia drew partly on the platform of the European Socialists and called for the equalization of social welfare standards, stronger control over global financial markets, and further investment in the education system. This party also supported a joint EU foreign policy and aid to EU-aspirant countries in Eastern Europe.

The ‘Society for Different Politics’, which claimed to be a Social Liberal party and which was perceived as a direct competitor to the Social Democrats, spoke of solidarity and participation in EU decision-making as key to serving Latvia’s national interests best. It emphasized a pro-active employment policy financed by Brussels and a reconsideration of the Lisbon strategy, along with the swift introduction of the euro in Latvia.

9.2 Electoral campaign

Elections were held in the middle of one of the deepest economic crises since Latvia regained its independence in 1991. Moreover, international organizations such as the IMF and the EU played a major role in the management of the crisis by means of requiring substantial public spending cuts and structural reforms in education and health care in return for loans totalling €7 billion. Whilst it should have been clear to voters that spending would be cut and their welfare would be affected, concrete proposals for severe wage reductions and the first round of spending cuts exceeding €700 million that had been negotiated with the above international actors were unveiled only after the elections in an obvious attempt to avoid major unrest on the eve of the two elections. However, in a conversation with the author 11 October 2011, the Prime Minister’s spokesperson denied any intention of managing the electoral cycle and emphasized the desire of Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis to negotiate the best possible deal with international lenders that eventually ran into insurmountable obstacles.

Given the concurrence and the high importance that elections to the Riga City Council have always had in Latvian politics, political parties focussed their attention on the municipal elections. Furthermore, these were the first municipal elections after administrative territorial reform, as a consequence of which the number of municipalities was reduced from more than 500 to 109 and the second tier of municipalities was eliminated altogether. According to Latvian election law, only registered political parties could submit candidate lists in most of the new, amalgamated municipalities.

On a par with the small number of EP deputies to be elected from Latvia, eight in total, the above factors contributed significantly to the relatively low interest that political parties showed in the EP elections. Parties launched their EP campaigns rather late, two to three weeks before polling day, and many of these were hardly visible to the wider public. A number of parties placed their second echelon of leaders in the top positions on their EP slates, but the First Party of Latvia/‘Latvia’s Way’, in opposition since March 2009, fielded a former Prime Minister and another former member of the cabinet, whilst the Civic Union placed a former commissioner and an MEP at the helm of its list.

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Most of the incumbent EP deputies ran again, but their party affiliation had at times been switched to reflect the changing party landscape in Latvia. Georgs Andrejevs (ALDE) elected on the Latvia’s Way list in 2004 chose to side with the recently created ‘Society for Different Politics’, a political organization that called itself Social Liberal. Inese Vaidere (UEN: ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’/LNNK) joined another newcomer, the right-of-the-centre Civic Union. Guntars Krasts (UEN: ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’/LNNK) chose to head the Libertas list in Latvia. Ģirts Valdis Kristovskis (UEN: ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’/LNNK) opted to run for the City Council of Rīga on the list of the Civic Union, whilst Aldis Kušķis (EPP-ED: ‘New Era’) refrained from running.

Although the platforms of many political parties running in the EP elections shared a concern for energy policy, farm subsidies, and identity issues, the actual EP election campaign lacked a clear focus and no issue could be singled out as dominant. ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’/LNNK fought its arch-enemy, ‘For Human Rights in United Latvia’, on issues of ethnic policy. The pro-Moscow ‘Harmony Centre’ and the Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Latvia were competing for the status of the most Social Democratic party. The Latvian branch of the Libertas movement was pushing EU transparency and accountability issues against a mildly Eurosceptic background, but hardly had any concerned interlocutors. All parties tried to address the economic problems Latvia faced, but largely limited themselves to an emphasis on accelerated and more efficient use of EU funds for sustainable economic recovery, better social protection, and the implementation of structural reforms as suggested by international lenders. European issues, including the Lisbon Treaty, further enlargement and the accession of Turkey, and foreign policy and terrorism, never reached the top of the political agenda during the campaign.

Many parties effectively merged their EP campaigns and their centrally run municipal campaigns, which largely focussed on who was the politician best suited to be Mayor of Rīga. However, this discussion turned out to be beauty contest between party leaders rather than a competition between programmes on how to deal with the severe economic crisis at the local level.

Although the campaign spending limit was notably increased before the 2009 elections and parties had an opportunity to amalgamate their spending for two concurrent elections, the 2009 campaign saw a more intensive use of the internet for political purposes in an attempt to reduce campaign costs and to tap into younger segments of society that have traditionally displayed lower levels of turnout. The most popular social networking site in Latvia, draugiem.lv, launched its elections rubric in cooperation with Jānis Domburs, one of the better-known analytical journalists, to scrutinize party platforms, involve parties in online discussions, and open them to more informal interaction with society. However, the success of this endeavor remains a topic for discussion. Diena, one of the most popular Latvian language dailies, overhauled its website in April 2009 and made a conscious attempt to expand its user-generated content, including blogs by politicians. As a consequence, the number of party-linked bloggers exploded but their activity has somewhat dimmed since the elections.

9.3 Electoral results

The turnout for the 2009 European Parliament elections jumped by 12 percentage points compared to the inaugural 2004 figures. However, this cannot be taken as a sign of immense growth in EP popularity or significance for voters in Latvia. The EP elections were held concurrently with municipal elections, and the turnout figure is closer to the turnout pattern in municipal elections. Therefore, it would be only reasonable to regard the increase as a function of concurrent elections.
Table 23.6 Turnout at EP elections in Latvia: 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registered voters</th>
<th>1,484,717</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Votes cast</td>
<td>797,219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid votes</td>
<td>791,597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnout</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 23.7 EP election results in Latvia: 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party/List</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Seats*</th>
<th>Vote %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>192,537</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>154,894</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCTVL</td>
<td>76,436</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPP/LC</td>
<td>59,326</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB/LNNK</td>
<td>58,991</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JL</td>
<td>52,751</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertas</td>
<td>34,073</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCP</td>
<td>30,444</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSDSP</td>
<td>30,004</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZZS</td>
<td>29,463</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VL</td>
<td>22,240</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TP</td>
<td>21,968</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDz</td>
<td>4,409</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party of Action</td>
<td>3,373</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KDS</td>
<td>2,361</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OP</td>
<td>2,102</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAP</td>
<td>1,712</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: *After the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, an additional seat was filled by a representative of the Civic Union.

Table 23.8 EP election results of major parties in Latvia: 2004–2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party/List</th>
<th>2004 vote share %</th>
<th>2009 vote share %</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TB/LNNK</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>-22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JL</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>-13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCTVL</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TP</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>-3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>-2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPP</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSDSP</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSP</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>+13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSP</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZZS</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>+24.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The vote count produced some surprising and, perhaps, trailblazing results. Two members of the ruling coalition, the Union of Greens and Farmers as well as the People’s Party, failed to elect any MEPs, despite the fact the latter fielded an incumbent MEP as its top candidate. The Prime Minister’s party won one EP seat, whilst a junior coalition partner, the Civic Union, came out at the top, winning two seats and was poised to obtain one more seat after the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. Parties advocating the interests of Eastern Slavic minorities, such as the ‘Harmony Centre’ and ‘For Human Rights in United Latvia’, performed considerably better than expected and won three seats in total. Ironically, a person convicted for treason against the Republic of Latvia will represent Latvia in the EP. The two big campaigners, the First Party of Latvia/‘Latvia’s Way’ and ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’/LNNK, each obtained one seat. Although Libertas was rather close to passing the electoral threshold, the charisma and reputation of former Prime Minister and incumbent MEP Guntars Krasts proved insufficient to clear the hurdle.

The number of elected women increased by one, as compared to the 2004 EP contest. One may note that two of them were incumbent EP deputies, whilst the third was a former Minister of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, all elected candidates were elected officials beforehand, apart from Alfrēds Rubiks, a former high-ranking Communist functionary who had headed the Socialist Party of Latvia for many years. Due to his close involvement in the Communist Party until the last days of the Soviet Union, Rubiks was forbidden to run in legislative or municipal elections.

9.4 Campaign finance

Given the notable impact of campaigning upon election results, as seen in a number of recent Latvian elections, particular attention was paid to campaign spending by major parties. Moreover, Latvia’s Anti-corruption Bureau had recently not only acquired a new head but also a new instrument to oversee campaigning: it now had a right to suspend a party’s media advertising if the party has exceeded spending limits according to the bureau’s calculations, approximately €300,000 per candidate list in European elections. The First Party of Latvia/‘Latvia’s Way’ and ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’/LNNK campaigned most vigorously and the former came very close to the maximum amount (Kažoka, 2009). However, the Anti-corruption Bureau announced a few days after the elections that no violations had been detected. Total spending in 2009 for both the European and municipal elections amounted to 2.8 million lats, approximately €4 million (KNAB, 2009).

10 Theoretical interpretation of Euro-elections

10.1 Second-Order Election theory

The Latvian case offers evidence in favour of Second-Order Election theory, especially with reference to the 2009 EP contest (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). In view of the short EP campaigns of most political parties, two to three weeks before election day, and the wide presence of ‘second-echelon’ leaders on the EP candidate lists of most major parties, the 2009 EP election appears not to have been prioritized by political parties themselves. This ran in a stark contrast to the 2006 parliamentary election, when campaigns were launched several months before the elections, and also in contrast to the 2009 municipal campaign in the capital city, which was launched more than a month before voting day. Moreover, turnout was lower than in the last parliamentary election in 2006 by nearly eight percentage points, and might have been even lower in absence of concurrent municipal elections.
### Table 23.9 List of Latvian MEPs: seventh legislature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>National party</th>
<th>Political group</th>
<th>Professional background</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ivars Godmanis</td>
<td>LPP/LC</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>Saeima deputy, former PM</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Budget, member; Regional Development, substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra Kalniète</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>EPP</td>
<td>Saeima deputy</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Internal Market and Consumer Protection, member; Agriculture and Rural Development, substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arturs Knīšānis Kariņš</td>
<td>JL</td>
<td>EPP</td>
<td>Saeima deputy</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Industry, Research and Energy, member; Economic and Monetary Affairs, substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleksandrs Mirskis</td>
<td>TSC</td>
<td>S&amp;D</td>
<td>Saeima deputy</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Foreign Affairs, member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubiks Alfrēds</td>
<td>LSP</td>
<td>EUN/NGL</td>
<td>Party chairman</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Agriculture and Rural Development, member; Transport and Tourism, substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inese Vaidere</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>EPP</td>
<td>MEP</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Foreign Affairs, member; Human Rights, member; International Trade, substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberts Žīle</td>
<td>TB/LNNK</td>
<td>ECR</td>
<td>MEP</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Transport and Tourism, member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatjana Ždanoka</td>
<td>PCTVL</td>
<td>Greens/EFA</td>
<td>MEP</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, member; Employment and Social Affairs, substitute</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, most successful were: (1) parties that had been relatively recently established, such as the Civic Union, and were scarcely represented in the government that came into being just three months before the elections; or, (2) parties that were in opposition, such as ‘Harmony Centre’ and the FHRUL. Some of the more successful parties also held fewer MP positions in the Saeima: the Civic Union had a faction of six deputies and the ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’/LNNK was also represented with six MPs. Large parties in the Saeima, such as the People’s Party with 21 seats and the Union of Greens and Farmers with 17 seats, either failed to win any MEP positions or managed to garner enough support to win only one MEP, for example New Era with 18 seats. ‘Harmony Centre’ constitutes an exception here, as this party had 17 seats in the national Parliament but still won two MEP mandates.

Parties holding ministerial positions since 2006 obtained only two EP mandates. In line with the SOE model, this can be seen as a punishment of the mentioned parties for the catastrophic management of the country over the preceding few years.

The ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’/LNNK suffered the greatest losses, not only because it had been in the governing coalition since the 2006 elections, but also because the party split in early 2008 and three incumbent MEPs left the party to establish the Civic Union, which was the most successful in 2009 despite the fact that only one, and perhaps less popular, incumbent ran on its list. The only party that clearly gained support was ‘Harmony Centre’, a long-standing opposition organization. However, one needs to take into account that, in fact, it is an amalgamation of four parties and some synergy may have taken place. Likewise in the 2004 EP elections, opposition parties and newcomers registered a victory in Latvia.

Although seven out of nine incumbents had run in the 2009 elections, only three succeeded. This can be taken as a sign of the notable general electoral volatility in Latvia and volatility in the EP elections.

10.2 Europe Salience theory

By contrast, most hypotheses of the Europe Salience model could not be corroborated in Latvia. The EP election campaign had little to do with Europe and/or the European issues of the day. Parties were often pursuing their domestic agendas and were merely using the EP campaign as another arena, a continuation of the 2004 pattern (de Vreese et al., 2006). Eastern Slavic parties most often stressed issues related to the problems of Latvia’s non-citizens, whilst ethnic Latvian parties reacted by advocating a strong EU policy vis-à-vis Russia and the need to recognize Latvia’s occupation in a broader and more far-reaching fashion. Leftist parties called for EU-wide social welfare standards, whilst the right-of-centre parties advocated for the swifter consumption of EU structural funds earmarked for Latvia. All major parties were in favour of more generous EU financial support to Latvia, and many of them spoke of a revamped energy policy, indirectly aiming to weaken Russia’s influence on the EU and its Member States. Parties addressed immigration and environmental issues marginally at best, and these issues were absent from public political discussions during the campaign. Hence, it is difficult to see noteworthy support for the ‘Europe Salience’ thesis, as proposed by Ferrara and Weishaupt (2004).

The environmentally conscious Union of Greens and Farmers lost its support, whilst the anti-immigration ‘Everything for Latvia!’ gained nearly 3 per cent of the vote, which was an improvement by nearly 1.5 percentage points compared to the 2006 parliamentary elections. However, this surge can hardly be attributed to the party’s position on the immigration issue, given the miniscule number of immigrants and the low political salience of this issue in Latvia.

Although right-of-centre parties garnered the most votes, one has to recognize that the performance of centre-left parties improved in 2009. Parties that could be considered extremist, in
Latvia

relation to Latvian politics, failed to gain any noteworthy support compared to the last parliamentary elections. These observations do not provide evidence for the Europe Salience model as developed elsewhere (Hooghe et al., 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Taggart, 1998).

Another indication of the weakness of this theory was the miserable defeat of the openly anti-EU Party of Action that garnered less than 0.5 per cent of the total vote. Moreover, the equally poor showing amongst Euro sceptics was characteristic of the 2004 EP elections and the 2006 parliamentary elections as well.

Overall, the EP elections appear to have been low on the priority list of both parties and voters. This appears to stem from rational-institutional considerations: Latvia has a small representation in the European Parliament; people seem to have little credibility in MEPs’ ability to make Latvia’s voice heard and taken into account in this forum; other institutions, such as the Parliament and the government, may have more direct impact upon EU policy-making; and a gap between the EU’s political agenda and the economically collapsing Latvian agenda appears to be wide and to contribute not only to the dominance of domestic political issues in the EP campaign, but also to voter detachment or even alienation from EU institutions on the grounds of their perceived irrelevance. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of any sense of mandate from Latvia’s citizens in the absence of mass survey data attesting to the contrary, which only confirms observations by Hix and Marsh (2007) that:

citizens do not primarily use European Parliament elections to express their preferences on the policy issues on the EU agenda or to reward or punish the MEPs or the parties in the European Parliament for their performance in the EU.

References

Primary sources


Secondary sources


