

from **Corinne Deloy**
Translated by Helen Levy

**Results**

Andris Berzins replaces Valdis Zatlers as President of the Republic of Latvia.

On 2nd June Andris Berzins (Union of Latvian Greens and Farmers' Party, ZZS) became the new President of the Republic of Latvia. The former chair of Latvijas Unibanka, won the votes of 53 of the 100 members of the Saeima, the only chamber in Parliament. His rival, outgoing President Valdis Zatlers, supported by the government led by Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, Unity (V), won 41 votes. In the first round of voting Andris Berzins won 50 votes and outgoing President Valdis Zatlers 43. One MP was absent from parliament in this election.

Valdis Zatlers' Thunderbolt Decision

Undeniably this result is a defeat for the coalition (Unity) of head of government Valdis Dombrovskis that rallies New Era led by Solvita Aboltina, the Civic Union led by Girts Valdis Kristovskis and the Society for Different Politics (SCP), led by Aigars Stokenbergs. The National Union that rallies All for Latvia, (VL) led by Ratvis Dzintars and the Union for the Fatherland and Freedom (TB/LNNK), led by Roberts Zile also gave its support to the outgoing president.

The election result can mainly be explained by Valdis Zatlers' thunderbolt decision, just as he was running favourite in the presidential election, to dissolve parliament five days before the vote. Some MPs turned away from the head of State, who also said that he was aware of the effect that his decision might have on his chances of being re-elected to office.

On 28th May last the outgoing President was interviewed on the TV channel LNT so that he could explain his decision to his fellow countrymen; article 48 of the Constitution allows him to dissolve the Saeima. "I want to give hope that things will change. We must end the behaviour which goes against the interests of our people and our country. This is why I want to tell you that I have signed the presidential decree asking for the dissolution of parliament and have submitted this to the Constitutional Court. The decree takes immediate effect," declared the Head of State.

Valdis Zatlers justified his action by MPs refusal on 26th

May to lift parliamentary immunity on MP Ainars Slesers, the leader of Latvia's First/Latvian Way (LPP-LC) together with that of Riga's deputy mayor, (and chair of the town's free port) who are suspected of paying out and receiving bribes, money laundering and embezzlement. The MPs vote prevented the prosecution from undertaking a search of their homes. Several businesses, including the free port of Riga and Euroline had already been searched. Ainars Slesers denies however that these companies, which do not appear in his tax declaration, belong to him and maintains that they were the property of his business partner, Viesturs Koziols.

On 20th May last the Anti-Corruption Bureau (KNAB) launched an inquiry into allegations of money laundering, corruption and fraudulent business transaction, embezzlement and false declarations which involved several politicians. In a search undertaken at Aivars Lembergs's home – he has been the Mayor of Ventspils since 1988 and is being prosecuted for corruption and money laundering – the police seized a certain number of documents that mention former Prime Minister (1995-1997 and 1999-2000) and leader of the People's Party (TP), Andris Skele and former Minister, Ainars Slesers. The parties led by these two men joined forces on 26th April 2010 within a group called "For a Good Latvia".

"The Saeima's vote is an alarm bell that reveals a serious conflict between the legislative and legal powers, two of the three mainstays on which our country is based," said outgoing President Valdis Zatlers, who also

said that it was not the first time that the Saeima had defied the legal system referring to MPs opposition to the re-election of Janis Maizitis as General Prosecutor in April 2010. "Parliament has lacked respect and has shown its defiance with regard to the competence of the legal authorities and has defended the interests of a restricted group of people rather than the State. Latvians have made great sacrifices – was this so that the State could be robbed? Politicians have to find a new compromise with the people so that they can act in the public's interest," added the Head of State.

The coalition, Unity, led by Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis approved the lifting of parliamentary immunity on Ainars Slesers on 26th May whilst its government partner, the ZZS of which Ainars Lembergs, also under suspicion, is a central figure - voted against. The head of government Valdis Dombrovskis said that he had had a serious conversation with his allies whom he accused of having done everything they could to ensure that the law on political party funding was not approved. "We have reached a threshold and the government coalition will not survive another vote like this. This is a yellow card and two yellow cards equal a red," said the Prime Minister to MPs of ZZS.

To be effective the dissolution hoped for by outgoing President Valdis Zatlers has to be confirmed by a popular referendum. This will take place on 23rd July. Latvians will have to answer the following question: "Are you in favour or against the dissolution of Parliament?" If they answer "yes" a general election will be organised within the two months following the consultation to elect a new Parliament. If they vote against the head of State will have to resign and the Saeima will remain

in office. No minimum turnout is required to validate the referendum result that will be decided by a simple majority vote.

Who is the new President of the Republic?

Aged 67, Andris Berzins comes from Nitaure, a town in the province of Vidzeme. He is an engineering graduate of the Polytechnic Institute of Riga and he also has a degree in economy from the University of Latvia. In 1990 he was elected to the Supreme Council where he was a member of the People's Front and during which time he voted in support of the independence of Latvia on 4th May. Andris Berzins was appointed Chair of Latvijas Unibanka in 1993, a position he maintained until 2004, the year when the establishment was purchased by the Swedish bank SEB. In December 2006 until April 2009 he chaired the board of the national electricity company, Latvenergo. Elected onto the town council of Riga with the Union of Latvian Greens and Farmers' Party, ZZS (of which he was not even a member at the time) during local elections on 13th March 2005 Andris Berzins entered the Saeima after the elections of 2nd October 2010.

Valdis Zatlers, who was the first President of the Republic to use his power to dissolve parliament, is now a hero in the eyes of some since he decided to convene a referendum on the issue. Others regret however that the Head of State took the risk of plunging a country, which is struggling to recover growth after having suffered a violent economic crisis, back into turmoil.

Andris Berzins will take office on 8th July next. His first task will be to organise the referendum on 23rd July on the dissolution of the Saeima.

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