

European
Elections monitorfrom **Corinne Deloy**
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7 days before
the pool

Harmony Centre (the leftwing opposition) ahead in the polls for the general elections in Latvia on 17th September

13 political parties^[1] (12 of which are putting forward candidates in the five country's regions: Riga (30 seats), Vidzeme (27), Latgale (15), Zemgale (15), Kurzeme (13)) are standing in the general elections on 17th September next in Latvia, i.e. the same number as in the previous election that took place on 2nd October 2010. 1,092 people will be standing for a seat in the Saeima, the only chamber in Parliament. 77 polling stations will be open for Latvians living abroad.

The chairman of the Central Electoral Committee (CVK), Arnis Cimdars has suggested that Latvians have the possibility of fulfilling their civic duty during the three days prior to the election to increase turnout. He also said he was against internet voting, that is used in neighbouring Estonia, believing that the network was not safe enough for an operation like this.

According to Arnis Cimdars, two thirds of those registered (67%) are due to vote in the election. This figure is based on the turnout recorded in the referendum on 23rd July last on the dissolution of parliament (44.73%), a comparatively high figure in the light of previous popular consultations. "There are new, stronger parties who have renewed their candidates' lists, which should influence turnout," he declared.

After the referendum on 23rd July last (94.30% of the electorate voted in support of the dissolution of the Saeima), the general election should see the decline of the influence of the oligarchs, the three main representatives being Aivars Lembergs (Green and Farmers' Union, ZZS), mayor of Ventspils since 1988, under prosecution for corruption and money laundering, Andris Skele, leader of the People's Party (TP), member of the electoral coalition "For a Good Latvia", former Prime Minister (1995-1997 and 1999-2000), and Ainars Slesers, leader of Latvia's First-Latvia's Way (LPP-LC), former Deputy Mayor of Riga, suspected of paying out and accepting bribes, money laundering, of make false declarations and of abuse of power. Moreover, the voters do not base their choice on

the economic programme of political parties. They still prefer to vote for personalities.

Finally the election on 17th September may see the victory of a leftwing opposition party. Indeed Harmony Centre (SC) led by the Mayor of Riga, Nils Usakovs, may very well win the greatest number of votes and participate in the next government.

Many political and economic analysts believe that victory on the party of Harmony Centre would threaten Latvia's financial stability and its economic recovery. Nils Usakovs' party has indeed declared that if it takes part in government it would ask for the negotiation of the terms of reimbursement of the 7.5 billion € loan (due in 2014) granted by the IMF and that it would put a stop to some of the cuts that have been planned to reduce the budgetary deficit. Harmony Centre has set the deficit goal at 5% or 6% instead of the 3% (which would match the obligations set by the EU's Stability and Growth Pact) demanded by the outgoing government led by Valdis Dombrovskis (Vienotība, Unity, V). Latvia adopted severe austerity measures to regain control of its finances, to emerge from the economic crisis, which affected it badly, so that it can adopt the single currency in 2014 (which is supported by most political parties). Harmony Centre may challenge this austerity policy if it comes to power.

"The prospect of seeing Harmony Centre in office is quite high," says Nils Muiznieks, director of the Social and Political Research Institute at the University of Latvia, adding, "they really

1. <http://www.cvk.lv/cgi-bin/wdbcgiw/base/komisijas2010.cvkand11.sak>

hope to govern. The party will sign unconditionally to enter government in spite of what its members say today." According to Edgars Rinkevics, former head of the cabinet of President of the Republic, Valdis Zatlers, the next government will comprise Unity (V) and the Zatlers Reform Party (ZRP) which will join forces with Harmony Centre or with National Alliance, a new party that emerged after the merger of the Fatherland Union and Freedom (TB/LNNK) and of the far right party, All for Latvia (VL). Janis Ikstens, political expert, believes that Unity and Harmony Centre will find it difficult to come to agreement because of their differences over the economy and foreign policy. Foreign Minister Girts Valdis Kristovskis (V) said that he thought it vital for the position he held to remain in the hands of someone on the right. In his opinion, Harmony Centre has not shown itself to be a sufficiently mature political force to undertake such responsibilities and that it would be unable to "defend the interests of the Latvia nation". According to Wikileaks, the USA has said it is concerned about the increasing influence of Harmony Centre and of its possible participation in the next Latvian government.

Support to economic reform is only one of the conditions set by Unity on Harmony Centre (if it came out ahead in the election) for it to be able to join government. The acknowledgement of Latvia's occupation by the USSR between 1945 and 1991 is also vital issue for the Prime Minister's Party. "Admitting occupation would affect our electorate. Everyone who came to Latvia after 1940 would then have to consider themselves as occupiers and witness a reduction of their rights," declared Boriss Cilevics, MP (SC).

Latvians comprised three quarters (77%) of the country's inhabitants in 1935 and only half in (52%) in 1989. They now represent 60%. The Russian speaking community comprises 600,000 people i.e. one third of the country's inhabitants. According to figures released by the Citizenship and Migratory Affairs Bureau, nearly 335,000 of them are without a nationality (715,000 were in this position on independence in 1991). Most of them have "non-Latvian citizens'" passports. Their status gives them the right to live in the country and have access to social services. However they cannot vote in the national or local elections or work in the police force or the army and they have to have a visa to travel to some countries.

On the initiative of "For Human Rights in a United Latvia" (PCTVL), which defends the rights of the Russian speaking minority, the "non-citizens"

launched a campaign to collate signatures to request the organisation of a referendum on their access to Latvian citizenship. "We call on all of those who support us and all Latvian citizens to take part in the collation of these signatures to organise a referendum, to put an end to ethnic discrimination and to restore fair relations between all Latvians. We are asking for universal voting rights and the unity of the inhabitants of Latvia," reads the appeal.

"It is our aim to prevent the oligarchs and economic interests from influencing Latvian politics and the government. Our party is completely independent of the businessmen and of any economic interest," declared Valdis Zatlers, former President of the Republic (2007-2011) and leader of the Zatlers Reform Party, for which Edmunds Sprudz is standing for the position of Prime Minister.

"Valdis Dombrovskis's second government (elected less than a year ago!) was unable to meet the electorate's expectations and the referendum result of 23rd July is not flattering," indicates Valdis Zatlers. Leader of the Saeima, Solvita Aboltina (V) answered that the result of the popular consultation was especially the expression of the opinion that Latvians have of the politicians who have governed the country for the last 20 years and of their desire to see things change quickly. She quoted the return to budgetary balance as the greatest success of the government led by Valdis Dombrovskis.

Solvita Aboltina has compared the electoral promises made by the Greens' and Farmers' Union on retirement pensions with those made to soldiers and farmers during the Bolshevik period. "It is easy to promise people that they will be given everything they want but political leaders have to take reality into account" she declared. She quoted the Zatlers Reform Party as the one whose programme most resembled that of Unity. The leader of parliament did however criticise the people chosen by Zatlers's party to take up ministerial posts, qualifying them as "incompetent in their sectors". "Political leaders have to be able to govern together. We need to develop our country which we might only do if we succeed in forming a stable government," she indicated.

"Those who supported Valdis Zatlers during the referendum hope that he will change their lives. He will not do it and that is what I'm frightened of" declared Ivars Ijabs, political scientist at the University of Latvia.

Roberts Zile (TB/LNNK) said that he would decide after the results on 17th September whether to

remain with or quit the National Alliance. He has suspended his co-presidency of the party (which he undertook with Raitis Dzintars) whose radical nature and nationalism he has said he deplores. Gaidis Berzins is running for the National Alliance for the post of Prime Minister.

Finally, and according to Ainars Slesers, three parties (Latvia's First-Latvia's Way, the Greens' and Farmers' Union and Harmony Centre) could win the majority of seats in parliament on 17th September next. By this he means that Harmony needs Latvia's First/Latvia's Way.

According to the latest polls only 5 parties will rise above the vital 5% threshold necessary to enter parliament.

Harmony Centre is due to come out ahead in

the election, followed by Unity, Zatlers's Reform Party, National Alliance and Greens' and Farmers' Union.

The President of the Republic, Andris Berzins said on 7th September that he would not start negotiations to form a government before 28th September next, the day on which he returns from the UN General Assembly in New York. "These ten days will be used by the parties to come to agreement. I do not see any problem in this. Negotiations will start on 28th September, everything will be done on time and the parties will be ready," he said.

In line with the Latvian Constitution the Saeima elected on 17th September next will hold its first session the following month, i.e. before 17th October.

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