

Who will succeed Egils Levits as President of the Republic of Latvia?

On 31 May, the 100 members of the Saeima, the single chamber of Parliament, will elect Egils Levits' successor as President of the Republic of Latvia. The outgoing head of state decided on 11 May not to seek a second term in office, although he had applied for it on 19 April. He had obtained the support of his party, the National Alliance (NA), and of New Unity (JV), the party of Prime Minister Arturs Krisjanis Karins. However, he is not running for re-election because of the lack of agreement among the coalition government parties on his candidacy. He had even claimed that this situation might ultimately enable a *"coalition of parties linked to a pro-Russian oligarchy"* to be decisive in the presidential election. *"Nobody has a clear majority. In this situation, it is possible that parties that do not defend Latvia's Western values will play a decisive role in the election of the President of the Republic. It would be naive to imagine that these political parties have no political intentions. Their votes would certainly come at a high cost to us,"* said Egils Levits.

The outgoing President of the Republic had also asked the other declared candidate, Uldis Pilens, founder and leader of the United List (AS), a party belonging to the government of Arturs Krisjanis Karins, to withdraw in order to allow for a candidacy involving all governmental parties, which would be in the interest of the Latvian state.

CANDIDATES IN THE RUNNING

3 people are officially candidates for the presidency of the Republic:

- Edgars Rinkevics (JL), Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2011, a longevity at the head of Latvian diplomacy that he is promoting to access the

presidential office and to best represent the Baltic Republic in international forums. He has been a strong supporter of Ukraine and a severe critic of Russia for many years;

- Uldis Pilens, founder (in 2022) and leader of the United List (AS), supported by Latvia First (LPV);
- Elina Pinto (Progressives, PRO), public governance expert and civil society and Latvian diaspora activist.

The election of the head of state in Latvia is a power game between the different political parties that use this election to increase their influence on the political scene or within the government coalition. For the time being, none of the three candidates in the race has a majority in Parliament.

Aware that alliances will probably be needed to elect a candidate, the United List and the National Alliance have declared themselves opposed to any government reshuffle. The two parties announced that they would not participate in a government coalition with the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS) and the Progressives (PRO), two parties that might try to trade their support for a candidate in exchange for entry into the government. Prime Minister Arturs Krisjanis Karins pointed out that while Edgars Rinkevics is the most qualified candidate to become head of state, his accession to the presidency of the Republic would mean that a replacement for him as foreign minister would be required. It would be very difficult to find a suitable substitute for him. His departure from the chancellery would be a loss for New Unity, of which Edgars Rinkevics is one of the most popular members.

Arturs Krisjanis Karins said that his decision to support Edgars Rinkevics in the 31 May presidential election was based on the need to take a firm stand on strengthening Latvia's internal and external security, maintaining transatlantic ties, defending democracy, Western values and the Latvian language.

For the New Unity candidate, defending the country's security and taking into account the profound changes that have taken place internationally as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine must be the main task of the next President of the Republic. *"My professional experience, skills and education afford me the ability to strengthen the role of the head of state and to unite Latvian society around a common goal: Latvia's security, the guarantee that the country will be respected internationally and that it will become a country of sustainable development,"* said Edgars Rinkevics.

The fact that his candidate *"helped Ukraine and united the population of a country neighbouring Russia with a large ethnic Russian minority against Moscow's aggression"* is a strong argument in favour of Edgars Rinkevics according to New Unity.

THE PRESIDENTIAL FUNCTION

The Latvian Head of State is elected for a 4-year term (renewable once) by an absolute majority of the 100 members of the Saeima. For a long time, the vote was organised by secret ballot, but in 2019 it became public. Each member of parliament is now accountable for his or her vote to his or her constituents and to his or her parliamentary group. This measure aims to strengthen the confidence of citizens in the parliamentary system by increasing its transparency.

The post of President of the Republic is open to any Latvian (without dual citizenship) who is at least 40 years old. Candidates must declare themselves no earlier than 50 days and no later than 45 days before the expiry of the term of office of the incumbent head of state. If none of the candidates receives the required 51 votes for election after two rounds (the required majority is always calculated on the total membership of the Saeima and not on the number of votes cast), a new election is held within two weeks. Candidates then have 5 days to declare themselves. If again none of them obtains an absolute majority, a new election is held under the same conditions as before.

In Latvia, the President of the Republic represents the State throughout the world. He ratifies international treaties, appoints the country's diplomatic representatives and accredits foreign diplomatic representatives. He is the head of the armed forces, heads the National Security Council and has the right of amnesty.

The head of state can propose legislation and hold a referendum on the dissolution of the Saeima. If a majority of voters approve, Parliament is dissolved and new parliamentary elections are held within 2 months. On the other hand, if more than half of the voters oppose the dissolution, the President of the Republic must resign from office and the Saeima elects his successor for the remaining term of the presidency. At the request of at least half of the deputies, the Head of State may be removed from office by Parliament in a closed session if at least two-thirds of its members vote in favour. In this case, the Saeima immediately elects a new President of the Republic.

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