

European
Elections monitor

The Latvians approve en masse the dissolution of their parliament.

from **Corinne Deloy**

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RESULTS

During a referendum on 23rd July the Latvians approved the dissolution of the Saeima, the only chamber of Parliament. More than nine voters in ten (94.03%) answered "yes" to the following question, "Are you for or against the dissolution of the Parliament?" and 5.48% voted against. This consultation followed the announcement on 28th May last by former President of the Republic, Valdis Zatlers, to dissolve the Saeima. This decision had to be confirmed by referendum. Since most Latvians voted "yes", general elections will probably be organised in September.

By approving the decision taken by their former Head of State en masse, the Latvians gave specific voice to their weariness of the corruption which has been undermining their country for many years. "The referendum sets a major precedent for Latvian political life, from now on no parliament will be guaranteed office for the four years of legislature," indicated Aivars Ozolins, political editor at the daily Ir. The director of the opinion pollster SKDS, Arnis Kaktins, stressed that voters would use their vote to express their deep discontent. "However, believing that the vote is simply a protest against the oligarchs would be simplifying matters. Our surveys reveal that the Latvians have been mistrustful and dissatisfied with their parliament for a long time, irrespective of the oligarchs," he added.

Less than half of those registered went to vote; turnout rose to 44.73%. Nils Muiznieks, director of the Advance Social and Political Science Research Institute of Latvia in Riga anticipated this high abstention rate: "turnout will not be great but voters will use this opportunity of the referendum to express their frustration. The Latvians have an incredible poor opinion of their government and the MPs in it," he said.

Janis Urbanovics, leader of the main opposition party, Harmony Centre, called on his countrymen to take part in the referendum. "Latvian citizens do not have enough opportunities to express their opinion about what is happening in their country," he declared. However former President of the Republic (1993-1999) Guntis Ulmanis said that he would not vote on 23rd July. "It is up to the people to decide, not the MPs," he stressed.

"I would like to thank all of those who took part in the referendum. They have clearly said that they want change. There will be change in Latvia and it will change our lives significantly," declared former President Valdis

Zatlers on the announcement of the election results. "I have opened the door to change. Now you will have to pass through it and feel that you can take hold of your own fate," he said on the eve of the referendum, stressing that he had had enough of living "in a country that was based on lies, cynicism and avidity." Girts Valdis Kristovskis, Foreign Minister and leader of Unity (Vienotiba, V) a coalition led by Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, comprising New Era, (JL), the Civic Union and the Society for other politics (SCP) as well as Raivis Dzintars, leader of All for Latvia (VL) and Harmony Centre leader, Janis Urbanovics, said that they would vote "yes" on 23rd July. Andris Skele, the People's Party leader (TP), a member of the electoral coalition, For a Good Latvia, former Prime Minister (1995-1997 and 1999-2000) and also one of the three oligarchs (with Aivars Lembergs and Ainars Slesers) specifically accused by Valdis Zatlers, said that he would vote "no" to the referendum qualifying the dissolution of parliament as "amoral". He also said that the former President had used his power to dissolve parliament to launch his own political career. Aivars Lembergs (Greens and Farmers Union, ZZS), mayor of Ventspils since 1988, who is under prosecution for corruption and money laundering, also said that he was against dissolution. "The referendum is positive for Latvia because it is a part of a move towards democracy by our country," stressed Toms Silins, Vice President of the Council for Foreign Investment in Latvia.

On 9th July last Valdis Zatlers officially announced the creation of his political party, the Zatlers Reform Party (ZRP) that lies to the centre-right of the political scale. The former head of State also created "the Reform Think-Tank" and which will advise his new party. Around 1,000 people have asked to join ZRP. A poll by TNS Latvia for the TV channel LNT,

Referendum in Latvia 23th July 2011

published on 22nd July credits the ZRP with 17.5% of the vote, i.e. as much as Harmony Centre. The two parties would be in the lead in the future general election, followed by Unity that is credited with 9% of the vote. "The Zatlers Reform Party sees a potential partner in Unity," declared Daiga Holma and Reinis Tukiss, the ZRP spokespeople. Valdis Zatlers had also refused any collaboration with the Greens and Farmers Union, a member of the present government led by Valdis Dombrovskis.

The ZRP held its first congress on 23rd July – on the same day as the referendum.

For their part the three parties in the coalition, Unity, decided to merge into one (Unity) – this will take place on 6th August. The opposition parties in the national union coalition, i.e. All for Latvia! led by Ratvis Dzintars and the Union for the Fatherland and Freedom (TB/LNNK) led by Roberts Zile have also chose to merge. Their union will take the name of "All for Latvia!-For the Union of the Fatherland and Freedom" will be led by the two men, Ratvis Dzintars and Roberts Zile. The two parties will however still be presented in the form of a coalition in the next election, since the registration of a political party requires two to

three months in Latvia.

"One of the main aims of the next general elections will be to ensure that the oligarchs and the parties which support them do not enjoy a majority in Parliament," declared Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis. "If this should happen then the initiative of the former president will have been for nought," he added. "The influence of the oligarchs goes beyond the three men pinpointed by Valdis Zatlers. I think that Latvia is home to many wealthy people who are directly or indirectly involved in politics. And not all of them are Latvians," said the former Head of State, Vaira Vike-Freiberga.

The next general election will certainly mean a setback for the parties led by the oligarchs (the People's Party of former Prime Minister Andris Skele; Latvia's First-Latvian Way (LPP-LC) led by Ainars Slesers and the Greens and Farmers Union led by Aivars Lembergs) but the formation of the future government coalition might prove difficult because those who previously voted for these parties will certainly not be ready to support the Prime Minister's party or the new Zatlers Reform Party.

The chair of the Central Election Commission (CVK), Arnis Cimdars, suggested that early elections take place on 17th September next.

Referendum results on the dissolution of the Saeima on 23rd July 2011 in Latvia

Turn out : 44,73%

Question asked	Number of « yes » votes (the number of votes features in brackets)	Number of "no" votes (the number of votes features in brackets)
Are you for or against the dissolution of the Parliament?	94,30 (650 518)	5,48 (37 829)

Source : Central Electoral Commission of Latvia (<http://www.tn2011.cvk.lv>)

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