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# Republic of Latvia

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# REPUBLIC OF LATVIA

(Latvijas Republika)

By Jeffrey K. Hass, Ph.D.



On August 21, 1991, following the failed Soviet putsch, the Latvian Supreme Soviet declared Latvia independent of the Soviet Union, beginning the process of building democracy. Like its two Baltic neighbors, Lithuania and Estonia, Latvia has enjoyed a happier transition to democracy and capitalism than other former Eastern bloc or Soviet republics. While disputes over policy, territorial boundaries, economic policy, and definition of citizenship have been problematic and while Latvia's economy bottomed out in 1992 and 1993, the country has enjoyed relative political calm and recent economic growth.

While it may perhaps be early to talk about a stable, never-changing political system, Latvia's polity has come closer to institutionalization than other post-Soviet states except Estonia.

Culturally Latvia is far from homogeneous—a potential political problem in the past, present, and future. According to official data, “Latvians” (ethnically defined) make up 57.7 percent of the population; Russians are 29.6 percent (a result of migration from other Soviet republics before 1991). The official language is Lettish (“Latvian”); Lithuanian and Russian are prevalent as well.

## The System of Government

Latvia is a parliamentary republic with a strong, unicameral legislature and a weak president.

## EXECUTIVE

The executive branch is headed by two figures, the president and the prime minister. The president, who sits for a three-year term (and who cannot sit for more than two consecutive terms), is the nominal head of state but is not a powerful figure in Latvian politics; the constitution holds the president as a figurehead who represents Latvia in the international arena and has other circumscribed powers. For example, no bill can come into force with a presidential signature alone; the prime minister must countersign bills. The constitution gives the president unilateral political power only in two cases: inviting a figure to become prime minister and form a government and suggesting that the parliament be dissolved. In the first case, the president can invite a prime minister to form a government only after the previous prime minister has resigned or failed to survive a parliamentary no-confidence vote. In the second case, the president may suggest that the Saeima (parliament) be dissolved; however, such a decision must go to a nationwide referendum. If the referendum receives a majority of votes cast, the Saeima is dissolved and new elections will be forthcoming. If, however, the referendum does not receive majority support and fails, then the president is dismissed from office and the Saeima elects a new president to serve out the remainder of the three-year term. Unlike some countries, such as Russia, where the president has the power to dissolve the legislature, the Latvian constitution makes such an

action a double-edged sword, forcing the president not to take such action lightly.

In spite of such institutional obstacles to a strong presidency, the first president, Guntis Ulmanis, tried to move beyond his legal means—not confining himself to the presidential bully pulpit or his duties in the realm of diplomacy and foreign policy (including talks with Russia about removing troops and bringing Latvia closer to NATO and the European Union). In 1995 the Saeima was divided into two roughly equal groups to the right and to the left, making support for a prime minister and government difficult; Ulmanis attempted to play power broker to put in his favorite for prime minister but finally had to turn to a compromise candidate (Andris Skele) on the third try. The law gives only so much room for presidential maneuver.

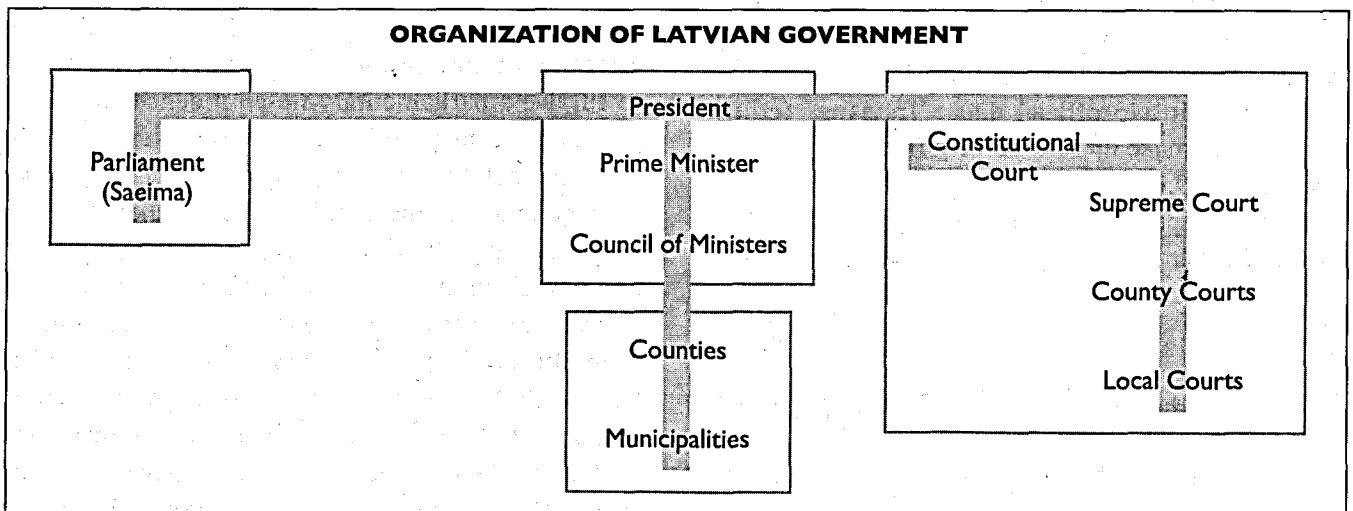
The prime minister is the head of the government and as such answers to the Saeima concerning the status and outcomes of policies and for problems within the government and Council of Ministers. In essence this makes the prime minister, rather than the president, the real executive authority. First, legislation becomes law only with the prime minister's cosignature. Second, by heading the ministries that form the apex of the government, the prime minister and the Council of Ministers have direct control over policy implementation and day-to-day operations (albeit at some bureaucratic distance). Third, in cases of urgent need occurring between sessions of parliament, the Council of Ministers has the right to issue temporary decrees with the force of law. However, the Council cannot issue such decrees on just any subject. For example, Council decrees cannot, among other matters, amend elections, judicial procedures, the state budget, or laws passed by a sitting parliament.

The president and the prime minister are not only beholden to parliament to account for their actions; they owe their positions to parliamentary election. The prime minister must be approved and can lose office to a vote of no confidence. In Latvia, the president is not elected by direct popular vote but by parliament. Presidential "elections" were held in 1993 and 1996. In July 1993, at the convocation of the first pure post-Soviet parliament, three individuals came forward as presidential candidates: Guntis Ulmanis won on the third ballot; the second post-Soviet presidential election saw parties in the Saeima challenge Ulmanis. Ulmanis maintained a moderate policy program, and this helped him win 53 of 97 ballots in the first round of voting, returning him to the presidency for a second term. In 1999 Vaira Vike-Freiberga, a woman of Canadian and Latvian extraction and an academic, succeeded Ulmanis to the presidency.

## LEGISLATURE

The Saeima, or parliament, is the locus of political power in Latvia. The Saeima is a unicameral body composed of 100 seats and is elected for a term of four years. When a newly elected parliament meets for the first time, the deputies elect a board that acts as the organizing head of the Saeima. This board consists of a chairman, two deputy chairmen, and two secretaries; the chairman acts in the role of speaker of parliament. The Saeima also has 10 committees that make up 100 positions; thus, in theory every Saeima member can become a member of a parliamentary committee. These committees are one path for submitting legislation; if five or more members of a committee so act, they can present a bill for a vote in parliament. (A bill can also

### ORGANIZATION OF LATVIAN GOVERNMENT



be brought up by the president, Cabinet of Ministers, or one-tenth of eligible voters.)

Parliament wields not only legislative power but ultimate political sovereignty. The president is selected by the Saeima, and the prime minister must answer to parliament. If the president dies, the next in line is not the prime minister, as in some countries (such as Russia); instead, power goes to the chairman of the Saeima. While the executive branch proposes and implements administrative policy, these policies are embedded in the legal framework formed by Saeima decisions. Parliamentary deputies enjoy not only immunity from criminal prosecution but also from recall: according to the constitution, deputies cannot be recalled from their office and can be disciplined only by the Saeima itself. (Only in the case of defamation or revealing information about another's private life can deputies become liable to prosecution.) Even in cases of criminal activity, a Saeima member cannot be prosecuted until the Saeima decides to sanction such prosecution.

Legislation is the primary duty of the Saeima. Laws pass if they receive a majority vote (51 votes). While the president can send legislation back to the Saeima for reconsideration, the Saeima can override the veto with a simply majority (51) a second time in support of the proposed bill. The president then cannot raise his initial objections a second time, that is, the president cannot veto a bill with the same objections twice. One-third of the Saeima can motion to suspend implementation of a law for two months or can request the president to suspend implementation. The law in question is then submitted to a nationwide referendum if one-tenth of the voters request it; otherwise, the law goes into force at the end of the two-month waiting period. If in the referendum a majority does not support the draft law, then it will not go into force.

Only laws and measures on the budget, on taxes and customs duties, on military service, on declaration of war or peace, on a state of emergence, and on foreign treaties cannot be subject to a nationwide referendum. Further, two-thirds of the Saeima may vote that a law is "urgent," which means that the president may not demand a second review of the law and a referendum cannot be called to judge it. Finally, the Saeima can amend the constitution if new articles are passed by a two-thirds majority after three readings; two-thirds of Saeima deputies must be present for such constitutional changes to be valid.

## JUDICIARY

The judiciary is in the process of being reorganized. For the first half of the 1990s, Latvia used the system it inherited from its Soviet past, namely, district, regional, and administrative courts, along with a newly created Supreme Court. Each level handles both criminal cases and civil cases (disputes), and appeals move up the chain to the Supreme Court, which is the final arbiter of legal conflict. The Constitutional Court has the right to determine the constitutionality or unconstitutionality of laws.

## REGIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Latvia is divided into 26 counties (*rajons*) and seven municipalities. At the local level, the highest political body is the local council, ranging from 15 to 120 members (depending on the region) and sitting for a five-year term. The council is run by a chairman and board elected by the council deputies. In local politics, members of the Latvian National Independence Movement have fared well and dominate, whereas candidates linked to the Communist Party have fared poorly.

## The Electoral System

The Latvian Constitution holds that election to the Saeima is through proportional means—that is, voters receive a list with parties and then vote for a party. Those parties receiving more than 5 percent of votes cast receive a number of seats equal to the percentage of votes they received out of the total votes cast for parties that overcame the 5 percent barrier; votes for parties that do not cross the 5 percent barrier are, therefore, wasted votes.

Latvia has not been blessed with stable governments, reflecting fragmentation in parliament—not unusual when many different parties are represented (a problem in Italy suffered for decades)—and unstable power bases. Anatolijs Gorbunovs was the first post-Soviet parliamentary chairman, backed by a majority coalition led by Latvia's Way. This coalition soon splintered, and Latvia's Way tried several times to build a successful, stable coalition. The 1994 elections led to another round of negotiations to form a new government, and, after several rounds of voting, businessman Andris Skele became prime minister. After the 1998 elections Latvia's Way was again heading the ruling coalition in alliance with nationalist

parties For Fatherland and LNNK (FF/LNNK) and the center-left New Party. Villis Kristopans was named prime minister, but he survived only nine months due to constant political crises. Skele returned, leading a coalition of FF/LNNK and the new People's Party. This government succumbed to internal rivalries and disputes over privatization and collapsed in 2000. The 1998 coalition returned with a new leader and prime minister, Riga's mayor, Andris Berzins—which survived until the 2002 elections. In 2002 Latvia's Way, the leading party in the 1990s, failed to overcome the 5 percent barrier. The New Era Party won the largest number of seats (26), followed by the coalition For Human Rights in a United Latvia. Einars Repše of the New Era Party became prime minister at the head of a center-right coalition. In February 2004 Repše's coalition collapsed, and Repše resigned his post. A coalition led by the Greens and Farmers Union formed a new government, with Indulis Emsis becoming the first European prime minister from a Green party. However, Emsis's government lasted only nine months before collapsing after the parliament rejected his government's budget. Aigars Kalvitis of the People's Party became the new prime minister, heading a four-party coalition.

## The Party System

As in other former Communist countries, talking about coherent "parties" is difficult. While there are formal party groupings, parties in Latvia may disappear and new parties sometimes are created, making the party landscape somewhat in flux. Further, the last few years have seen shifting coalitions of parties, who ally or merge in order to increase their potential electoral support and voting power in the Saeima. Finally, party organization and discipline do not always seem very strong, since candidates may run on their party's list in one district and on a list for a coalition in a district where that party is weaker. Hence, there may be a low correlation between the "rank and file" (which may be rather low), programmatic stance, positions of deputies in parliamentary debates, and leadership within one party.

In the 1990s the two dominant parties were Latvia's Way (*Latvijas ceļš*) and *Saimnieks*, but both suffered reversals of fortune: *Saimnieks* lost all its parliamentary seats in the 1998 election, and in 2002 Latvia's Way lost all its seats as well (it had 21 in 1998). Latvia's Way was founded in 1993 on the basis of political organizations that had championed Latvian independence from the USSR. Aiming for support from

entrepreneurs and the middle class, Latvia's Way promoted radical economic reform, but this created backlash. *Saimnieks*, which drew support from the *nomenklatura* (Soviet-era economic elite), was founded for the 1995 parliamentary elections and merged with the Democratic Party. It joined a coalition government after the 1995 election but left the coalition in 1998. It strongly supported a change in Latvia's citizenship laws and successfully obtained such a change. This was its last success, as it lost all its seats in the 1998 election and has not reappeared since.

On the left a coalition emerged to maximize electoral success: For Human Rights in a United Latvia (*Par Cilveka Tiesībām Vienota Latvija*). The electoral alliance received the second largest number of votes (18.9 percent) and seats (25) in the 2002 elections. It was made up of three parties, the People's Harmony Party (*Tautas Saskaņas Partija*), the Latvian Socialist Party, and the minor partner *Līdztiesība Savienība*. For Human Rights gained much of its support from the Russian-speaking population. By itself the People's Harmony Party achieved electoral representation (5.6 percent of the vote and 6 seats in 1995), but the coalition had better success. In 2002 another left-wing party, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party, lost all 14 seats it won in the 1998 elections.

In the center is the New Era (*Jaunais laiks*) Party, and toward the center-right are the People's Party, the Latvian Farmers' Union, and the Green Party of Latvia. Further along the right-wing nationalist spectrum are two formerly important parties who merged to form For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian Independence Movement.

## Major Political Parties

### NEW ERA PARTY

#### (*Jaunais laiks*)

This party was founded in 2000 by Einars Repše and in 2002 won the most seats in the legislative elections. Repše formed a coalition government and served as prime minister until 2004, when the coalition collapsed and he resigned. Linked to domestic and foreign (especially Scandinavian) businessmen, New Era enjoys healthy financial support, and its recruitment of cultural figures to its ranks has helped its popular image as well. The party's platform addresses issues primarily of corruption but also market development.

## PEOPLE'S PARTY

(Tautas Partija)

This center-right party was founded in 1998 by Andris Skele and populated by deserters of Latvia's Way, the Christian Democratic Union, and LNNK. Like the right-wing parties from which it originated, People's Party focuses on right-wing populist issues such as supporting society's moral fiber, protecting the traditional family, and defending the nation. People's Party nationalism is not total, however: it has ties with Russian business. The party won 20 seats in the 2002 legislative elections, and in 2004 it formed a new coalition government, with Aigars Kalvitis as the new prime minister.

## LATVIAN FARMERS' UNION

(Latvijas Zemnieku savienība)

The Farmers' Union is conservative and protectionist, and while it has taken on board former Communists from other defunct parties, the party remains center-right. This party joined a coalition with the Greens in 2002, and in 2004 the alliance formed a brief government with Green Party leader Emsis Lemulis as prime minister.

## GREEN PARTY OF LATVIA

(Latvijas Zaļā partija)

Founded in 1990, this party formed an alliance with the Latvian Farmers' Union in 2002 that captured 12 seats in parliament. In 2004 the Green Party's Emsis Lemulis became the first Green Party prime minister in European history when he formed a brief minority government. The government collapsed after only nine months, and a new center-right coalition came to power.

## FOR FATHERLAND AND FREEDOM/LATVIAN NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

(Apvienība Tevzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK)

In 1995 For Fatherland and the Latvian National Independence Movement received 12 percent and 6.3 percent of the vote, respectively; in 2002 they merged to form For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Independence Movement (Apvienība Tevzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK) and promptly received only 5.4 percent of the vote. Both promoted nationalist

issues, including nationalist citizenship laws, and rejected diplomatic compromises with Russia.

## PEOPLE'S HARMONY PARTY

(Tautas Saskaņas Partija)

This party was formed in 1994 by Jānis Jurkāns, who has remained its leader since then. It has long been popular with ethnic Russians. In 1998 it joined the For Human Rights in a United Latvia coalition, which won 25 seats in the 2002 parliamentary elections. However, People's Harmony pulled out of the coalition in 2003.

## LATVIAN SOCIALIST PARTY

(Latvijas Sociālistiskā partija)

This party was founded in 1994 and has long drawn its strength from the Russian-speaking population. In 1998 it joined with two other Russian-oriented parties, People's Harmony and Equal Rights, to form the For Human Rights in a United Latvia coalition. The coalition enjoyed significant success in the 2002 elections but gradually fell apart, with People's Harmony pulling out in 2003 and the Latvian Socialist Party following not long after.

## EQUAL RIGHTS

(Līdztiesība Savienība)

Like its former coalition partners in For Human Rights, this party gets its support from the Russian-speaking population.

## Minor Political Parties

There are numerous smaller parties in Latvia, most of which have no representation in the Saeima. These include the Peoples Movement for Latvia on the far right, the Democratic Party on the center-left, and the Latvian Unity Party on the left.

## Other Political Forces

The tensions between ethnic Latvians and Russians have been a factor in the country's political system since independence, and will likely remain one into the future.

## National Prospects

Latvia has two major political problems, those having to do with ethnic issues and those having to do with political gridlock. On the ethnic front, the problems are mainly between ethnic Latvians and Russians, who make up one-third of the Latvian population. While citizenship had been a thorny issue, it appears to have been solved for the present. While some groups claim political abuse, the actual abuse is not particularly abominable.

The second potential problem is political gridlock. With most parties hovering around a center ground, political disputes are more like those in the United States—conflicts between rival political ambitions rather than over different ideological views and policies. With the Saeima split in half, forging political coalitions and bold political policies has proven to be difficult. However, if viewed in the context of politics in other former Soviet nations, perhaps such political

gridlock of the American variety is a sign that Latvia is in good shape.

Perhaps Latvia's crowning achievement after independence has been its invitations into two important Western families: NATO and the European Union. NATO membership has caused some tension with Russia, but it also offers a modicum of security Latvians had long desired. EU membership promises access to markets and provides opportunities for labor mobility that likely will help Latvia's post-Socialist economic development.

## Further Reading

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