

The Big Picture

Klāvs Zichmanis – 26 August 2011

Rīga - What happens in Latvia is affected by the international geopolitical power game between three groups of interested parties in this part of the world. The most significant player with specific and well defined interests in the Baltic area, of course, is Russia. Other major players such as the US or the European Union have limited and more vaguely defined objectives. The third group with an interest is regional powers Poland and Sweden with the aim of limiting Russian influence in the Baltic States.

Putin's lament that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest tragedy of the twentieth century renewed Russia's desire to regain superpower status in the world. The starting point of this strategy was to regain influence in the former Soviet territories, which meant the influence of competitors like the US, China, the EU and Turkey had to be squeezed out. Russia has been successful in central Asia, the Caucasus, Ukraine and Belarus, leaving only the Baltic States as uncontrolled territory. The weakest of the three and with the largest Russian minority is Latvia. Russian strategy for the 'near abroad' dovetails with its diaspora policy, which since the mid-nineties consists of five elements: 1) The Russian diaspora should remain abroad, 2) it obtains unconditional host country citizenship, 3) it obtains official status for the Russian language, 4) Russia should use dual citizenship as leverage in the near abroad and 5) Russia should invest in the local economy. The most commonly used tactic is 'soft power', which does not create suspicion or opposition due to its slow and subtle nature. An example of this is the annual New Wave concert in Jūrmala, which opens every year with great fanfare, followed by a reception at the presidential palace, and it is difficult to find something overtly negative about the event. But the goals of binding former Soviet society with Russia and remembering a common history are furthered.

The US is once again interested in the cold war strategy of containment to stop the expansion of Russian power. The EU as an association is largely indifferent to the interests of the Baltic States and its population. Sweden and Poland as regional powers worry perhaps the most about the future of the region. They understand the impact of Russian influence in the Baltics can have on their own security. Due to NATO's present weakness, both co-operate strategically; Sweden leads a loose military grouping of Scandinavian and Baltic states including Estonia, and Poland leads a similar group based on the Visegrad countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and

Hungary) adding a military component to the group's original economic purpose. All of these interested parties are closely following the 11th Latvian Saeima parliamentary elections.

The only power directly involved in the elections in Latvia. To further the near abroad strategy it is necessary to garner local support. Soft power tactics have prepared the groundwork. The Latvian Russian population generally agrees with the Russian-speaking media, which emphasizes Russians as 'victimized' because Latvia does not grant them unconditional citizenship. The political tool is the Harmony Centre (SC) party, which the current Russian ambassador, a former KGB man named Vešnikovs, has consolidated into a single political party and has minimized the Russian extremist PCTVL party's influence on local Russian society, thus concentrating all voting power in the SC. Actual SC objectives do not differ from the PCTVL, which has been open in stating its imperialistic views. The Latvian language media weakly reviews or analyzes the SC party. The impression on Latvian society of the SC is generally positive: the party is generally clean, it uses logical and rational arguments, and therefore it is surely better to let the SC Russians govern than thieving Latvians. There are considerable numbers of wealthy Russian oligarchs, who also collaborate with the Latvian oligarchs, but the Latvian language press rarely exposes them. In the current election campaign, SC has offered a three-year moratorium on linguistic and historical issues to sort out the economy, a seemingly rational suggestion, but a strategy to calm Latvian fears of SC domination and to vote for the SC.

While current public opinion polls show the SC as the most popular party, on its own it cannot form a government which it wants to do "at all cost". It needs a voluntary partner to get a majority in Parliament. During the 10th parliament this role was played by the ZZS (Green Farmers Union), voting 51st times with SC, not with its official coalition partners in government, the Unity party (Vienotība). The historic vote in the Saeima on the right to search Slesers' (an oligarch) residence by the KNAB (Anti-corruption Bureau), the SC and ZZS parties both voted for Slesers immunity, therefore, including the PLL (Slesers Party), the three defended the interests of the oligarchs. The PLL successor party is not showing any signs of life and probably will not make the 5% threshold needed to enter parliament, removing the PLL as a potential SC partner. ZZS support has diminished because of this vote and the failure of Lembergs case in British courts. This election the ZZS will not get 22 seats in parliament, and without a significant number of ZZS parliamentarians, the SC is not interested in the ZZS.

The remaining three parties to probably exceed the 5% threshold are Unity (Vienotība), National Alliance (VL, LNNK/TB) and the newly created ZRP (Zatlera reformu partija). The gnawing question is, which one is ready to form a coalition with the SC? A hint in this direction comes from the Unity candidate Abolģiņa, no doubt conscious that Unity-SC talk loses Unity a certain strata of electoral support. Remember that such a move would be historic (the first Latvian/Russian party government) with not only great risk to the unity of the Unity party, but to the whole Latvian society in unforeseen ways. As far as is known, all three of parties are loath to be the first to take this step. Predictions that the SC will be the largest party in the 11th Parliament and thus have the right to form a government, may be thwarted if the electorate sees this as undesirable, and may reinforce the need of the three parties to at least together reach the 51+ number of mandates in the September 17th elections.