

What's happening in Latvia?

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On January 3, 2011 in the TLKC Umurkumurs pub about 50 people gathered to hear the 11th Saeima MP Valdis Liepiņš (Riga - ZRP) speak on what's happening in Latvia. Liepiņš is known in Latvia as the chair of VEL (Electoral Reform Society) and as a former member of the Riga City Council, and in Canada as the Toronto Latvian Centre's initiator and first chairman. He takes the work of Parliamentarian seriously: he is a member of four committees, two subcommittees, ten country groups and one delegation. In addition, last December Liepiņš served as an OSCE observer during the Russian Federation Duma elections.

In order to understand the internal situation in Latvia, he looked at what is happening outside the country. The current weakness of the West also weakens the position of central Europe vis a vis Russia. The U.S. is engaged in extracting itself from two wars in the Middle East and the EU is suffering a severe economic crisis. This opens up possibilities for Russia to regain influence in the former Soviet Union, especially in Latvia using soft power tactics and the support of local allies. Putin's current weakened position slightly improves the situation in East and Central Europe.

Conditions currently are favourable for Latvia's destabilization: it is economically poor, has generated considerable debt and significant numbers of the population, at least temporarily, have emigrated. Although independence has existed for 20 years, democracy is still fragile. Therefore, it is easier for Russia to put on the pressure, i.e. to claim non-citizens' rights, falsify history, weaken the Latvian language and its position in society, and create a "banking crisis". On these issues Russian and SC interests coincide.

The falsification of Latvian history has a rational basis. May 9th for all Russians is the only common holiday. To recognize the occupation is to recognize the illegitimacy of the Russian claim to the Latvian state, so naturally SC supporters generally do not want to admit this. It is in the interests of SC (and Russia) to support this false view of history to ensure itself an electorate for future use.

During the election the notion spread that "this time SC should be in government" because of "possible unrest" if it wasn't. SC threw somersaults to ensure it participated in the coalition: it abandoned its pre-election promises, Ušakov recognized the occupation, relinquished 3 SC "Rubika" MP's, then reversed himself again to appease his electorate by claiming "there was an occupation but there are no occupiers". If allowed into the coalition, SC would be the Trojan horse in government.

What are the consequences of destabilization in Latvian politics? Society could start to polarize and radicalize, Linderman and Gaponenko gain greater leverage among

SC voters, and in the 2013 municipal elections demand the participation of non-citizens (nepilsoni), especially in Riga. This could have a negative impact on the stability of the Latvian government. However, unifying elements also exist: Latvia's society has largely overcome the economic crisis; the ethnic Latvian community feels an outside threat (Russia's soft power, the EU and U.S. weakness) as well as open internal threats by SC and the Linderman group.

How did the vote for Russian as a second national language come about? It can be seen as a direct but unexpected outcome of the failure to collect enough signatures to make Latvian the sole language of instruction in all public schools. Linderman and Gapaņenko took advantage of the situation and proposed a successful signature campaign for Russian as the second national language resulting in the February 18 referendum. To save the situation for Latvians and their supporters participation in the vote is a political imperative. President Bērziņš has unnecessarily muddied the waters on this issue as well.

Liepiņš also addressed important but less critical issues. In the renewed 1991 Latvia dual citizenship was only granted to WWII Latvian exiles. After joining the EU in 2004 Latvia experienced a major wave of emigration. Since then, Latvian families and the government wanted to maintain citizenship links with non exile Latvian children born outside Latvia. The solution seemed simple: allow dual citizenship for those born in EU or NATO countries, thereby avoiding those born elsewhere (read Russia). A problem arises with those born in Australia or other acceptable states; how to define a non-EU or NATO born child, a question now engaging the Saeima. The second issue concerns the citizenship of Latvian-born non-citizen children. The idea is to simplify the citizenship application process thus ensuring a future without new non-citizens.

On behalf of the European Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Valdis Liepiņš took part in the Russian State Duma election as an observer. In Russia he became acquainted with the local political situation and observed the election process in a small town near Moscow. At polling stations he faced electoral deficiencies: the absence of properly written or missing records making it hard or impossible to gauge election results. The available data and surveys concluded that the ruling party *United Russia* vote was upgraded by 20 to 30 percent. The OSCE conclusion was the same.

Liepiņš rates the new Parliament positively. It is moving towards a more open policy by reevaluating the use of secret ballots, eradicating *abstention* voting, considering registering voters for parliamentary elections, looking at the possibility of registering voters online, and dividing the existing five constituencies into 12-14 smaller ones, all VEL recommended reforms. The zero value declaration, which for many years and several governments was stuck in Parliament, is finally law.

Those who attended the presentation felt like winners, gaining the latest information and profiting from Liepiņš personal experience and getting the satisfaction of a personal visit, a sign of a democratic, responsible attitude to voters which we see for the first time on this side of the Atlantic from elected Saeima members from North America.