

Voters and parties

Klāvs Zichmanis – 12 September 2011

RIGA - An astute Riga resident described the core problem of Latvia as: if Latvia's pensioners were prohibited from voting, Latvia would be a completely different country. The expression aptly describes the powerful influence this age group has on Latvia's election results. Pensioners form up to a third of small town and rural voters and about one quarter of the electorate in large cities. How crucial their vote is can be seen by many advertisements in the media aimed specifically at this demographic, where the main ZZS (Greens, farmers) and SC (Harmony Center) party message is to introduce indexed pensions, no matter how impossible such a promise may be in the country's current financial situation. Finance Minister Vilks predicts the 2012 budget will be the last one where large budget cuts will be needed. With firm income/expenditure policies the country will again have the means to increase the social budget, including pensions. Driven by poverty, a large proportion of pensioners want to believe in the indexed pension promise made by the ZZS, which repeats the unsubstantiated slogan 'Lembergs steals, but gives to others as well'. It highlights a personal perspective interpretation (I have nothing, but I need it) at the same time removes major issues such as corruption ('Lembergs steals ...') beyond their immediate political concern. The fight for the senior vote is a major campaign issue.

Many Latvians often see the Russian-speaking community as a unified block. In fact, it is composed of several nationalities, different political and economic beliefs, educational and economic levels, differing philosophies of life, and it sees itself as diverse and fragmented. The current Latvian government has not renewed its pre-war minority's policy, which, if it were implemented, might take away from 6 to 10 percent of the so-called Russian-speaking voting bloc. Most post-war Slavic immigrants arrived as factory workers with low or secondary education with a greater interest in economic rather than political issues. Educated and successful segments of this community are not as responsive to Russia's soft power efforts to mobilize a pro Russia vote and a large proportion of Russian speakers want to remain politically independent of Moscow. Among them is the belief that the SC has been taken over by the Russian mafia, and Urbanovics and Ušikovs have been 'bought' by them, and are concerned about this situation.

How will the Russian-speaking electorate vote in the upcoming election? Russia's Diaspora policy will influence the majority who will support the SC. Part of the Russian nationalists may return to voting for the PCTVL. Šlesers (LPP/LC) party has involved the once highly regarded in Russian-Latvian society Jānis Jurkāns, probably hoping to gain Russian-speaking support to overcome the 5% parliamentary threshold he badly needs. For the anti-corruption segment in the community, it is too late in this surprise election to form a new Russian-speaking alternative party, and it would be culturally

unacceptable as well. Traditionally, Russian collectivism requires supporting 'our own', and to openly challenge community leadership or control is a rarity. The only alternative to those dissatisfied with the current management of the SC is voting by secret ballot for some of the Latvian-speaking parties. The SC vote in Parliament in favor of Šlesers also casts a pro-corruption shadow on this party. Anti corruption and anti mafia former SC supporters would be hard pressed to vote for the ZZS or LPP/LC, both involved in corruption. The only acceptable parties for these Russian-speaking voters are Vienotība or the ZRP (Zatlers Reform Party). One founding ZRP principle is that it is a party which does not divide between Latvians and Russians, and Vienotība party's Āboltiņa's statements about possible cooperation with the SC after the election can be construed as an attempt to scare nationalistic Latvians out of Vienotība to lure Russian-speaking voters to the party.

Former President Zatlers decision to dismiss 10th Saeima (Parliament) electrified a large part of Latvian society. He received the highest ratings of any politician in post Soviet Latvia, and in the referendum 95%, more than six hundred thousand people, agreed with the President's decision. It's obvious why his political party bears Zatlers name. His critics dispute the need for a new party, saying that the previous (9th) Saeima should have been dismissed instead, or that the 10th Saeima elected many new and honest deputies, or a new party divides the Latvian electorate, however, the overall result is positive. The 10th Saeima was dismissed not because of perceived low quality of its members, but the realization that certain parties block any improvement in the country and that the Saeima was largely controlled by an informal non-government coalition, and with non-parliamentary interest groups, to satisfy selfish goals. There was a need for voters to be able to choose a parliamentary majority not dominated by vested interests.

The dissolution of parliament shook up society not only for the above mentioned reason, but it also gave voters the pure pleasure of expressing authority and displeasure over politicians and a chance to throw them out. It's thought that the percentage of voter participation could go from 62% last time around to 67% by mobilizing non-voters or those who have not participated in a long time. It seems that the voter now has a better idea who impedes and who encourages national development. The voter also understands that one decent party is powerless to form a progressive governmental majority if there are no other parties with similar standards or goals. This time the electorate must choose such parties to elect a parliament with at least fifty one members to form the so called 51+ coalition.

Klavs Zichmanis