

## **Dombrovskis Resignation**

Klavs Zichmanis.

At the Toronto Latvian Centre January 31, keynote speaker at an information meeting for the general public regarding recent events in Latvia "*Zolitūde, Dombrovskis and then ...*", was Reform Party (RP) member of the Saeima, Valdis Liepiņš, with commentator Klāvs Zichmanis, and moderator Centre Board chairman Alberts Upeslācis.

Mr. Liepiņš updated the audience on his recent political activities. As an OSCE mission delegate, he participated in the first qualitative assessment of parliamentary elections in Turkmenistan. The OSCE delegation made recommendations for improvements in that country's future elections.

The Latvian Electoral Reform Society (VEL) is dissolved as a majority of desired reforms have been implemented, for example, adoption of open voting in the Saeima (except for the President). However, a register of voters and the option for a voter from outside Latvia designating in which constituency his vote would be recorded, were both rejected. The Saeima adopted a new Election Law excluding the aforementioned two VEL proposed reforms, but the President has returned the new law to Parliament for re-examination. There is at least a theoretical possibility that the VEL reforms may be included in the future.

The public most wanted to hear from Mr. Liepiņš about Prime Minister Dombrovskis' abrupt resignation as a result of the Zolitūde tragedy for unclear and worrisome reasons.

V. Liepiņš described the sequence of events. In the spring of 2011, Saeima (parliament) deputy Andris Bērziņš named himself as a candidate for the presidential elections. A poll of Saeima deputies appeared to guarantee President Zatlers sufficient support for re-election to a second term. Instead, by secret ballot, the deputies elected Bērziņš, an act of deceit and duplicity by both the ZZS and SC parties. These two parties supported Valdis Zatlers during the presidential elections of 2007. President Zatlers failed to be the obedient, acquiescent president those parties had expected in nominating him. After one four year term Zatlers had to be replaced by a president trusted by the oligarchs, one of their own, Andris Bērziņš.

Bērziņš named Gundārs Daudze as head of the Presidential Office. Both men belong to the oligarch Lembergs-controlled Green Farmers Union (ZZS). The ZZS party obtained a pliant president, but lost control of the Saeima. In the elections of 2011, the number of ZZS MP's shrank from 22 to 13. No other oligarch-controlled party was elected to that parliament.

So the question becomes, what is the role of Lembergs in Dombrovskis' resignation? If the ZZS is not in government, it has no access to state financial benefits and security. With the new president, ZZS is a force able to penetrate the government to defend Lembergs and other oligarchs' interests.

Attempts to destabilize the government began as early as June 2012. Justice minister Gaidis Bērziņš resigned for obscure reasons and was replaced by Janis Bordāns. Other "scandals" followed in the Ministries of Education, Culture, and again in the fall of 2013, in Justice. This

time, the National Association (NA) party requested Bordāns resignation. Dombrovskis however did not fire Bordāns (who was planning to change a law upsetting the oligarchs). The NA quit the ruling coalition and began to vote with the opposition. Dombrovskis now led a minority government. The opposition, however, now had a majority in parliament: SC 30, ZZS 13 and NA 13, altogether 56 votes, enough to overthrow the government, but it lacked a reason to do so.

The opportunity appeared at the end of November in the form of the Zolitūdes tragedy. In early December, BNN (Baltic News Network), quoting unofficial sources, ran a number of articles describing Lembergs' role in the resignation: "Bērziņš to Replace the Government on Lembergs' Initiative" and "ZZS Wants Control of Ministries in the New Government". Bērziņš and Lembergs have in common not only the ZZS, but go back to the Soviet era. A possible scenario could have been an order from Lembergs, who directly or through intermediaries contacts Bērziņš, who invites Dombrovskis for discussions. The two spend an hour and a half in private. They in front of ready-to-roll TV cameras emotion-ridden Dombrovskis announces he is taking political responsibility for the Zolitūdes tragedy and resigns as Prime Minister. He cites the need to stabilize the government by inviting all center-right parties, i.e. the existing coalition plus the ZZS to form a new government. Previous signs or rumours of such action were not evident prior to the meeting with Bērziņš. The choice of a new government was put in the hands of Bērziņš, a man with an autocratic vision for Latvia and a desire to lean East.

Until Valdis Dombrovskis reveals the details of his meeting with the President, we can only infer the real reasons for his resignation. What comes to mind are the possible scenarios outlined for him: an opposition parliamentary vote of no confidence in Dombrovskis' government with unpleasant consequences, or Dombrovskis' resignation. But, to bring the balanced and peaceful Dombrovskis near tears requires something very personal. Bērziņš apparently wanted Dombrovskis to decide immediately, without time to evaluate the choices, ask for advice, or change his mind. It is reminiscent of a Soviet-style ultimatum; a successful first step in Lembergs' coup.

K.Zichmanis suggested a possible alternative to resignation; what could Dombrovskis have done instead? Governments facing deadlock in parliament often either call new elections or turn to the people. Early elections were not an option, but appealing to the people was. Presenting the causes of the Zolitūdes tragedy as the end result of catering to vested interests, it would have been possible to mobilize the public behind Dombrovskis, to continue the reforms against corruption and special interests to a successful conclusion. People at that moment would have supported him.

What benefits would ZZS get in government? According to BNN, Lembergs Empire is currently suffering financial difficulties. Buying political influence, supporting self-aggrandizing projects and fighting court cases is expensive. He needs to control three ministries to ensure a steady source of income.

Controlling VARAM will help to change two legal cases: 1. Halt the reform prohibiting persons facing a court judgment from holding public office; 2. Revoke a court decision to remove Lembergs from office as mayor of Ventspils. Controlling the Ministries of Transport and Economics enables officials allied to Lembergs to return to manage Ventspils Freeport, stop

reforms initiated by the government (increasing competitiveness of Latvia's ports) allowing Lembergs to again control Freeport resources unchecked. As well, Lembergs does not deny he wants European Union fund money, even at the expense of other Latvian regions or municipalities.

The president is able to amnesty convicted persons. For Lembergs, who faces several lawsuits in Latvia and abroad, amnesty could be useful.

Lembergs strives to appear considerate of others so as not to seem singularly self-promoting, V.Liepiņš lists those whom Lembergs supports. "Oligarchs and all who profit from a weak government and state, those who put their own, not national interests first; those who are interested in weak ties with Western democracies and strong ones with the East."

Where does that leave the Zolitūde, a tragedy used for advancing personal interests, a comprehensive inquiry abandoned and obscured? In V. Liepiņš words, "...[it is] advantageous for Ušakovs and Ameriks, as they have the most direct responsibility [for the Zolitūde tragedy] an accountability not demanded from them by the President, nor from negligent, corrupt, incompetent builders, designers, building inspectors, surveyors, etc. who want to hide their involvement."

The evening ended with questions from the audience.