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The year 2015 may bring surprises to Latvian politics.

Next door to Latvia, the *Minsk 2* ceasefire talks in mid-February did not settle the Ukrainian-Russian war, but put all the responsibility of resolving the outstanding issues and ending hostilities on Ukraine's shoulders. However, the broken truce managed to awaken Europe from the illusion that the war can be resolved by diplomacy and sanctions alone. Putin, absolved of responsibility, can devote his energy to hostilities against the West somewhere else instead.

Meanwhile, ISIS recent success in rallying other Islamist groups to its cause outside its Syria-Iraq confines shifts attention, especially that of Southern Europe and America, away from the Ukraine crisis. And Greek negotiations with creditors contribute to divisive debate in the European Union. Both issues benefit Russian foreign policy goals.

After Ukraine, the next Russian anti-Western military campaign could well be Belarus. It's well known that Putin believes President Lukashenko is an unreliable partner and hence wants him replaced. With Belarus neutralized Russia would have direct and unfettered access to the eastern borders of the Baltic States and Poland. The militarized Russian Kaliningrad enclave sits in the middle of the Polish-Baltic region. Russian military forces could then encircle Ukraine on three borders, the east, south and north, and along with Ukraine's western neighbours Slovakia, Hungary and Moldova sympathetic to Putin, guarantees Russia a good military position from which to influence and intimidate surrounding countries.

Russia is also manoeuvring in the Baltic States. In all three, Russian activists recently called for establishing so called 'People's Republics': *Narva* in Estonia, *Latgale* in Latvia and the *Vilnius region* in Lithuania. Of the Baltic States, Latvian politicians have the weakest understanding of statehood. As a result, the country's defenses are ill prepared, and Latvia becomes easily manipulated. Party standings in the Saeima reveal internal weakness. Both *Saskaņa* and Ingūnas Sudrabas *No Sirds Latvijai* (NSL), a Russian created and financed party, are pro-Russian. Together with Lemberģ's *Zaļo Zemiņu Savienība* (ZZS), an Eastward leaning party, the three parties control 52 of the 100 parliamentary seats.

Recently ZZS party leader Augusts Brigmanis claimed that the ruling coalition agreement between Vienotība, *Nacionāla Apvienība* (NA) and the ZZS, is no longer valid, because its coalition partners voted in Parliament to elect the President by an open vote, not by secret ballot as is the current practice. Brigmanis reasoning? Changing voting methods to an open vote is a Constitutional amendment and not allowed by the coalition agreement. Since, with the opposition (*Saskaņa* and NSL) the ZZS has a majority, Brigmanis confirmed that his party could vote with the opposition when electing the President. The ZZS also will not allow Vienotība to replace its current prime minister for someone else, a move to keep a mediocre and uncharismatic Prime Minister in place. Thus neither the coalition nor the opposition can act

without the consent of the ZZS. Brigmanis however, says that he does not see this as a threat to a stable coalition.

This year, not only will the Saeima vote for the President, but also the Chief Prosecutor, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the opening of gas markets, and possibly a change of government. All are important, far-reaching decisions, which are subject to ZZS control. When questioned, in what circumstances would the ZZS take over the post of Prime Minister i.e. a change in government, Brigmanis replied "It takes patience and the right correspondent conditions". The weaker *Vienotība* becomes, the stronger ZZS can become. Meanwhile, with public announcements, *Saskaņa* takes care to weaken *Vienotība*'s position in society. This struggle between the government, the opposition and the ZZS takes place in both open and subtle ways.

Although ZZS manager Brigmanis insists he is not influenced by Aivars Lembergs, reality is different. Since Lembergs *For Latvia and Ventspils* (FLV) party joined the ZZS, the united party is financed and run by Lembergs; he has the effective power, but not the political responsibility or liability. He personally participates in coalition negotiations, dictates which Ministries he wants and who will represent the ZZS as ministers.

Who is Aivars Lembergs? His public persona is friendly, often charming, nonthreatening, and successful. Born 1953 in Jēkabpils, he studied economics at LU, was a member of the Communist Party, in 1988 was appointed mayor of Ventspils, later became successful in business, and in 1994 founded the party FLV. In 2006 this party joined the ZZS, from which Lembergs was the Prime Minister-designate several times. He is Chairman of the Board for *Ventspils Free Port*, President of the Basketball Club *Ventspils*, Chairman of the Board of the *Ventspils Development Agency*, Executive Committee member for the *Latvian Olympic Committee*, and in 2000 was awarded the *Trīs zvaigzņu ordenis*, III class. Among his holdings is a major newspaper *Neatkarīgā rīta avīze* (NRA) and his net worth in 2013 was estimated at 270 million USD. One might say pretty impressive.

But that's not all. Lembergs ZZS is the only remaining oligarch party in Parliament. Since 2007 the Latvian authorities have charged Lembergs in various criminal activities: bribe taking, money laundering and abuse of authority. In February 2015 the authorities resumed a long ongoing lawsuit. With expensive lawyers and weak Latvian legal practice, Lembergs has dragged out his trial for eight years. The indictment is based on his activities in Ventspils City Council, basketball club *Ventspils*, and the *Ventspils Free Port*. Depending on a current investigation, he may eventually be charged for illegal political practices. A number of witnesses willing to testify against Lembergs have been found dead or are missing. He has also been tried in Britain and investigated in Switzerland. He was instrumental in the fall of Valdis Dombrovskis government in 2013. On political issues, his public announcements are anti-Western and reflect Russian foreign policy: anti-US, EU, NATO and Western Latvians. A full compendium of his anti-Western views are documented in his NRA newspaper.

This is the person who will influence, perhaps decide, the choice of future Latvian senior officials, ministers, government, and political direction of the state during an increasingly dangerous and crucial period in Latvia's history.