

The Political Honeymoon – President Vējonis first 60 days

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It's been two months since Raimonds Vejonis was elected as the 9th President of the Republic of Latvia, sufficient time to assess the vision of his presidency and his understanding of the pressing issues facing Latvia.

In his inauguration Vējonis promises "All my presidential work will be devoted to strengthening and developing the democratic traditions of our country, to consolidate the Latvian nation, defend its interests internationally and enhance its prosperity. We must feel safe ourselves, for our families and our country." Speaking more specifically, he mentions a number of areas which ought to be reorganized and improved, indicating he has a good understanding of the current situation in Latvia. He considers strengthening national security as the major issue i.e. military readiness to defend the country. "Russia's aggressive behavior in Ukraine shows that the military and technological safety of the world still has a large role to play." He also advocates a greater NATO presence in the Baltic States. At the new Strategic Communications Center opening in Riga Vējonis stressed "the Ukrainian conflict proves the strategic importance of communication and the need for such a center."

During his visit to Estonia, the two countries discussed the Russian-speaking population's views on the conflict in Ukraine, and the Russian-streaming media space, indicating that in these matters there is a need for closer cooperation between the Latvia and Estonia. Talks included discussions of the two countries' defense budgets. Estonia welcomed Latvia's commitment to increase its defense budget by 2018 to 2% of GDP. They also discussed the increasing pressure of illegal immigration on both countries eastern border.

Vējonis met with Defense Minister R. Bergmanis to discuss the 2016 defense budget, and the Minister's defense priorities. He informed the President about current defense readiness, emphasizing that Latvia must invest in strengthening security in order to fulfill its international obligations. Vējonis invited the Minister to promote public awareness of the mission of the armed forces.

National security also includes personal safety and family future in Latvia. One can see the President's concern for the stability of society, economy, Diaspora, emigration, and social and political values.

Achieving stability in society requires a change in attitude; it has to become more positive. Recognize individuals' successes and be proud of them, your country and its people. Every Latvian's achievement deserves our acknowledgement through a positive attitude and appreciation. Such people are the basis of Latvia and its future, "so that our grandchildren will be proud to live here, to work and build a family. We need to work on strengthening the foundations of our country, so that they become self-evident to every Latvian citizen. We also have to work on a common understanding of Latvian history. "

Security also means social responsibility. "There is a need to think about those who are most in need. Reducing significant regional inequities is important; all deserve equal attention and support. I have always been driven by one main task - the Latvian state and the strengthening of its security. I look forward to cooperation with all Latvian political forces. "

The economy is also a security component. The government should initiate targeted strategic projects to attract foreign investment. It's important to clean up the business environment, the problems in the judicial system, stabilize tax policy, and reduce administrative barriers.

Municipalities must also be involved, for example, developing zoning and organizing public consultations. When developing new export markets, they must take in account not only geopolitical considerations, but

also potential economic benefits. It is important to promote exchange of information between the President's Office and LIAA (Latvijas investīcijas & attīstības aģentūra).

The President sees the importance of the Diaspora's economic role. For Latvia it is a development opportunity that uses the Diaspora's experience and expertise. It knows the market, the possibilities, the solutions, Latvian traditions and the business environment. Seeing Latvia as outsiders, the Diaspora is able to accurately see what is most needed for Latvian economic growth. Cooperating with Latvian entrepreneurs, it can give them an incentive to develop into major world players. Communication with the Latvian Diaspora must be regular, open and focused on results, to promote innovation, investment and expertise in raising capital, as well as a fair and law based business environment in Latvia.

"Entrepreneurs also need Security. Sometimes we have forced the most ambitious of our people against the state by frequent tax rate changes, and difficult to understand rules and laws. State administration should be understandable and predictable. Government should not operate in isolation from economic life. "

However, Latvians must do the preparatory work: "There should be a stable tax system, completed educational reform, and settled energy security issues. We must create an attractive environment for investment and people alike, as well as continuous support for export markets."

Emigration is related to the economy. Latvian entrepreneurs can compete successfully in other countries. "For these achievements we have paid a high price, too many of our most talented people have gone to work abroad ... Each emigrant is a small dent in national security. To make us economically secure, we must ensure that labour is more productive to attract investment, and create well-paid jobs. We must utilize those things that will ensure the development of Latvia in the short and long term ... The question is how to entice, at least in part, the emigrants to return? It will only be achieved by broad measures and targeted policies". Thus the diaspora not only plays an economic role in the President's future vision, but also serves to promote remigration to Latvia.

Political values are also part of national security. Latvia must promote prudent policies "so that a variety of skewed and populist ideas that our foes circulate will not seem so attractive in Latvia, for example: that Latvian integration with the Western world and its economy is a failure, that we are being maltreated by them, and that Eastern scenarios are more attractive." Be aware that the safety and welfare of Latvia is provided by co-operating with our partners in the EU and NATO." Politicians should be evaluated by their success in national development, that people are richer, happier, more patriotic and safer than they were before the politician assumed office.

How is the new President rated? In mid-July the polling agency *Latvijas Fakti* reported that around 55% people questioned responded "positive" or "generally positive" to the question "What is your assessment of Latvian President Raymonds Vējonis?" Vējonis is equally popular among citizens and residents.

At the Presidential reception held at *Melngalvju Nams* after the 2nd World Latvian Economics and Innovation Forum, Latvian Honorary Consul Imants Purvs said "A man who understands well the current situation in Latvia ... is competent, the right man to do what is necessary ... understands the value of Latvia's Diaspora... a man with backbone ... expects concrete results that will contribute to national growth and independence from neighboring powers ... appreciates the Forum, and left a very positive impression by answering many difficult questions, demonstrating his knowledge and ability to answer them. "

Western news agency *AFP* reported that Raymonds Vējonis was the EU's first "green" president, although they do not consider him as typical of EU Green party sympathizers. He reportedly promised

to use his presidency to promote Green environmental policy. Latvia is tackling security issues and increased tensions with Russia. "I would like to improve relations with Russia ... but while Russian rockets and heavy weapons remain in Ukraine, it is not really possible" stated the President.

Russia's *Eurasia Daily* asked what Russia can expect from the new President of its western "traditionally unfriendly neighbor?" (Russia traditionally blames someone else.) The Agency believes that the impression gained in 2008 of Vējonis was of a calm, clever utilitarian rather than a radical nationalist. He never made aggressive statements against local Russians or Russia itself. Taking over the post of Minister of Defense, Vējonis started using unfriendly rhetoric against the Russians. Now Vējonis wholeheartedly supports the permanent presence of NATO troops in Latvia, and requests more resources for weapons. Vējonis recent "anti-Russian" statements: "Seventy- eighty percent of broadcasts on Russian television worldwide are hostile to Latvia"; "Unfortunately, I must say that Russia is our long-term problem, and we should not expect any changes, either inside Russia or internationally." If this trend continues, says *Eurasia Daily*, Vējonis may well turn into a "war president." It continues "It's quite possible, but Latvia can only symbolically be called an independent state."

Overall, the positive assessment of the President can be explained by his calm, steady character (charismatic leaders are not in fashion), is not part of the Riga political elite whose attitude makes the majority of society outside Riga feel ignored. Vējonis is the rare politician who has not become rich while in office, a feature indicating honesty. The newly elected President's team largely consists of young people: management's average age is 47, the advisors is 36. They belong to the post-Soviet generation, which has now been given the opportunity to unleash society from the restrictions of the Soviet era generation