

The political triangle: information, parties and the voter **Klāvs Zichmanis – 14 September 2011**

Riga – It's two weeks before the emergency parliamentary elections on September 17th and finally there are signs of a political campaign: ads in the mass media, leaflet distribution, and advertising posters in bus shelters and street advertisements. This is the second general election in less than a year and has left many party coffers empty, and the sudden decision by President Zatlers to dismiss parliament left party organizers unprepared. However, for the past two months in the media there has been a hidden ad campaign nonetheless and musings on election-related topics.

The press in Latvia is free, however it's free only from government control and ownership and with few exceptions, the media serve the economic or political interests of its owners. The result is weak and often skewed information from which voters make political opinions and choices. Web sites are generally more informative, those associated with one of the six largest Latvian newspapers (three Latvian, three Russian) are still marginal. In the Lembergs owned The Independent newspaper misinformation and disinformation dominate its political coverage. Anti-Western, pro-Russian, it specializes in out of context citations, descriptions of petty political hassles, open falsehood, and investigative journalism is a foreign concept. The paper's coverage is the political version of the gossip magazine *Privātā Dzīve*. The internet portal Providus recently examined media coverage of Latvian political parties as at the end of August. The most frequently examined party was V (Vienotība), the most positive articles were about SC (Saskaņas Centrs), but the more negative articles were about the ZRP (Zatlers Reform Party). The complete results look like this:

<u>Party</u>	<u>% Positive</u>	<u>% Negative</u>	<u>% of Articles</u>
SC	10,2	7,0	15,5
ZRP	4,8	15,8	18,2
ZZS	2,3	9,0	18,6
VL/TB/LNNK	3,2	5,5	12,6
V	2,5	9,4	22,6
PCTVL	2,7	8,2	4,5
LPP/LC	1,6	4,7	7,9

The media and certain parties support or even encourage some fallacious assumptions. The most common political slogan, that all politicians are the same is a classic. It expresses many things: first, the differences between good and bad members of parliament and parties are erased, leveled, good and evil are equated. Second, if all politicians are the same, there is no need to evaluate member or party activity, i.e. what laws they propose, support or how they voted. Third, accountability for bad laws is ascribed to all parties, again deleting differences between parties and making every member and party responsible for the results. Fourth, comparing party words and deeds

becomes unnecessary. The result, of course, is cynicism, mistrust of Parliament as an institution, a feeling of powerlessness by the individual, that it's not worth voting and that influence on political processes is an illusion, and basically questions democratic principles. However, this situation is ideal for corruption. This slogan avoids public scrutiny of the corrupt parties and at the same time tarnishes the image of decent ones reducing public interest in participating in political discourse and thus making dubious political activity easier.

Another widespread public assumption is the phrase the fight for positions (*cīņa par krēsliem*), meaning the competition for ministerial or other lucrative posts in the party or government. Of course, this is largely true, but the slogan does not distinguish between the normal political processes of selecting applicants for government positions and fighting for a position for self seeking personal greed. It is assumed that all who aspire to hold public office do so for selfish reasons, again, equating the honest with the dishonest. Accustomed to order as a standard in an authoritarian system, the public sees democratic competition as messy, uncivilized, selfish and unnecessary. Appointing public officials to positions is a necessary component of the democratic political process. The law of supply and demand, when demand is greater, will always create competition to fill positions of prestige, power or money generating ministries within the governing coalition, as well as intra party competition for ministries and other offices. The public, of course, has no answer to the question of how else except by the fight for positions can the necessary positions be distributed. This slogan, again, degrades the prestige of parliamentary democracy.

The weak public understanding of the distribution of powers between parliament and government and the different functions each serves makes it possible for some media to push in favor of certain parties. In the 10th parliament, the Vienotība led coalition government's deficiencies and weaknesses were ascribed only to Vienotība, not the ruling coalition as a whole. The other partner, ZZS escapes blame.

In this questionable atmosphere can voters rationally choose the cleanest parties and candidates? Studies show that only between 20-30 percent of voters decide rationally, the others decide emotionally, at the last minute or without much thought. Due to historic and Soviet-era autocratic power influences, Latvian voters are generally passive and watch how others run their lives. A large proportion of voters are not self-confident enough to think that they can run their own lives by taking responsibility for their actions, since power has always belonged to others, and survival required submission to authority. Autocracy is prevalent in party structures and management style toward rank and file deputies and party members. Although many see weaknesses and corruption in their party leadership, an internal bottom up revolt is unlikely. It is safer to watch from the sidelines than taking action or responsibility. Internally, the party brass is all powerful and mostly undemocratic. The Saeima is ruled by a partocracy, parliamentary leadership

by party brass. Even a visit to the parliament building is subject to party consent. The average Latvian voter expects that the government has a duty to take care of him. In terms of the Western left-right political spectrum, the voter here ranks at the left end of the spectrum.

Even with weak and even false information, autocratic political parties, voter cynicism and an authoritarian past, a large part of the electorate is still capable of sifting through it all and making reasoned rational choices. The question is, are such people in the majority.