

The decisive moment
Klavs Zichmanis – 27 September 2011

Thursday before the elections was the last legal campaigning day, the last chance to influence voters for a candidate, party or program. Newspaper articles, radio and television commentators continuously babbled about possible outcomes, coalitions, ministers and Prime Ministers. Last minute emails circled the globe hoping to influence the undecided. Friday all this stopped and everyone enjoyed a welcome silence. By law, ad campaign materials from streets and buildings must be removed by Friday morning, and no written or telecast political ads are allowed. This day political parties put finishing touches to hoped for victory celebrations to be held after Saturday's vote.

As an election observer, I spent Saturday at the nearest polling station watching people exercise their five minutes in power deciding the country's fate. Some voters were waiting at 7:00 am for the poll to open, perhaps hoping to be the first to vote. Some went in and out of the booths quickly, clearly knowing who to vote for, others sat there much longer, perhaps making a last moment decision, maybe adding pluses to or striking out selected candidates. Voters came in waves, sometimes waiting in line, at other times the place was empty. Shortly before closing, some panting soul's runs in, hoping it was not too late to vote. The poll managers were experienced, courteous, helpful and knowledgeable.

Sunday morning the first serious preliminary election results became known. The foreign vote had not yet been counted, along with a few minor problems, but basically there was no major change later on. The final election results were:

Ranking	Party	% of vote	No. of deputies
1	SC	28.9	31
2	ZRP	20.7	22
3	V	18.7	20
4	NA	13.7	14
5	ZZS	12.1	13
6	LPP / LC	below the 5% threshold	

60.5 of the eligible voters participated, 2-3 per cent less than in the 10th Parliamentary elections. Russian speaking voters firmly supported the ethnically based SC. This is supported by a study done by *Ir* magazine. The total number of votes cast for SC and PCTVL together is the same as the last election, in Riga it even slightly declined. The seeming climb SC support can be explained by the slight decline in voter participation. SC support for Slesers does not seem to have done it any damage.

The Latvian voter was concerned with two major issues: economic recovery and the mitigation or even elimination from political participation in parliament of the oligarchs. Although the Latvian voter also voted for ethnic Latvian parties, support for them was based on the future direction of the state, not ethnic-related issues.

The different emphasis on election issues by Latvian and Russian-speaking parties is reflected in how they assess the SC victory as the largest party, and who has the right to form the next government. The largest party traditionally is given the first opportunity to do this, although the ability to form a stable coalition is more important. After this vote, the so-called 51 + Coalition, which consists of ZRP + V + NA (VL / LNNK / TB) looks the most stable, because all of them share a belief in the importance of the rule of law, have a compatible approach to national development and whose leadership does not consist of the old Soviet era elite. The SC's unconventional economic policies have scared off international investors, and are largely based on potential Russian markets, but which will open up only if Latvian domestic and foreign policies are acceptable to Russia. The economic, legal and public policy framework between the 51 + Coalition and the SC is too different to build an effective stable government. Other workable coalition combinations without certain 'red lines' are hard to find.

This time, money did not play a significant role in the election outcome. Parties that spent the least enjoyed the best success - ZRP, starting from scratch won second place, and NA almost doubled its representation in parliament.

Critics of Zatlers' Presidency complain that he should have recalled the 9th Saeima, not the 10th. If he had done so, the results then would not be as positive as Saturday's vote suggests. Society at that time did not fully appreciate the impact of the oligarchs. During the relative prosperity of the 'fat' years (2006-08), since many were enjoying 'a piece of the pie', the oligarchs were not seen as particularly troublesome who have to be squeezed out of government. But now, during hard times, the impact of oligarch illicit activity on living standards seems to be better understood.