

New Government Approved

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On October 25th, five weeks after the election, the Saeima (Parliament) passed a confidence motion approving the new *Justice* (V+ZRP+NA) coalition government. The day after the election, the current coalition looked like the natural and logical choice, so why did it take so long to form?

Less than a week after the election, the ZRP switched from trying to create the *Justice* coalition to another, the ZRP+SC+V. Ten days later it switched back to talks with the *Justice* option. Two days before the confidence vote, a splinter group of ZRP MP's, the *Olšteins sešnieks*, left the party. If the *Justice* coalition had been formed within two weeks or so after the election would the *Olšteinieši* have separated?

A possible explanation has four factors: the ZRP, responsibility, Dombrovskis as PM and the economic interests. The seven week old ZRP, hastily created in August was more a movement than a party. After the elections it felt strong and capable. Convinced of the value of its program and voter support for it (becoming the second largest party), it enthusiastically started coalition building, hoping to maximize the implementation of its program and the envisioned Constitutional amendment to elect the president by popular vote, which requires a 2/3 majority. This could be achieved by a ZRP+V+SC coalition (73 votes). V, being aware that this could split their party, withdrew from this arrangement. ZZS could theoretically replace V giving such a coalition 66 votes, enough for a Constitutional amendment, but the ZRP's "red line" against the ZZS prevented this coalition. These two possibilities gave the *Olšteins sešnieks* no reason to leave the ZRP because the interests they represent would not be affected. But a government without V creates new problems.

While the SC and the ZRP would ensure enough votes (53) to form a government, neither party wanted the Prime Minister's (MP) job. Downsizing the budget is still not over and Europe may be entering a new economic crisis. In the absence of better economic conditions, both parties preferred others take governmental responsibility. For the ZRP however, finding a responsible MP was important to ensure successful implementation of its election platform and the desired Constitutional change. Such avoidance of responsibility also appears in the new government, which appointed five unelected ministers, the so-called *impartial professionals*.

As a rare politician highly regarded among voters, Valdis Dombrovskis can handle and has filled the responsible post of MP and thus has support from both the ZRP and SC. With V abandoning the ZRP+V+SC coalition, the responsible Dombrovskis went with it. The ZRP was forced to abandon the Constitutional change and its *cohesive society* dream and switch to the *Justice* coalition, now effectively led by V.

However, the new coalition could not guarantee the defense of certain economic interests. *Justice's* 56 votes would be free to decide against them, putting them at risk. The new coalition had to be weakened and made dependent, and this is what the *Olšteins sešnieks* achieved. Four or five of them would not be enough, and

seven or more would look like a blatant manipulation by economic interests. The *Oļšteinis sešnieks* is enough to make the government feel insecure, since it is unknown how it will vote. In addition, the official reason for leaving was not economic interests but the undemocratic nature of the ZRP. The party in this respect is a typical Latvian party, not the exception. SC, ZZS and the former LPP and Tautas parties internally have iron discipline. It is unknown whether the *Justice* coalition has more hidden plants that would refrain from supporting it.

Western and local Latvians smirk and laugh at Latvia's seeming inability to act without the appearance of a political circus or chaos and it is common to denigrate Latvians as politically immature, uncivilized, or somehow otherwise deficient. However, such descriptions, promoted by Latvian media and Westerners, hide a real political power struggle between economic interests and their opponents. The seeming circus or chaos has certain logic. What makes the Latvian political process ludicrous is the reluctance to call a spade a spade, and even fear to call things by the right names.

20 years in a nation's existence is short. Comparing Latvia today with its beginnings in 1991, political understanding has matured and is on the right track. The recent election shows increasingly focused political choices by voters. Society understands that no one will save Latvia but themselves, and therefore they must take responsibility for the future of Latvia themselves. They are beginning to realize that voters have power and are ready to use it. Progress of course is slow and many lack patience and want to live for today. However, a new post-Soviet political elite has developed, still insecure, but by the next election will be experienced and prepared to take more ambitious steps.

Two previously elected major oligarchs are no longer in Parliament. The third, Lembergs, recently suffered setbacks in British and Latvian courts, and if one judiciary is unable to put him behind bars the other will. One way or another Lembergs faces tough times ahead. Besides the three well-known oligarchs there are others and the fight against them will be tough. However, they are wounded, will tenaciously defend their interests, and the fight will become dirtier. Last September 17th the Unfinished Revolution made progress and will continue. If by the 2014 election the *Justice* coalition is a reasonably successful government, the revolution will be victorious.