

The Latvian Parliament will meet on 3rd June to elect the President of the Republic

Abstract :

On 10th April last the President of the Latvian Republic Andris Berzins told his fellow countrymen that he did not wish to remain for a further mandate as Head of State. According to a poll by TNS Latvia for the TV channel LNT 2/3 of the Latvians (68%) backed the outgoing head of State's decision. 41% of them said that Mr Berzins had chosen to do this because he knew that he did not have enough support within the Saeima, Parliament's only chamber. The outgoing President is the first in Latvia's history to give up on a second mandate due to personal reasons in justification of his decision.

The Presidential Office

The Latvian head of State is elected for four year mandate (renewable once) by the absolute majority of the 100 members of the Saeima. Voting is undertaken via a secret ballot. The post is open to any Latvian (who is not a national of any other country) aged at least 40. Candidates must enter their bid at least 50 days and 45 days at the latest before the end of the mandate of the head of State in office i.e. between 19th and 24th May this year.

If none of the candidates win the 51 votes vital for his/her election after two rounds a further election is organised two weeks later. Candidates have five days to announce that they will run. If again there is no absolute majority another election is organised.

In Latvia the President of the Republic represents the Latvian State across the world. He ratifies international treaties, appoints diplomatic representatives and accredits foreign diplomatic representatives. He is head of the armed forces, leads the National Council and can grant amnesty.

The head of State can suggest laws as well as a referendum on the dissolution of the Saeima. If a majority of the electorate approve, Parliament is dissolved and general elections are organised within the two months following the vote. However if more than half of the

electorate vote against dissolution, the President of the Republic has to resign from office and the Saeima then elects his successor for the remainder of the presidential mandate.

On the request of at least half of the MPs the head of State can be impeached by Parliament during a closed session if at least 2/3 of its members vote in support. In this event the Saeima immediately elects a new President of the Republic.

According to a poll by Latvijas Fakti in April last 60.3% of the Latvians said they wanted the head of State to have more power than the parties.

The Candidates

Four people have officially declared they are standing for the presidency on 3rd June next:

- Raimonds Vejonis, co-Chair of the Green Party of Latvia (LZP) and chair of the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS) – he is the present Defence Minister. He was appointed by the leaders of his party instead of the Mayor of Liepaja, Uldis Sesks;
- Egils Levits, a judge at the European Court of Justice, supported by the National Alliance (All for Latvia Union (VL) and the Fatherland and Freedom Union (TB/LNNK)) ;
- Martin Bondars (Regions Alliance, Latvijas Regionu Apvieniba, LRA), who was head cabinet of former Pre-

sident of the Republic Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga (1999-2007);

– Sergejs Dolgopolovs (Harmony Centre, SC), MP.

The electoral process

The election of the head of State in Latvia comprises a power struggle between the various political parties which use the election to increase their influence over the political landscape or in terms of the parties leading the country, over the government coalition. Some analysts also suggest that the ZZS is more interested in the post of Prime Minister than that of President of the Republic.

The present government is led by Laimdota Straujuma, bringing together Unity (Vienotība, V), the ZZS and the National Alliance. It was divided over its choice of candidate to the supreme office: indeed two partners in the coalition are running in the election. This division has weakened the government. Firstly Unity maintained that it supported Defence Minister Raimonds Vejonis but others expressed their support for Egils Levits.

The Prime Minister's party even wondered whether it might put a candidate forward: the names of Sandra Kalniete (V), former minister, former European Commissioner and present MEP (EPP), of MP Solvita Aboltina (V) and MEP Artis Pabriks (EPP) were circulated for a time.

The two parties – Unity and ZZS – only have 44 seats in the Saeima – i.e. -7 in comparison with the minimum required to elect Raimonds Vejonis in the first round of the election on 3rd June.

The internet site mansprezidents.lv (My President) offers Latvians aged 16 and over to vote on-line for their head of State. Its founder Madara Peipina hopes that every citizen will express his/her support to one candidate or another aiming to make the appointment process of the candidates for the head of State transparent and understandable for everyone.

In all likelihood, since there is no agreement within the government coalition, the President of the Republic will not be elected in the first round of voting.

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