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ANALYSE

Will 2018 be the year in which Harmony takes power in Latvia?

On 24th January last we learned that the next general elections in Latvia will take place on 6th October, according to the tradition i.e. on the first Saturday in October. Early voting will be possible during three days preceding the vote.

16 political parties are officially running in these elections, i.e. the second highest number after the election on 7th October 2006. 1,470 candidates are running, 31.7% of whom are women. 121 polling stations have been opened for Latvians living abroad in 45 countries, 23 more than in the last elections on 4th October 2014. The votes of the latter are counted as part of the constituency of Riga.

According to the most recent poll published at the end of August, Harmony (S) is due to come out ahead in the election with 23% of the vote. The Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), the party of outgoing Prime Minister Maris Kucinskis, is due to come second with 14% of the vote followed by its government partner, the National Alliance (AN), which is due to win 13% of the vote, just like "who does the country belong to?" (KPV), founded in May 2016 by Artuss Kaimins. Then there is the electoral alliance formed on 26th April by "For the Development of Latvia" (PAR), with 10% of the vote and the New Conservative Party (JKP), which is due to win 9% of the vote. New Unity (JV) is forecast to win 5% of the vote and will therefore be able to remain in Parliament.

THE PARTIES OF THE OUTGOING GOVERNMENT

The present Latvian government comprises 5 parties: the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), the National Alliance (NA^o, For Latvia and Ventspils and the Liepaja Party to which the outgoing Prime Minister Maris Kucinskis belongs. Kucinskis is standing for re-election. The latter two parties are very close the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS).

THE UNION OF GREENS AND FARMERS

The main party in the government coalition and also the party of the President of the Republic, Raimonds Vejonis, the Union of Greens and Farmers is campaigning on its results as head of the country since March 2016, and notably on the implementation of its tax reform and its ongoing reform of the healthcare system.

The party is promising to reform the education system and the housing policy and to provide greater support to SMEs in the farming and fishing industries.

The Union of Greens and Farmers refused to sign a non-cooperation pact with the pro-Kremlin parties, i.e. Harmony arguing that this agreement was a populist initiative.

The head of State Raimonds Vejonis did however indicate on 4th July last that Harmony should not under any circumstances become a member of the Latvian government. The Union of Greens and Farmers would like to continue its work with the National Alliance (AN), a nationalist, conservative coalition (opposed to the reception of refugees in Latvia) that is strongly committed in its support of the primacy of the Latvian language in education, as in public life, and which has promised never to ally itself with

Harmony. The National Alliance candidate for head of government is MEP Robert Zile.

At the end of August the President of the Republic issued a warning to the parties running in the election. "The Euro-Atlantic line is a fundamental framework of our work and I shall not accept any exception to this line. As a result, in view of the formation of the next government, I would like the candidates for the post of Foreign Affairs Minister and Defence Minister put forward by each of the parties to agree with my position. I must be absolutely sure that these candidates are prepared to follow the Euro-Atlantic line," declared Raimonds Vejonis during a televised interview.

A member of every government since its creation in 2002, the Union of Greens and Farmers is due to come amongst the first three parties in the election.

NEW UNITY

Unity (V), the party of former Prime Minister of this legislature, Laimdota Straujuma has experienced various internal splits and several defections that have led it to the verge of chaos. For the general elections, the party led by outgoing Economic Affairs Minister Arvils Aseradens, has allied itself to five regional parties – the Party of the County of Kuldiga, For the town and country of Tukums, the Party of Latgale, For Valmiera and Vidzeme and the Regional Party Jekabpils – in a coalition called New Unity (JV), led by MEP Krisjanis Karins.

New Unity wants to increase defence spending to 2.5% of the GDP and to bring the average wage up to 1,500€, make the election of the President of the Republic an open vote and finally allow the publication of the KGB's archives. JV has also been behind the non-cooperation pact with pro-Kremlin parties which it proposed to other parties for signature.

Arvils Aseradens believes that on 6th October next Latvia has to make a choice: the country can choose Europe or prefer, by voting for a populist party, to draw closer to the Visegrad Group of countries (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia).

According to the polls New Unity might not achieve the 5% threshold of votes cast on 6th October next. One of the main issues in this election is therefore the following: how will the former Unity voters behave during the ballot?

THE OTHER FORCES RUNNING

HARMONY

Harmony (even though Saskana means rather more "concord" in Latvian) is Latvia's leading party. In the last two general elections (17th September 2011 and 4th October 2014), the party that likes to define itself as being social democrat came out ahead in the election but was prevented from taking power. Many Latvians perceive Harmony to be too close to Russia. The party is indeed mainly supported by the Russian-speaking electorate and has mutually respectful relations with Moscow and the other countries of the Community of Independent States (CIS). It also failed to condemn the annexation of Crimea by Russia and is against the economic sanctions inflicted on Moscow as a result of this annexation and the invasion of Ukraine. Harmony did however break off its cooperation agreement with United Russia (ER), the party of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Will this be enough to make the party a government force?

Harmony wants to increase the share of the GDP devoted to education (up to 6%) and healthcare (7%). It defends the Russian language and would like children to have a trilingual education (Latvian, Russian and English).

The party's leader, Nils Usakovs, who is not running in the general election, has undertaken a great deal of work to modernise the image of his party, which he would like to turn into a social-democratic party.

Vjaceslavs Dombrovskis, the lead candidate for Harmony in the constituency of Riga, is the party's candidate for Prime Minister. Vjaceslavs Dombrovskis replaced former President of the Republic (2007-2011) Valdis Zatlers as head of the Reform Party (ZRP) in 2014. During the dissolution of the latter he announced

in April 2015 that he was leaving politics before creating the think-tank Certus. Now Vjaceslavs Dombrovskis repeats that the absence of Harmony from government is to blame for Latvia's stagnation, "a country that has been governed by the same parties for too long".

THE "SMALL" PARTIES

Amongst the "small parties" "who does the country belong to?" (Kam pieder valsts? KPV), founded in May 2016 by Artuss Kaimins, a former actor and at present MP (elected under the label of the Alliance of Regions (LRA), which he left when it started negotiations with Unity). KPV is a populist party that is extremely critical of the elites, which, in its opinion, are all only interested in money and their upkeep in power. Lawyer Aldas Gobzems is running for the post of Prime Minister.

The electoral alliance formed by the For the Development of Latvia (PAR) on 26th April is liberal, both from an economic and societal point of view. It hopes to double nurses' wages and also those of pensioners (in 10 years' time) and increase the minimum wage so that it totals 500€ per month (it stands at 430€ right now). MEP Artis Pabriks is running for the post of head of government.

Led by former Justice Minister (2012-2014) Janis Bordans (who is running for the post of Prime Minister) the New Conservative Party (JKP) was founded on 17th May 2014. It is campaigning for the defence of Latvian traditions and values, such as the Latvian language. Last year the former leaders of the anti-corruption agency (KNAB) Juta Strike and Juris Jurass joined this party which increased its popularity.

The New Conservative Party wants to reduce the number of ministers to 8, merge together the anti-corruption agency, the security police force and the bureau for the protection of the Constitution into one agency devoted to countering corruption and threats to peace and security.

"Amongst the new parties, only the New Conservative Party has any chance of winning any seats," declared Ojars Skudra, a political expert at the University of Latvia.

THE LATVIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The 100 members of the Saeima have been elected since 1998 for four years according to a proportional vote and the Sainte-Laguë method. Voters choose a list but can write a plus or a minus near the name of the candidates of their choice to promote or exclude the latter.

For the general elections Latvia is divided into 5 electoral districts: Riga (which is also the constituency in which the Latvians living abroad vote), Vidzeme, Latgale, Zemgale and Kurzeme. The number of seats available in each constituency (which ranges from 13 to 29) is set by the Central Electoral Commission four months prior to the vote according to the number of inhabitants in each of the latter. Candidates must be aged at least 21. Former agents of the USSR and the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic and the security, information and counter-espionage services cannot run in the general elections; since 2009 people who worked as technicians in the former Soviet security services can stand for election. Multiple candidatures are not allowed. A political party must win at least 5% of the votes cast to be represented in parliament.

A recent modification made to the electoral law obliges parties that want to put candidates in the general election forward to have been created for at least one year prior to the vote and to have a minimum of 500 members.

After the general election on 4th October 2014 the political parties represented in the Saeima were:

- Harmony (S), the main left-wing opposition party led by Nils Usakovs, with 24 seats;
- Unity (V), a liberal party and member of the outgoing government led by Economic Affairs Minister Arvils Aseradens, with 23 MPs;
- the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), a centrist party of Prime Minister Maris Kucinskis (he is a member of the Liepaja Party and the Union of Greens and Farmers), chaired by Augusts Brigmanis with 21 seats;
- National Alliance (AN), which brings together the Union for the Fatherland and Freedom (TB/LNNK), led by Gaidis Berzins, and All for Latvia (VL), a right-wing party led by Ratvis Dzintars. Member of the outgoing government it, has 17 seats;

General elections in Latvia

6th October 2018

- the Alliance of Regions (LRA), a regionalist party founded in 2014 and led by Nellija Kleinberga, with 8 seats;
- For Latvia from the heart (NSL), a populist conservative party led by Inguna Sudraba, with 7 seats.

In Latvia the President of the Republic is elected by parliament every four years. Raimonds Vejonis (ZZS) was appointed to this post on 3rd June 2015 in the 5th round of voting. He won 55 votes, i.e. the absolute majority (42 MPs voted against, and one voting slip was declared invalid).

Reminder of the results of the general elections on 4th October 2014 in Latvia

Turnout: 58,85%

Political parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of seats
Harmony (SSDP)	209 885	23	24
Unity (V)	199 535	21.87	23
Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS)	178 212	19.53	21
National Alliance (NA)	151 568	16.61	17
Alliance of Regions (LRA)	60 812	6.66	8
For Latvia from the heart (NSL)	62 521	6.85	7
Others	50 020	5.48	0

Source : http://sv2014.cvk.lv/index_rez.html?lang=0

Harmony comes out ahead in the general election in Latvia but is not guaranteed to be in the next government

RESULTS

Harmony (S), a left leaning party led by Nils Usakovs came out ahead in the general elections on 6th October in Latvia. The party won 19.8% of the vote, taking 23 seats (-1 in comparison with the previous election on 4th October 2014) in the Saeima, the only house of Parliament.

To whom does the country belong? (Kam pieder valsts? KPV?), a populist party founded in May 2016 by former actor and present MP Artuss Kaimins, came 2nd with 14.25% of the vote and 16 MPs. It is followed by the New Conservative Party (JKP) led by former Justice Minister (2012-2014) Janis Bordans, with 13.59% of the vote and 16 seats.

The liberal electoral alliance, For the Development of Latvia (PAR), founded on 26th April last came 4th with 12.04% of the vote and 13 seats, followed by the National Alliance (AN), a member of the outgoing government, which rallies the Union for the Fatherland and Freedom (TB/LNNK), led by Gaidis Berzins, and All for Latvia (VL), a rightwing party led by Ratvis Dzintars (11.01% of the vote and 13 seats, -4). The Union of

Greens and Farmers (ZZS), the party of outgoing Prime Minister Maris Kucinskis, won 9.91% of the vote and 11 seats (-10), New Unity (JV), led by MEP Krisjanis Karins, 6.69% of the vote and 8 seats (-15).

Harmony won in two of five electoral constituencies, Latgale and Riga, "To whom does the country belong?" came out ahead in the two constituencies of Zemgale and Kurzeme and the New Conservative Party won in Vidzeme.

Turnout was the lowest ever recorded in Latvia's history. It totalled just 54.57% i.e. 4.27 points less than in the previous general election on 4th October 2014.

General Elections Result 6th October 2018 in Latvia

Turnout: 54.57%

Political parties	Number of votes won	Percentage of votes won	Number of seats
Harmony (S)	167 117	19.80	23
To whom does the party belong? (KPV ?)	120 264	14.25	16
New Conservative Party (JKP)	114 694	13.59	16
For the development of Latvia (PAR)	101 685	12.04	13
National Alliance (AN)	92 963	11.01	13
Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS)	83 675	9.91	11
New Unity (JV)	56 542	6.69	8
Others	102 060	13	0

Source : <https://sv2018.cvk.lv/pub/ElectionResults>

"There is no possible coalition combination that will be stable and able to govern without Harmony," declared Nils Ushakovs, the party's leader on the announcement of the results.

The leader of "To whom does the country belong?" Artuss Kaimins declared during the electoral campaign that he was prepared to work with any of the parties, but he did however address contradictory message about forming an alliance with Harmony. However, in all the two parties only have 39 MPs, i.e. 12 short of the absolute majority.

"To whom does the country belong?" is extremely critical of the elites, which in its opinion are only interested in money and staying in power. The party is not offering a specific programme, but it promising to increase the number of infants' schools, the amount spent on healthcare and to reduce the number of civil servants. Its populist discourse and its candidates, who are new in the political arena, have succeeded in attracting a great number of voters, who are extremely discontent with their political leaders, who they believe to be corrupt and inefficient. "There is a strong anti-establishment feeling in Latvia as well as a strong desire for something new. If we look elsewhere we can see the same thing happening in many European countries," declared Arnis Kaktins, director of the pollster SKDS. « To whom does the country belong? » has succeeded in convincing many Latvians that the leading classes have corrupted the State and that no change will occur in Latvia before the latter are chased from power and replaced, » stresses Una Bergmane, professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics (LSE). "Voters have sent us the following message: we want to see new faces and we are not satisfied with the way the country's issues are being

dealt with," maintains Janis Ikstens, a political expert at the university of Latvia.

In the past Harmony has already come out ahead twice in the general elections in Latvia (in September 2011 and in October 2014) but it has never entered government, because most of the other parties refuse to work with a movement that it considers too close to Russia.

Harmony likes to define itself to represent "social democracy" and has put forward several personalities of "Latvian origin" on its lists, and recently broke the cooperation agreement it had with United Russia (ER), the party of Russian President Vladimir Putin. However, it is not certain that this will enable it to reach office.

With 7 parties entering the Saeima will be extremely segmented. The coalition possibilities are multiple and the parties against participation by Harmony in government will do everything so that once again, they will prevent this party from entering office.

"The initiative to engage in discussions in view of a coalition must come from the centre right," indicated the chair of the Unions of Greens and Farmers, Augusts Brigmanis when the results were announced. The re-election of the right-wing government is still the privileged option by many political analysts.

Moreover, the head of the Latvian State, Raimonds Vejonis, indicated during the electoral campaign that he preferred the solution of continuity. There is therefore little chance that he will appoint former minister Vjaceslavs Dombrovskis, Harmony's candidate as Prime Minister or Aldis Gobzems, the candidate of "To whom does the country belong?"

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