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Latvia is preparing for the parliamentary elections in 2022

The municipal elections in Latvia, held in June 2021, have opened the informal election campaign season. Political activity of the candidates who intend to run in the parliamentary elections, scheduled to be held on October 1 next year, has increased. Their initiatives are undoubtedly influenced by the migration crisis and the uncertainty of political and social situations caused by expected fourth wave of the pandemic. In the last eight months, new political parties have emerged in Latvia: the Law and Order party, Stability! party, Latvia First party, and the Republic party, which position themselves in opposition to the government and is taking advantage of the disenchantment of citizens with the current policies of the state. The fragmented parliament and frequent changes in the government are characteristic for Latvia; therefore, it is possible that the new parties will achieve a good result and be elected to the Saeima.

Unstable political scene. From the beginning of 2019, the government in Latvia has been composed of the following: New Unity (*Jaunā Vienotība*), Who Owns the State? (*Kam pieder valsts*, KPV LV), New Conservative Party (*Jaunā konservatīvā partija*), Development/For! (*Attīstībai/Par!*), and the National Alliance "All For Latvia!" – "For Fatherland and Freedom" (*Nacionālā apvienība "Visu Latvijai!" – "Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK"*) ("[Komentarze IEŚ](#)", [nr 1](#)). In recent months, changes on the Latvian political scene have most clearly touched the KPV LV party (currently For Human Latvia – *Par cilvēcei Latviju*). While it received 14.3% of votes in the 13th Saeima election and won 16 seats, today its support is less than 1% (according to SKDS survey conducted in July 2021) and has only five representatives in the parliament. On June 2, the party was removed from the government coalition. Its political potential is therefore very low, as shown by the results of the Riga City Council elections in August 2020 (slightly over 1%).

The high support and then loss of votes of the populist KPV LV in a relatively short time are typical elements of Latvia's unstable government and fragmented party system. After 1991, new parties gained relatively high support in elections, but they rarely managed to stay in power for very long. As a result, the average period of the government's rule was around 18 months, when the coalition governments and politically fragmented parliament had to constantly grapple with internal crises.

Closing ranks. In recent months in Latvia, the activity of some politicians has increased noticeably, and new political parties have been formed. This should not be explicitly associated with the local elections held on June 5, 2021, but with next year's elections to Saeima, which are held on the first Saturday in October. According to the law, parties and their associations must be established no later than a year before the elections and have at least 500 members may to participate in elections.

At the beginning of January 2021, Aldis Gobzems established the Law and Order (*Likums un kārtība*) party. Gobzems, previously a member of the KPV LV (initially he was even proposed to be the party's candidate for prime minister) and for two years a non-attached MP, is one of the most controversial figures in the Latvian parliament. He is known for his populist rhetoric and vocal criticism of the government and the opposition. Among the members of his new party, there are many figures who have not been connected to politics thus far, including representatives of the media and businesses with conservative views.

A few weeks later, Aleksejs Rosļikovs and Valērijs Petrovs, former Riga city councillors, formed the Stability! (*Stabilitātei!*) party. Earlier, they were expelled from the Harmony (*Saskaņa*) party because of the lack of party discipline while voting for the deputy mayor of Riga. They then took part in the extraordinary elections to the

Capital City Council from the Alternative (*Alternative*) party's list, but without success. Their new party wants to take over the existing social-democratic electorate of Harmony. It positions itself as centrist, and its main goal is to ensure financial and social stability, as well as to "restore entrepreneurs' confidence in the state". On August 14 this year, a founding meeting of the Latvia First (*Latvija pirmajā vietā*) party was held, initiated by Ainārs Šlesers. He is a former politician, an oligarch who announced his return to politics in the spring of this year after 10 years away from politics. In July, Šlesers founded an association of the same name with the aim of strengthening family and Christian values and social integration. Šlesers has already reached an agreement with the Honor to Serve Riga (*Gods kalpot Rīgai*) party to run together in the upcoming elections to Saeima.

Also in mid-August, Sandis Ģirģens and his brother Kaspars, both previously associated with KPV LV, announced the formation of a new political party. As a result, on August 28, the Republic (*Republika*) party was established with S. Ģirģens and Vjačeslavs Dombrovskis as leaders. Both of them have rich political experience. Dombrovskis was deputy minister and a candidate for prime minister for Harmony in previous elections, and Ģirģens is the former minister of the interior. The Republic is going to attract former members of Harmony and individuals without political backgrounds. The party is supposed to be a pragmatic group, based on liberal and social democratic ideas.

What do the new parties have in common? The new parties are looking for support among the protest electorate, which is why they are willing to take advantage of the uncertain situation caused by the pandemic and the migration crisis. Gobzems, Rošļikovs, and Šlesers participated actively in the protests against the restrictions introduced because of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly against the proposition of compulsory vaccinations (the last one took place on August 18 in Riga and attracted nearly 4,000 people). The new parties build their potential based on slogans referring to security, stability, and the traditional family model. The uncertain situation related to the next wave of the coronavirus expected in fall and the migration crisis, as well as low public confidence towards the government, may foster consolidation of support, especially among voters with right-wing identification. The potential of the newly established political parties is very large, evidenced by the unexpectedly good election results achieved by them in recent years.

Apart from the freshness of the new parties, future election results will undoubtedly be influenced by dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the most important institutions in the country and, as a consequence, low voter turnout. Social confidence in the government and parliament is constantly declining – 23% and 20%, respectively (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 330](#)). In addition, the results of the SKDS survey in March 2021 indicated that 72% of respondents were dissatisfied with the work of the government during the pandemic, and 70% of them considered the economic situation in the country as bad. Therefore, low voter turnout occurred in the 2018 Saeima elections, with 54% and only 34% during the last local government elections, which was the lowest value in the elections since 1991.

Conclusions. There is still a year left before the parliamentary election, but politicians are in a hurry to create new political forces so that in the event of failures, there is still time to reshuffle the ranks. Most of them are active politicians, so cutting them off from the political past can sometimes be difficult (some were involved in political and financial scandals or linked to Russian business) and damage the reputation of new parties.

Currently, none of the parties has a chance to be elected, but it does not mean that their ratings will not increase. Low voter turnout combined with high volatility on the political scene make the election results difficult to predict. Latvian voters tend to change which the party they vote for easily, and their preferences are increasingly influenced by specific political events and politicians rather than by long-term strategies and political programs.

The leaders of the newly formed parties also hope to create a common platform to run on in the elections. Although they share criticism of the government, their attitude towards basic values proves to be the main differences in their general opinions. For example, when voting on the constitutional amendments to the definition of the family initiated by the National Alliance, Dombrovskis, along with liberal parties, voted against bringing the bill to committee, unlike Gobzems, who joined the conservative section of parliamentarians voting to advance the act.

Politicians also represent different models of action – from Gobzems’ populist rhetoric to Dombrovskis’ more constructive and thoughtful proposals.

If individual new parties win at least 5% of the vote and are elected to the Saeima, Latvia will once again experience fragmentation of the parliament and, as a result, the government. In such a case, as in 2018, the process of forming a government coalition by parties from a broad ideological spectrum could be very difficult.