Latvia: EUropean expertise matters

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Latvia was one of the few EU countries that went to the polls on Saturday 25 May, although advance voting was also available for three days. According to the Central Elections Commission (CEC), there were 1,411,955 Latvians eligible to vote – a decrease of 4% compared with 2014. A party list system is used to choose eight MEPs, and voters can express either a positive or a negative preference for each candidate on a list that they vote for. As in all countries, there is a threshold of 5 per cent in order to access the European Parliament, although the effective threshold (due to the small number of seats) tends to be higher. Whilst national elections in Latvia divide the country into five electoral districts, for the European elections the whole country constitutes single electoral district.

THE CAMPAIGN

Both registered political parties and their alliances having no fewer than five-hundreds members are allowed to field candidate lists in European elections in Latvia. The CEC registered sixteen candidate lists representing both coalition and opposition parties in the national parliament. along with parties that did not clear the electoral threshold in the 2018 *Saeima* elections, and organisations that did not participate in those elections.

Electoral performance of new parties only recently elected to the Latvian national parliament were a matter of some interest during the campaign. Both the New Conservative Party and the KPV LV party (*Kam pieder valsts?*, which means: Who owns the State?) mobilised their supporters by heavily criticising the government, and by accusing the political establishment of corruption and of mismanaging public administration. As a result of a complicated coalition building process, both parties became part of the ruling coalition headed by Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš of New Unity (center-right). That, however, coincided with an ebbing of popular support for the KPV LV party, which prompted some pundits to conclude that its accession to the governing coalition had not been politically beneficial for this populist party. Moreover, the KPV LV faced intensive political infighting among its political leaders that arguably contributed the decline of the party's support. The New Conservatives, however, stood united and suffered almost no loss of public support.

Nevertheless, it was the Social Democratic Party Harmony, a main advocate of political interests of Slavic minorities, that experienced the most turbulent campaign. The party was largely caught by surprise in February when MP Vjačeslavs Dombrovskis was removed as the party's top candidate to be replaced by Nils Ušakovs, a long-serving Mayor of Riga, and Andris Ameriks, former Deputy Mayor of Riga and a close ally of Ušakovs, against the backdrop of corruption charges brought against a number of managers of the largest municipal transportation company. The meaning of this sudden overhaul became more apparent in May when the Anti-corruption Bureau searched premises of the Riga Tourism Development Office (RTDO) a few weeks before the elections, and the media reported financial transactions implicating the use of RTDO funds to finance the 2018 national election campaign of Harmony. After this news emerged, Ušakovs disappeared from public view, exemplifying Harmony's inclination to avoid public discussions throughout this campaign.

Manifestos of major contestants seemingly paid more attention to European issues (as compared to earlier campaigns) and to increasing the percentage of gross national income to be redistributed via the EU budget. While more funding for higher education and research in the next multiannual financial framework was broadly supported, centrist parties such as Development/For! and the Progressives were keen to redistribute the support provided by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This was opposed by several right-of-the-centre parties, most notably the Union of Greens and Farmers who, on the other hand, emphasised fostering bioeconomics, reducing waste and transitioning away from fossil fuels. Centrists took the lead in offering EU-related solutions to social problems in Latvia – creating a pan-European pension fund, setting a uniform minimum wage formula, or even introducing a uniform tax system across the EU. To this end, they were joined by the pro-Slavic Harmony party that *inter alia* pledged to fight nationalism and xenophobia and called for municipalities' direct access to EU funding. This take on devolution was further elaborated by the Russian Union of Latvia calling for a federal Europe and extensive cultural autonomy of ethnic minorities in the EU.

The New Conservative Party and the National Alliance, in turn, wanted to increasingly allocate EU funding for vocational education and life-long learning to meet the demands of labour market. The two parties saw the EU as yet another mechanism to provide security from Russia by means of battling misinformation, improving cyber security and supporting select EU Eastern neighbourhood countries. These two parties spoke about the EU as a union of nation states, while the ideologically proximal New Unity argued in favour of a strong and united EU that discourages any transfer of ownership of strategic European companies to 'unfriendly third countries'. The populist KPV LV party offered a catch-all platform emphasising both social security, economic development, CAP and transparency of EU governance, as well as an inclusive society that supports the culture of smaller nations.

According to data provided by the parties, overall financial investment in the electroal campaign was lower than in the 2018 national elections. Harmony and Development/For! were the top spenders, followed by New Unity and the Russian Union of Latvia. Moreover, media strategies of parties differed. While Harmony invested

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Latvia

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
New Unity (JV)	EPP	124,193	26.4	2	-19.8	-2
Social Democratic Party 'Harmony'	S&D	82,604	17.6	2	+4.4	+1
National Alliance 'All for Latvia'-'For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK' (NA)	ECR	77,591	16.5	2	+2.2	+1
For Development/For! (A/P)	NI	58,763	12.5	1		+1
Russian Union of Latvia (LKS)	EPP	29,546	6.3	1	+0.1	
Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS)	ALDE	25,252	5.4		-2.9	-1
Regional Alliance of Latvia (LRA)	NI	23,581	5.0		+2.5	
New Conservative Party (JKP)	NI	20,595	4.4			
Progressives (P)	NI	13,705	2.9			
Political Party KPV LV (KPV)	NI	4,362	0.9			
Latvian Nationalists (LN)	NI	3,172	0.7			
Centre Party (CP)	NI	2,312	0.5			
Awakening (A)	NI	2,242	0.5			
Social Democratic Workers' Party of Latvia (LSDSP)	NI	922	0.2		-0,1	
New Harmony (JS)	NI	829	0.2			
Party of Action (RP)	NI	791	0.2			
Total		470,460	100	8		
Turnout (%)			33.5			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			5			

Source: https://epv2019.cvk.lv/pub/velesanu-rezultati

heavily in TV advertising, Development/For!, Regional Alliance of Latvia and the New Conservative Party prioritised radio advertisements. The Progressives and the New Unity were geared towards outdoor billboards but KPV LV relied on social media that had worked to its favour in 2018.

Election administration was plagued with problems after Arnis Cimdars, a long-standing Chair of CEC, was removed from office in March. The media reported that up to 700,000 eligible citizens may have not received an official letter indicating the polling station at which they are to vote. Although measures were taken to fix the problem, not all elegible voters received the correct information. The government announced that people could go to any polling station on the three days of advance voting. However, this option was closed for parts of the second and third day of advance voting due to a technical problem. Because of these setbacks , the Mayor of Daugavpils, Andrejs Elksniņš,' argued that these elections were illegitimate.

RESULTS

Voter turnout rose by a little more than three percentage points in comparison to the previous EP elections, reaching 33.5%. This increase follows a trend observed in many EU countries. Although the technical problems abovementioned were occasionally blamed for keeping voter activity low this year, one could argue that media coverage of this issue increased awareness of the elections and that the option to vote at any polling station for a few days actually increased turnout.

New Unity received more than a quarter of all votes cast. However, this represented a sharp decline compared with 2014, when this party garnered support from nearly a half of voters. In contrast, the Harmony party improved its performance by four percentage points and one MEP seat, as compared with 2014. The National Alliance also gained one more MEP seat. The Russian Union of Latvia reaped the fruits of a notable investment in the election campaign as it managed to retain one MEP seat in a fierce competition with Harmony. Finally, the Union of Greens and Farmers continued to lose public support and failed to obtain representation in the European Parliament.

CONCLUSION

The 2019 EP elections in Latvia suggested the importance of the candidates' experience of European affairs. New Unity benefitted from the presence on the party's candidate list of Valdis Dombrovskis, the Vice-President of the European Commission, and several seasoned MEPs. Roberts Zīle, a long-serving MEP representing the National Alliance (NA), likely mobilised voter segments that would otherwise not support NA. Tatjana Ždanoka of the Russian Union of Latvia, another experienced MEP, helped her party secure representation in the EP.

In line with the theory of second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), several smaller parties performed well (New Unity, Russian Union of Latvia). However, opposition parties showed mixed results – while Harmony increased its vote sha-

re, the Union of Greens and Farmers lost their EP representation. Similarly, new parties had divergent fortunes. While Development/For! obtained one EP seat, New Conservatives and KPV LV did not clear the electoral threshold. For the populist KPV LV this crushing defeat followed excellent results in the national elections eight months earlier. This could be a consequence of serious conflicts within the party's leadership, accompanying gradual disillusionment of KPV voters, that will likely result in a disintegration of this party before the 2021 municipal elections.

Slavic parties (Harmony and the Russian Union of Latvia) mobilised their supporters in greater numbers and increased their combined representation in the EP. Some political rivals have hastily claimed this resulted from a low turnout. Based on official returns, this appears to be a candidate visibility (Ušakovs) effect. Moreover, sending Ušakovs to the EP will likely affect not only his public visibility and support, but it may also trigger both more profound changes within the Harmony party and competition for the position of Mayor of Riga.

While EP election results are rarely taken as an indication of party support at the national level in Latvia, some politicians have voiced a proposal to choose the next EU commissioner on the basis of party performance in the elections. This approach is not favoured by several participants of the current coalition, and therefore the next commissioner will likely be a result of a broader political compromise involving other important decisions.

REFERENCES

Reif, K., & Schmitt, H. (1980). Nine second-order national elections–a conceptual framework for the analysis of European Election results. *European journal of political research*, 8(1), 3-44.