

LATVIA

Ivars Ijabs

I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Latvia has a parliamentary system with a directly elected legislative body and an executive that emerges from the legislature and is responsible to it. At the centre of the Latvian political system stands the parliament (Saeima), which is directly elected by citizens for a four-year term. Saeima, an unicameral legislature, has 100 members. They are elected by means of a party-list proportional system. The parliament appoints the head of state, the president, for a four-year term; an absolute majority of members of parliament (MPs) must support the candidate. The government must also achieve a vote of confidence in parliament. The candidate for prime minister, however, must be nominated by the president, who usually makes his decision after consultations with parliamentary fractions. Only after that can the parliamentary vote of confidence take place. The Latvian parliament usually includes eight to ten parliamentary groups; the country has therefore only experienced coalition governments hitherto.

Political system

The Latvian Saeima is a strong legislative body for several reasons. First, it is virtually impossible to dissolve it. True, the president has a constitutional right to initiate dissolution (article 48 of the Latvian constitution *Satversme*). In this case a referendum must take place, and, if the popular vote is negative, the president himself is dismissed. No president until now has risked his/her own position in this way. Therefore none of the nine Latvian Saeimas has been dissolved. Second, the position of government vis-à-vis the parliament is relatively weak. The government can be dissolved by the parliament at any moment; if the annual budget law proposed by the government fails, the government falls by necessity. There is no constructive vote of no confidence. All changes of individual ministers must be approved by the parliament. Third, Saeima has not only legislative functions, but also the right to appoint judges, the head of the state audit office (Valsts Kontrole), the head of the anti-corruption bureau (KNAB), the prosecutor general and other important actors.

The current functioning of the Latvian parliamentary system is marked by two distinct traits. First, the fragmentation leads to short-lived coalitions and governments. Since the restoration of independence in 1990 Latvia has experienced as many as 14 governments. The longest duration of a cabinet was 35 months (the government of Aigars Kalvītis from December 2004 until December 2007), the shortest just eight months (the government of Vilis Krištopāns from November 1998 until July 1999). Although all Latvian governments have been ideologically similar (i.e. centre-right), frequent changes of ministers and prime ministers hinder the continuity of policymaking and responsible reforms. In addition, these changes have often been motivated not by ideological differences, but by personal considerations and the moneyed interests of influential party sponsors. Second, Latvia is the only country in the EU where the political spectrum is still dominated by an ethnic divide (Lipset/Rokkan 1967): there are ethnic Latvian parties and ethnic Russian parties. Russian parties usually get about a quarter of the vote in parliamentary elections. However, being regarded as socialist and Russia-friendly, they have not been included in any government until now. Hence some authors have even written about the emergence of "ethnic democracy" in Latvia (Pettai 1998). The stigmatization of Russian parties constrains party competition and hinders the development of meaningful political alternatives.

Constitution Latvia is the only country in Central Eastern Europe which re-adopted its pre-war constitution, originally adopted in 1922 (Pabriks/Purs 2001; Smith/Pabriks/Purs/Lane 2002). From the point of view of constitutional law, contemporary Latvia is not the "second republic", like most countries in the region, but the direct heir of the first Republic of Latvia, which existed from 1922 until 1934. This democratic statehood was interrupted by the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis in 1934 and, after that, by three consecutive occupations: by the Soviet Union, by Nazi Germany and, once again, by the Soviet Union. The feature is important to bear in mind in order to understand Latvian politics: the constitution is regarded as a symbol of state continuity, as well as a source of legitimation for certain policies, e.g. for the citizenship and border policies.

Important amendments have been made since the re-adoption of the constitution in 1990. Chapter 8 was added in 1998, establishing human and basic civil rights: freedom of speech (article 100), freedom of association (article 102), freedom of peaceful meetings announced with prior notice, street processions and pickets (article 103), as well as the right to participate in the work of the state and local government (article 101). On the whole, these rights are realized in practice; nevertheless, there are shortcomings in their realization. The best-known problem is the large number of so-called "non-citizens". These are former Soviet citizens living in Latvia who have no right to any other citizenship and have not acquired Latvian citizenship by naturalization. Although Latvia has adopted a relatively liberal naturalization policy, recent data from the Latvian Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (2009) reveals that approximately 358,000 people, or 16 per cent of the total population permanently living in Latvia, still have no political rights in the country's democratic institutions.

State of democracy Latvia is a functioning liberal democracy with free and fair elections, real political competition among parties, a free media, and the rule of law. It effectively protects human and minority rights, and provides its citizens with opportunities to participate in the political life of the country. Latvia is recognized as a democratic country by most international actors and it participates actively in the promotion of democracy in other countries of the region such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Nevertheless, there are several important deficiencies of liberal democracy in Latvia. The first is the considerable number of people without political rights, i.e. the "non-citizens" mentioned above. The second deficiency is the high level of political corruption. Although the level of administrative corruption has decreased significantly during the last five years, the "state capture" still remains salient in Latvian political life. Political decisions are still made behind closed doors among narrow circles of leading politicians and influential party donors, rather than in open discussion. Together with a worsening economic situation, this style of politics has led to widespread dissatisfaction with Saeima and political parties. According to the recent Eurobarometer opinion poll, published in February 2009, only 5 per cent of Latvians trust political parties (Eurobarometer 70). This is the lowest level of trust among all EU member states.

In 2004, Latvia together with seven other Central European countries achieved its most important strategic goal: membership of the EU and NATO. This event was crucial for the development of democracy in Latvia. On the one hand, the EU and NATO accession was followed by an economic boom and increased integration with international structures on different levels. On the other hand, the era of international "conditionality" was over, and after years of rigorous reforming and compliance with western standards a certain relief was felt among the political elite. This relaxation has had its political consequences. Mainstream politicians started openly to support anti-liberal causes, for example, the minister of interior Dzintars Jaundžeikars and other prominent politicians protested against a gay pride event taking place in Riga in July 2005; Latvian nationalist sentiments have also returned. Independent institutions, like the constitutional court, the anti-corruption agency, public media and the prosecutor's office have faced political attempts to narrow their independence. Nationalistic populism has also become more common among the political elite, as it was before the EU accession.

The near-omnipotence of Saeima has sometimes provoked discussions about whether the principle of the division of power has been realized in Latvia. This question must be answered positively. Although the parliament is powerful, there are institutions that balance its power. First, the president not only has the rather impractical right to initiate the dissolution of the parliament, he or she also fulfils the functions usually carried out by second chambers in bicameral systems. The president has the right to veto all legislation (a three-quarters majority of the parliament can overrule the presidential veto) as well as the right to initiate a referendum about it. These rights are used relatively often, the most prominent case being the referendum about dubious security legislation, initiated by the previous President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga in 2007. The president also has the right to nominate the candidate for prime minister, which can be a crucial function in a country where governments change frequently. Second, the court system is independent and can fulfil its function of judicial review, especially after the constitutional court was established in Latvia in 1998.

Separation of powers

Executive power in Latvia is exercised by a single executive, the cabinet of ministers. The number of ministries can be changed for political reasons. There have been cases when ministries and other cabinet posts (e.g. state secretaries) have been created for political reasons, i.e. to satisfy all coalition partners (e.g. the formation of Einars Repše's government in 2002). There are 14 ministries right now in Latvia, but their number will decrease because of the economic crisis. During the last five years of economic boom the state bureaucracy has become inflated and ineffective; hence there is a consensus among the political elite about the need to curtail it in the immediate future.

Latvia is a unitary state with a one-chamber legislature, Saeima. Until 2007 the cabinet of ministers also enjoyed the constitutional right to produce regulations with the force of law during parliamentary holidays. This prerogative (article 81 of Satversme) was abandoned because of its clear misuse, which led to a presidential veto and referendum (see above).

Furthermore, Latvia has a three-level general jurisdiction and a constitutional court. The independence of courts is secured in the constitution (article 83), laws and international treaties. Nevertheless, there are certain problems with judicial independence. Court budgets still depend on political decisions in the ministry of justice and judge selection procedures are not always transparent and competence-based.

Like most parliaments in a parliamentary system, the Latvian Saeima stands at the centre of the country's political life. It has the right to produce legislation, to change the constitution, to approve the government, and to elect the president, judges and other high officials. It also controls the executive by means of interpellations and questions. Parliament also has the right to create special investigation committees with extensive rights to investigate possible misuses of power.

National assembly

Saeima has 100 members, who are elected by a party-list proportional system with a 5 per cent threshold for a four-year term. Latvia has five electoral districts (Kurzeme, Vidzeme, Latgale, Zemgale and Capital Riga), and the number of deputies to be elected in a district depends on the number of voters living there before the election. Seats are allocated in accordance with a modified Saint-Lague formula. Voters can indicate their preferences by crossing out as many individual candidates as they want. They can also give a "plus" to their favourites; the final ranking order in the slate depends on these pluses and crossings-out. Until the last Saeima elections of 2006 a candidate could run for his/her party list in all five electoral districts simultaneously. Votes cast for a party in all five districts were added up. This led to the so-called "bandwagon" phenomena, when a few well-known and popular individuals pulled into the parliament a bunch of practically unknown deputies. This legislation was changed in February 2009, and in the next Saeima election (planned for 2010) a candidate will be allowed to run in only one district.

The present Saeima was elected in October 2006, and seven parties succeeded in overcoming the 5 per cent threshold. The government formed by four parties immediately after the elections was practically identical to the previous government, both led by Aigars Kalvītis of the People's Party (TP).

Due to popular pressure, however, in December 2007 Kalvītis stepped down and was replaced by Ivars Godmanis of the First Party of Latvia/Latvia's Way (LPP/LC), the ruling coalition remaining the same. This coalition was extended in March 2009, when previously oppositional New Era (JL) joined in with its own prime minister, Valdis Dombrovskis.

Table 1 | DISTRIBUTION OF PARLIAMENTARY SEATS ⁽¹⁾

Party	Latest election (2006)	Present status	Prior to latest election (2002)
People's Party (TP)	23	GJ	20
Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS)	18	GJ	12
New Era (JL)	18	PPM/GS	26
Harmony Centre (SC)	17	O	-
For Human Rights in United Latvia (PCTVL)	6	O	25 (SC and PCTVL in a single ticket)
First Party of Latvia/Latvia's Way (LPP/LC)	10	O	10 (only First Party of Latvia)
For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian Movement of National Independence (TB/LNNK)	8	GJ	7

⁽¹⁾ Number of seats out of a total of 100 seats.

Abbreviations: PPM/GS = party of the prime minister and senior partner of a coalition government

GJ = party is junior partner in the government | O = party is in opposition.

Source: Central Election Committee, <http://web.cvk.lv> (last accessed on 14/05/09).

II. PARTIES AND THE PARTY SYSTEM

II.1 Party System

Legal regulation The right to form political parties is protected by the Latvian constitution (article 102). Beyond that the constitution does not assign any special functions to political parties. They are mentioned only once, among associations, in which people can freely participate.

The registration of a party can be denied if the declared aims of a party violate the constitution, laws or international obligations of Latvia (Law on Political Parties, art. 20, part 4).

Several legal acts regulate the activities of political parties. Saeima adopted the Law on Political Parties in 2006; it extensively regulates the founding, work and liquidation of parties. This law serves as the legal basis of party life in Latvia. However, there are also other acts regulating the work of parties, for example the law on financing political organizations (parties), which has been the subject of a heated debate and significant changes right from its adoption in 1995. There are also legal acts regulating political campaigning before parliamentary and municipal elections, as well as before the elections to the European Parliament. There is an official registration procedure in Latvia for political parties, and only parties that are registered can participate in elections.

The policy towards party participation in national elections is relatively liberal. All registered parties can participate in elections – after paying a deposit of 1,000 lats (approximately EUR 1,430), which is paid back if the party succeeds in getting at least one parliamentary seat. There is a 5 per cent threshold (raised from 4 per cent in 1998) for entry to the Latvian parliament; in 2007 the same

threshold was also applied to municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants. The minimal number of local organizations in electoral districts for a party to participate in parliamentary elections is not regulated. Also the minimal age of the party is not prescribed – some parties in Latvia were founded less than half a year before they came into parliament. There are, however, preconditions for the registration of a party. Non-citizens of Latvia and citizens of other EU countries can be members of political parties in Latvia. No individual can be a member of more than one political party. To be registered a party must have at least 200 members with Latvian citizenship. If the number of citizen members falls below 150, and the party cannot get back that number in the following six months, the party can be liquidated, according to the Law on Political Parties (articles 12, 41, 44). If a party has more than 400 members, at least half of them must have Latvian citizenship (article 26). These regulations are important, when the specific context of Latvia is taken into account: parties are generally unpopular; their membership is small, and about 16 per cent of inhabitants have no Latvian citizenship. Hence the creation of a new political party is a rather demanding task in Latvia; it usually requires human and financial resources, as well as a basic infrastructure. There is one more peculiar trait of the membership requirements of Latvian parties. Most of them require their potential members to submit two letters of recommendation from two or three existing party members. Personal interviews with the potential member are also often required. These requirements seem to have a restrictive influence on membership.

Party financing has been among the most actively discussed topics in recent years. The influence of money on Latvian politics is widely regarded as too big, and the regulation of party finances has been treated as an important instrument in combating this influence. Important steps have been taken to reduce the dependence of political parties on private capital, but significant loopholes are still visible. Latvia is the only country in the EU where political parties receive no direct public subsidies. The introduction of such subsidies has been intensively lobbied for by civil society organizations (cf. Kažoka/Walecki 2007). The role of money during the election period, however, is substantial in Latvia: regulations on campaign spending are still rather vague and can be evaded.

Party financing

The Law on Party Financing was initially adopted in 1995. It introduced only basic restrictions: that campaigning expenses must be covered from party accounts, that party income may come from membership fees, donations (both from private persons and enterprises) and other types of income. The maximum size of a donation from a single benefactor in one year was 25,000 lats (approximately EUR 35,600). These regulations have been tightened several times, and now the situation is different. First, corporate donations are not allowed. Only private persons can now donate to political parties, and they can only do that from their taxable income of the last three years. Second, the maximum amount of a yearly donation from one person is set at the level of 100 minimum wages – currently 16,000 lats (EUR 22,800). Thirdly, the financial accountability of political parties has increased significantly. Parties have to disclose information about all donations on the internet within ten days of receipt. They are also obliged to submit their financial declarations to the anti-corruption bureau (KNAB) not only yearly, but also before and after elections. KNAB is an independent anti-corruption agency with broad investigation rights, supervised by the prime minister. Its head is appointed by the prime minister and approved by Saeima. It has been also entrusted with the right to control campaign spending; violation of party finance regulations can lead to criminal charges. Campaign spending has also become more regulated: each party can spend no more than 0.32 lats (EUR 0.46) per voter in its campaign. The total number of voters is taken to be the total number of Latvian citizens at the time of the previous parliamentary election. This means that each party will be allowed to spend the sum of 463,372 lats (662,000 EUR) for its 2010 Saeima election campaign.

In real life, improvements are less visible. Most parties still rely on hefty media campaigns that are very expensive. Membership fees are usually not high and do not constitute a significant part of their income; also, entrepreneurial activity is not popular among parties. Most of the money for campaigning (around 75 per cent) is received from private donations. Most of these (around 80 per cent) come from well-off people or entrepreneurs, who donate sums bigger than USD 6,000

(Ikstens 2008). Each significant party usually has a patronage network of entrepreneurs, who are able to donate big sums and willing to receive (legal and illegal) returns from the party if it attains public office. The fundraising is highly centralized: it is usually carried out by ministers, MPs and senior party members. The situation is made even more complex by the unclear legal status of the third parties, i.e. NGOs, who want to campaign for their favourite party, and also the low ethical standards of journalists, who often engage in hidden advertising for a party or candidate.

Relevant parties There are eight relevant parties in Latvia. Seven of them have won seats in parliament for two consecutive parliamentary periods:

- Peoples Party (Tautas Partija, TP);
- Union of Greens and Farmers (Zaļo un Zemnieku savienība, ZZS)
- New Era (Jaunais laiks, JL);
- Harmony Centre (Saskaņas centrs, SC);
- First Party of Latvia/Latvia's Way (Latvijas Pirmā partija/Latvijas ceļš, LPP/LC);
- For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian Movement of National Independence (Tēvzemei un brīvībai/Latvijas Nacionālā Neatkarības Kustība; TB/LNNK);
- For Human Rights in United Latvia (Par cilvēktiesībām vienotā Latvijā; PCTVL).

The eighth relevant party, the Civic Union (Pilsoniskā savienība, PS), was founded in 2008, when four MPs from the JL, two MPs and two members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from TB/LNNK left their corresponding parties and founded a new party. PS is going to participate in municipal elections in June 2009, and it is an important rival to other right-wing parties, such as TB/LNNK, TP and JL.

ZZS and SC are nominally party unions rather than united parties. ZZS consists of the Farmers' Union of Latvia (Latvijas Zemnieku Savienība, LZS), the Green Party of Latvia (Latvijas Zaļā partija, LZP), and the smaller regional party For Latvia and Ventspils (Latvijai un Venstpilij, LV). SC consists of five, mainly ethnic Russian parties: the Peoples Harmony Party (Tautas Saskaņas partija, TSP), the New Centre Party (Jaunais Centrs, JC), the Daugavpils Municipal Party (Daugavpils Pilsētas partija, DPP), the Socialist Party of Latvia (Latvijas Sociālistiskā partija, LSP), and the Social Democratic Party (Sociāldemokrātiskā partija, SDP). However, both parties practically function as single united parties, so they are treated as such in this report.

There is no clear trend in the number of political parties in Latvia. In 2005 there were 64 registered political parties in Latvia, in 2007 there were 72 and in 2009, 51. The present decrease stems largely from the new party legislation, adopted in 2006, which required all parties to renew their registration before the end of 2007. Seventeen political parties are now being dissolved (Source: Enterprise Register of the Republic of Latvia, <http://www.ur.gov.lv/partijas.html> [last accessed on 14/05/09]).

As for relevant parties, their number has increased during the last two parliamentary terms. All parties elected into the 9th Saeima (elected 2006) were also present in the 8th Saeima (2002–2006), albeit in different alliances. That was not the case during the 1990s, when many parties survived only one parliamentary term.

Party families It is difficult to talk about clear party families in Latvia because of the persistent dominance of the ethnic divide. "Left-wing", "socialist" or "labour" ideologies in Latvia are traditionally associated with Russians and a pro-Russia stance in international politics. Besides, ideologically dubious unions are widely used in Latvia: the best example is the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), but the union of liberals and religious traditionalists (LPP/LC) could also be mentioned. Parties are rarely created for ideological purposes; they mainly arise from patronage networks. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish at least the basic ideological self-identifications of the relevant Latvian parties.

Table 2 | IDEOLOGICAL COMPOSITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

	Name and founding year	Present situation	Situation prior to the present
Conservative/Latvian Nationalist	New Era (JL), 2002	PPM/GS	O
	People's Party (TP), 1998	GJ	PPM/GS
	For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK (TB/LNNK), 1997	GJ	GJ
	Civic Union (PS), 2008	GJ	NR
Left-socialist (ethnic Russian)	Harmony Centre (SC), 2005	O	O
	For Human Rights in United Latvia (PCTVL), 1998	O	O
Party of traditional Christian values (in union with liberals)	First Party of Latvia/Latvia's Way (LPP/LC), 2007	O	GJ
Farmers' party – Green/Environmental	Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), 2002	GJ	GJ

*Abbreviations: PPM/GS = party of the prime minister and senior partner of a coalition government
GJ = party is junior partner in the government | O = party is in opposition | NR = no representation.*

There are several factors that influence party formation in Latvia. The ethnic division is still very important, and several parties identify themselves primarily by referring to ethnic issues – like the Latvian nationalist party TB/LNNK or the Russian party PCTVL. The ethnic issue constitutes the sole ideological clash in Latvian politics that is more or less stable and permanent. Nevertheless, other factors are also important. There are parties, whose main task is to promote one charismatic leader running for office – for example, the LPP/LC party, whose leader and main benefactor Ainārs Šlesers is running for the Riga city council in 2009. Both Latvian and Russian parties have their patronage networks, which may have a crucial influence on a party's activities. Since parties in Latvia are vitally dependent on private donations (see above), their influential benefactors often determine parties' decisions on policies, on joining coalitions, on ideological issues, etc.

Origins of parties

If we use the distinction between policy-seeking, office-seeking and vote-seeking parties, developed by Müller and Strøm (Müller/Strøm 1999), the relevant parties can be roughly categorized thus: LPP/LC, TP and ZZS are office-seeking parties; JL is a policy-seeking party, PCTVL is a vote-seeking party; TB/LNNK and PS is something between a policy-seeking and an office-seeking party; and SC is something between a vote-seeking and an office-seeking party.

There are several roles played by political parties in Latvia. First, they are important for the political integration of voters; they draw public attention to important social problems, as well as inform people about the issues on the country's political agenda. The communication between parties and voters, however, tends to be asymmetrical. Parties usually promote their ideas by means of advertising campaigns, which take place before elections. Direct communication between party politicians and the voter is very limited; parties rarely engage in political education. Second, they are often vehicles for candidates to pursue their own ends. These ends are often of an economic nature, whereby all types of public procurement and fixed competitions are used. Public office provides an opportunity to engage in clientelism, which is rather common in Latvia.

General significance of parties

Voter-party relations Research data shows that the ethnic divide is still a very important factor that determines voting behaviour in Latvia (Ikstens 2005, 2006). There are also certain elements of tradition: the older generation in particular have relatively stable voting preferences. Patronage relationships also play a role, since some Latvian citizens may expect personal benefit from a party's being in office. Other ideological divisions (left-right, labour-capital; urban-rural; religion-secularism; Euro-optimism-Euroscepticism, etc.) are usually only of secondary importance.

Relations between parties and voters are rather unstable. Although most parties have their own faithful supporters, the number of citizens who change their preferences between elections is pretty high. Electoral volatility is high in Latvia. The Pedersen's index of volatility, which shows the sum of absolute changes in vote shares obtained by parties, is 27 for Latvia in the period between 2002 and 2006 (Ikstens 2008).

The 9th Saeima election in 2006 was the first time that a new, recently founded party did not get a substantial share of the votes. This has been interpreted as a sign of increasing stability in the Latvian party system. This conclusion may be misguided: between 2007 and 2008 several new parties were founded, who may get a significant share of votes in the next Saeima election in 2010. Opinion polls show that during the last five years the total number of potential non-voters and undecided voters has increased steadily: from 19 per cent in March 2004 to 45 per cent in March 2009 (SKDS 2009).

II.2 Individual Parties

Party membership There are some membership statistics for most parties, but they are not fully reliable. There is no official register for party members in Latvia; party membership lists are also not accessible to the public. The only way to get the information is to consult parties themselves, who tend to give more or less approximate answers. There are some reasons to distrust these numbers. Since parties are small and the party membership in Latvia is the lowest among EU countries (about 0.9–1.4 per cent of the population, according to different opinion polls), parties may want to provide overblown membership figures in order to increase their legitimacy. Broadening their membership has never been among the priorities of political parties in Latvia. In this respect they belong rather to the ideal-type of "cartel party", with a small membership and reliance on capital-intensive campaigns (Katz/Mair 1995).

The largest overrepresentation of groups within parties is caused by the ethnic divide. In Russian parties, like SC and PCTVL, a large majority of members are ethnic Russians. Some parties, like TB/LNNK, deliberately limit their membership to Latvian citizens. There is no reliable data about the representation of different social groups in individual parties. Nevertheless, one can reach some conclusions from opinion polls where people are asked about their membership in any political party. Women seem to be underrepresented in political parties: 1.7 per cent of men and 1.0 per cent of women are members of a party (SKDS 2008). Relatively overrepresented groups among the total party membership seem to be: ethnic Latvians, people with higher education and a better income, people in managerial positions and people living outside the capital Riga.

Table 3 | MEMBERSHIP FIGURES

Party	2003/ 2004	2009	Present member- ship density ⁽¹⁾
JL	400	1,200	0.81
LPP/LC	1,530/ 1,415	3,699	4.75
PCTVL	375	500	0.91
PS	–	402	–
SC	–	3,000	2.29
TP	1,800	1,700	0.95
ZZS	3,520/ 1,200	2,400	1.58
TB/LNNK	2,200	2,100 (in 2008)	3.33

⁽¹⁾Members/voters × 100

Membership density is calculated vis-à-vis the results of the last parliamentary election of 2006.

Sources: For 2003/2004: Auers/Ikstens 2007; for 2009: Kažoka 2009.

As noted above, parties are connected rather weakly to certain social strata. The only stable relationship concerns the ethnic divide: ethnic Russians and ethnic Latvians having their “own” parties. Apart from this divide most parties tend to function as “catch-all” parties; many voters also frequently switch their sympathies. Nevertheless, one can observe that most parties have target groups that remain relatively stable:

- JL: ethnic Latvian middle class, people with higher education, young people, entrepreneurs;
- LPP/LC: both ethnic Latvian and Russian voters, young people, religious people, private sector employees;
- PCTVL: ethnic Russian working class, older generation, poor people, “losers of transition”;
- PS: ethnic Latvian middle and working classes;
- SC: ethnic Russian middle class, entrepreneurs, young people;
- TP: ethnic Latvian (and also Russian) middle classes, rural voters, entrepreneurs;
- ZZS: ethnic Latvian rural voters, older generation, low-income population;
- TB/LNNK: ethnic Latvian older generation, Latvian nationalists, public sector employees.

According to article 14 of the Law on Political Parties, all parties are required to have written statutes. These must include the basic principles of their organizational structure, the goals of the party, the regulations about admission of new members, the foundation of local branches, the rights and obligations of members, the prescriptions for the nomination of candidates for parliamentary, municipal and European elections, and other regulations.

Party organisation

Most members of political parties have at least a basic knowledge of the political parties’ statutes. Party statutes are usually adopted at parties’ foundation congresses. They can be changed, however, if required by political tactics. For example, in 2004 the congress of the People’s Party (TP) changed its statutes, which had previously allowed only the party’s chairman to become prime minister. TP wanted Aigars Kalvītis, who was not the chairman of the party at the time, to have the post of prime minister. The statutes were changed in order to make this possible.

All relevant parties have some kind of local branches. Their activity often depends on parties being in power in the corresponding municipality. If the party is in power, the local branch is used for building up a patronage network among the local population. If it is not, the local branch is active predominantly during election campaigns. Local branches have relatively small influence on the decision-making process in Riga, particularly because of the centralized fund-raising for national election campaigns (Auers/Ikstens 2005). Local branches have more influence in municipal elections, where they participate in candidate selection and fund-raising more actively. The numbers of local branches are as follows:

- SC: 99
- ZZS: 69
- TB/LNNK: 54
- LPP/LC: 44
- JL: 37
- PS: 36
- PCTVL: 29
- TP: 27

(Source: Ijabs 2009).

Most relevant parties (TP, JL, TB/LNNK, PCTVL) have youth organizations. They are active in organizing public events and campaigning, as well as in promoting political education. Leaders of youth organizations usually participate in the party's board meetings, and youth activists have a good chance of being co-opted as future members of the party's elite. Nevertheless, their role in decision-making seems to be very limited. Two of the relevant parties (TP, LPP/LC) also have women's organizations. Their main aim seems to be leisure time activities rather than political engagement. There are no labour wings in Latvian parties.

Societal entrenchment Relationships with collective civil society organizations differ depending on the parties. LPP/LC has a very close relationship with religious organizations; indeed, some of its leaders were priests before their political careers. Catholic, Protestant, as well as different Protestant groups, such as the "New Generation" and Seventh-Day Adventists, belong to the party's patronage network. They get public money from the party in exchange for free advertising and lobbying for voters' support. Ethnic Russian parties seem to have greater societal entrenchment than ethnic Latvian parties. The PCTVL party has its own network of civil society organizations. The declared aim of this party is to protect Russian-speakers and non-citizens in Latvia, so it has multiple partnerships with different non-citizen and ethnic Russian organizations, such as the Russian Community of Latvia (ROL), the Latvian Association of Russian Youth (LARM), the Latvian Human Rights Committee (LCK) and others. Some ethnic Latvian parties also have their support organizations. The recently founded PS has a broader support organization, the Society of Democratic Patriotism (DPB); individual members of TP, assisted by some intellectuals, academics and businessmen, founded the Society of Protection of Conservative Values (KVAB) in 2008. These projects, however, have had very little public significance until now. Some interaction between parties and civil society takes place without public acknowledgment. Since political parties are unpopular in Latvia and party rivalry may affect the fate of an NGO, civil society organizations are not motivated to display openly their links with political parties.

Internal decision-making Officially, the most significant decision-makers in a party should be the convention and the party board, which is elected by the convention. In real life, the situation is often different. The main decision-making frequently takes place outside the official bodies of the party. Most important decisions are made in narrow circles of cabinet ministers, leaders of parliamentary fractions and municipal officials, joined by influential party benefactors and entrepreneurs. In this sense a very important decision-maker is the "party in public office" (Katz/Mair 2002). Most parties have this kind of inner circle, which may partly overlap with the board of the party. Since these party elders have high authority among rank-and-file party members, boards and conventions usually accept

their decisions without much discussion. The inner circle is responsible for fund-raising and for the organization of election campaigns, and these factors are regarded as more important for the future of a party than broad discussions and controversies. This type of “controlled democracy” is particularly common among the parties in power; dissenters usually leave the party or try to establish their own parties, rather than seek to convince their own party leadership in an open discussion. Opposition parties tend to have more internal democracy and discussion on policy issues.

The procedures for candidate nomination are centralized in all relevant Latvian parties. In municipal elections local branches nominate their candidates, who must receive the approval of the party board. In national elections the situation is rather different. Some of the relevant parties (SC, PCTVL, ZZS) have no clear regulations about nominations. In most of the other cases the crucial institution for the nominations is the party board. No party needs the approval of a national party convention for its nominations. Some of the relevant parties (LPP/LC, JL) require the approval of broader party institutions: the Council (Dome – JL), or the Assembly (Sapulce – LPP/LC). These bodies include the leadership of local branches. In some cases the right to nominate candidates rests with local branches (TP, JL, PS). In other cases the party board can nominate candidates by itself (PS, LPP/LC). Rank-and-file members usually have very little influence on the nomination of candidates: None of the parties has formal democratic procedures, such as pre-elections or caucuses, for nominations. Although some internal discussion among party members can take place during the nomination process, most democratic procedures just rubber-stamp decisions made by the boards and informal inner circles. There are no formal quotas for women.

The political party is a rather complex institution, and different types of internal relationships are observable among its members. All three types of internal decision-making (democratic, hierarchical and patronage-style) are present in the political parties of Latvia. Most important decisions (e.g., about joining coalitions, support for certain policies, nomination of candidates for higher public offices) are usually made among the members of informal inner circles. In this sense parties are hierarchically organized: rank-and-file members have little say on such issues. On the other hand, patronage-style relationships also constitute an important part of internal communication in a party, especially if the party is part of the ruling coalition at the national or municipal level. A considerable number of party members have some kind of direct and indirect benefits from their membership. Their enterprises might receive state and municipal commissions and subsidies or their careers might be promoted by their party affiliation. Democratic decision-making also takes place in particular at the local level and in opposition parties. The dominant types of decision-making for the relevant parties are the following:

- JL: hierarchic, democratic;
- TP: patronage, hierarchic;
- LPP/LC: hierarchic, patronage;
- TB/LNNK: patronage;
- ZZS: patronage;
- PS: democratic, patronage;
- SC: hierarchic, democratic;
- PCTVL: hierarchic, democratic.

As mentioned before, the only stable ideological identification of political parties in Latvia concerns the ethnic divide. Parties almost never cross the line of ethnic division. Those parties, which concentrate primarily on ethnic issues, have remained faithful to their identity and names. PCTVL and TB/LNNK must be mentioned here. Human Rights in United Latvia (PCTVL) concentrates on the rights of Russian-speakers and non-citizens; TB/LNNK is a party of Latvian nationalists (Tēvzemei un Brīvībai – For Fatherland and Freedom – is the inscription on the monument of freedom, the symbol of national independence in Riga city centre). As for most other parties, they usually prefer ideologically neutral names, like the First Party of Latvia, New Era, Latvia’s Way, People’s Party, Harmony Centre, etc. Apart from the ethnic divide, ideology plays very little role in the identity of

*Stability
of party ideology/
programmes*

parties. Party politicians usually do not want to limit their scope for action by professing adherence to a particular ideology (liberal, social democratic, conservative, etc.). As a result, ideologically dubious unions are also possible – like those of liberals and religious traditionalists (LPP/LC), or greens and farmers (ZZS).

People in Latvia usually vote for personalities, not for programmes. Hence programmes are not very significant for the integration and mobilization of voters. Programmatic documents tend to be rather vague about policies; general phrases and catch-all slogans are more popular. However, during recent election cycles party programmes have become more significant due to increased media attention. Programmes are usually drawn up by board members and accepted in party conventions.

Communication Parties communicate with their voters in different ways, both direct and indirect. Active political communication usually takes place before parliamentary and municipal elections. Extensive media campaigns are usual; pre-election meetings with party politicians and public discussions with them are also used in Latvia. Mass rallies are not common; nevertheless, for campaign purposes parties increasingly use direct contacts with their voters on the streets, in different public festivities or on the internet. Some politicians also organize individual meetings with their electorate – also outside electoral periods. Pre-election advertising in newspapers and on billboards is widely used. In summary, the dominant form of communication is massive pre-election advertising in electronic media, especially on TV. Parties spend more than half (about 55 per cent) of their election-year budgets on campaign-related services, most prominently on air time on TV and radio. In non-election years party budgets are on average two-to-three-times smaller, and the share spent on communication services is significantly lower (Ikstens 2008). The total election-year 2006 budget of all Latvian political parties was 2,853,000 lats or EUR 4,059,470. This sum does not include all campaigning expenses, since unofficial campaign financing and hidden advertising still takes place quite often (according to pre-election media monitoring reports: Public Policy Centre PROVIDUS 2005, 2008).

The party staff have important functions in distributing information, coordinating campaign activities and other events. Nevertheless, all relevant parties use professional agencies for their campaigns. They seem to be pretty successful, since the correlation between campaign spending and the number of votes received is relatively high in Latvia.

There are no serious technical problems for effective communication in Latvia at present. The main problems for political communication are its one-way character, lack of the feedback opportunities and dependence on financial resources. Very little communication takes place between elections; during election campaigns the main efforts and resources are devoted to one-way television and radio campaigning, as well as to billboards. Critical discussion of policy proposals gets much less attention; voters are treated as spectators rather than as participants in the political process. Since election results depend on campaign spending and there are very few effective restrictions on campaign spending, election campaigns usually turn into spending contests among parties and their sponsors. Although there are some important exceptions (e.g., the success of the New Era [JL] party in the 2002 election), it is very difficult for a new political proposal to enter the political scene if considerable financial resources are not available to it.

Relationship between party and parliamentary groups Only political parties can propose slates for parliamentary elections, and MPs are normally party members. The parties' MPs, cabinet ministers and deputies of the Riga city council usually belong to the board of the party. In most cases there is a considerable overlap between a party's leadership and its "people in public offices". Due to this centralization there have so far been no serious tensions between parliamentary fractions and parties' extra-parliamentary organizations. Different kinds of problems arise, however, when MPs leave their parliamentary fractions, joining other fractions, staying independent or establishing their own fractions. The Latvian Constitution Satversme says explicitly that a MP cannot be recalled from the parliament (article 14). Hence deputies can change their party affiliations, especially, when they see their chances of being re-elected vanishing

before elections. This often happened during the early parliamentary terms after the restoration of independence (1993–1995, 1995–1998, 1998–2002). Party discipline has become more effective now, although MPs still sometimes change their party affiliations. For example, during the present Saeima four MPs elected on the JL ticket and two MPs from the TB/LNNK ticket left their parties and created a new parliamentary fraction, the Civic Union (PS). Two other deputies left TP, and one ZZS in 2007, and one changed his affiliation from PCTVL to SC in 2008. There have been several attempts to restrict this mobility and to enforce party discipline. The introduction of the imperative mandate has been discussed by party politicians and the media several times without success. Therefore other methods to prevent mobility are used. JL made its candidates for the 2002 parliamentary election swear an oath, which included a promise to give up their parliamentary seat if they leave the party or lose the trust of its parliamentary fraction. The same year TP required some of its candidates to submit a written promise that they would pay back their share of campaign expenses if they were elected and subsequently left the party.

III. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Despite numerous deficiencies, Latvia is generally a functioning democracy with broad participation, free media and protected human and minority rights. The party system, however, is one of its main weak points. As shown in the report, many functions are fulfilled only poorly. Parties select candidates for public office and participate in elections, but the integration and political socialisation of voters is still unsatisfactory. Many voters feel alienated from political life, and parties are not trusted in Latvian society – according to the latest opinion polls, only 5 per cent trust political parties (see above). The percentage of party members among the population is the smallest in the EU; the main method of communication is massive and expensive pre-election advertising in electronic media; parties have very little communication with their voters between elections; their dependence on private money is still too big for a modern democratic country. Latvian voters are presented with alternatives in each election; nevertheless, apart from ethnic issues, these are alternatives between personalities rather than between programmes and policy proposals.

As for individual parties, their ability to fulfil the above-mentioned functions vary. The integration and political socialization of voters is relatively good in ethnic Russian parties: voters of SC and PCTVL seem to be rather faithful to their favourite parties. These parties also have more direct communication with their electorate between elections. Being in constant opposition, Russian parties have developed relatively good links with ethnic Russian civil society. Ethnic Latvian parties, especially those in the ruling coalition (TP, LPP/LC, ZZS, TB/LNNK), however, rely mainly on massive pre-election advertising. Since all parties have a rather limited membership, it is sometimes not easy for them to find worthy people for public offices, for example, ministers, higher municipal officials and others. Some parties (TP, LPP/LC) in such cases fill public offices with rather incompetent people from their own party. Other parties (ZZS, TB/LNNK) tend to “out-source” their public offices, seeking competent people outside their party in order to fill government posts. Both of these strategies can hardly lead to responsible leadership and good governance. It is a vicious circle. Citizens distrust parties, regarding them as elitist, closed and corrupt. Parties, on the other hand, can rely only on their own patronage networks, since the broader public normally does not want to devote its time, energy and reputation to such mistrusted organizations.

Parties in Latvia are relatively small and unpopular. Nonetheless, some of them have considerable organizational potential, especially, during election campaigns. The organizational strength of a typical party in Latvia lies in its patronage network, rather than in broad participation and involvement. The social entrenchment of Latvian parties is relatively poor: most parties have very little contact with civil society organizations. However, one should take into account that Latvian civil society is politically rather passive (Miezaine/Simane 2005), and the self-isolation of political parties is just an expression of the more general weakness of Latvian civil society. Ethnic Russian parties have better social entrenchment than ethnic Latvian parties.

Most parties in Latvia rely on massive pre-election advertising as the main method to integrate and socialize voters. This system reveals its weakness, since the prestige and popularity of political parties has decreased significantly during the last five years.

The life span of parties has increased significantly, beginning from the election of 8th Saeima in 2002. The foundation of new parties and the re-naming of old ones does not take place as frequently as during the 1990s. There is very little party activity between elections: parties are normally used as election-winning machines or "Potemkin villages" (Auers 2003) rather than as participatory organizations. Apart from the ethnic divide programmatic foundations play very little role in Latvian party politics. Parties in power are usually able to fulfil their functions up to the moment, when the interests of their sponsors or their intended policies start to conflict. Opposition parties usually have very little influence on the political agenda in Latvia. The opposition is usually split between the permanent opposition of ethnic Russian parties and the temporary opposition of ethnic Latvian parties that are not members of the ruling coalition. The impossibility of a consolidated opposition is one of the main problems of party life in Latvia.

There are both institutional and cultural obstacles to the institutionalization of party democracy. The main institutional obstacle is parties' dependence on private capital. The Latvian "money for influence" (Ikstens 2008) model is a good example of a defective party democracy, where party-finance and campaigning legislation makes parties dependent on private interests. Cultural obstacles primarily involve the weakness of civil society. Parties must be rooted in a broader context of civil activism, where citizens understand their own responsibilities and are capable of defending their interests collectively. Passive and disinterested civil society provides a good breeding-ground for corrupt and elitist party politics. An important precondition for the institution- alization of a party democracy is its increasing internationalization, which often exerts a very beneficial and civilizing influence on new democratic regimes.

REFERENCES

- Auers, Daunis (2003): "On Potemkin Villages and Campaign Finance Reform", public policy website *politika.lv* (available at: <http://www.politika.lv/print.php?id=15776> [last accessed on 14/05/09]).
- Auers, Daunis/Ikstens, Jānis (2005): "The Democratic Role of Political Parties", in: Rozenvalds, Juris (ed.): *How Democratic is Latvia? Audit of Democracy*, Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, pp. 89–98.
- Auers, Daunis/Ikstens, Jānis (2007): "Politisko partiju loma demokrātijā", in: Rozenvalds, Juris (ed.): *Cik demokrātiska ir Latvija. Demokrātijas monitorings 2005–2007*, Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, pp. 45–48.
- European Commission (ed.) (2008/2009): *Eurobarometer 70*. Brussels (available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_en.htm [last accessed on 14/05/09]).
- Ikstens, Jānis (2005): "FHRUL bloc: Leftist Parties or Parties of Russian-speaking People?", in: *Acta Universitatis Latviensis*, 680 (2005), pp. 152–161.
- Ikstens, Jānis (2006): "Eastern Slavic Political Parties in Latvia", in: Muižnieks, Nils (ed.): *Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions*, Rīga: SPPI, pp. 41–51.
- Ikstens, Jānis (2008): "Latvia: disclosure yet abuse, volatility yet stability", in: Roper, Steven D./Ikstens, Jānis (eds.): *Public Finance and Post-Communist Party Development*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 45–62.
- Katz, Richard S./Mair, Peter (1995): "Changing Models of Party Organizations and Party Democracy: the Emergence of the Cartel Party", in: *Party Politics* 1 (1), pp. 5–28.
- Katz, Richard S./Mair, Peter (2002): "The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office: Party Organizational Change in Twentieth Century Democracies", in: Gunther, Richard/Montero, José R./Linz, Juan José (eds.): *Political Parties: New Concepts and New Challenges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 113–135.
- Kažoka, Iveta (2009): *Personal interviews with Latvian party leaderships, April 2009*, public policy centre PROVIDUS, Rīga.

- Kažoka, Iveta/Walecki, Marcin (2007): *Maksa par demokrātiju: vai partijas jāfinansē no valsts budžeta?* Rīga: Open Society Institute (available at: http://www.politika.lv/temas/politikas_kvalitate/14868/ [last accessed on 14/05/09]).
- Latvian Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (2009): *Population Register* (available at: <http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/statistika/iedzivotaju.html> [last accessed on 14/05/09]).
- Lipset, Seymour Martin/Rokkan, Stein (1967): "Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: an Introduction", in: Lipset, Seymour Martin/Rokkan, Stein (eds.): *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, New York: Free Press, pp.1–64.
- Market and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS (Sociāli Korelatīvo Datu Sistēmas) (2008): *Sabiedriskās domas aptauja Pārskatam par Tautas attīstību 2008/2009*. Rīga: SKDS.
- Market and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS (Sociāli Korelatīvo Datu Sistēmas) (2009): *Latvijas politisko partiju reitingi*. Rīga: SKDS.
- Miežaine, Zinta/Sīmane, Māra (2005): "Political Participation", in: Rozenvalds, Juris (ed.): *How Democratic is Latvia? Audit of Democracy*, Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, pp. 149–159.
- Müller, Wolfgang C./Strøm, Kaare (1999): *Policy, office, or votes? How political parties in Western Europe make hard decisions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pabriks, Artis/Purs, Aldis (2001): *Latvia: Challenges of Change*. London: Routledge.
- Pettai, Vello (1998): "Emerging Ethnic Democracy in Estonia and Latvia", in: Opalski, Magda (ed.): *Managing Diversity in Plural Societies Minorities, Migration and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Europe*, Ottawa: Forum Eastern Europe, pp. 15–32.
- Public Policy Centre PROVIDUS (2002): *Iespējamo slēptās reklāmas gadījumu analīze medijos pirms 8. Saeimas vēlēšanām*. Rīga: PROVIDUS (available at: <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?f=106> [last accessed on 14/05/09]).
- Public Policy Centre PROVIDUS (ed.) (2005): *Iespējamo slēptās reklāmas gadījumu analīze medijos pirms 2005. gada pašvaldību vēlēšanām*. Rīga: PROVIDUS (available at: <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?f=554> [last accessed on 14/05/09]).
- Smith, David James/Pabriks, Artis/Purs, Aldis/Lane, Thomas (2002): *The Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*. London: Routledge.

FURTHER READINGS

- Auers, Daunis/Kasekamp, Andres (2009): "Explaining the Electoral Failure of Far-right Parties in Estonia and Latvia", in: *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17 (2) (forthcoming).
- Galbreath, David (2005): *Nation-Building and Minority Politics in Post-Socialist States: Interests, Influence and Identities in Estonia and Latvia*. Stuttgart: ibidem.
- Muižnieks, Nils (ed.) (2006): *Latvian-Russian Relations. Domestic and International Dimensions*. Rīga: University of Latvia.
- Onken, Eva-Clarita (2007): "The Baltic States and Moscow's 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe", in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 59 (1), pp. 23–46.