

Change in Sight?

2017 Local Elections and the Left-Wing Landscape in Latvia

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- The local elections in Latvia did not mark any serious break with the previous development of local politics. This year's local elections did not bring any big surprises. In most urban municipalities, incumbent parties and their leaders were reelected; the distribution of power remained the same. However, the election clearly showed the general public atmosphere in the country, the society's preferences, and possible long-term tendencies. The local elections are seen as a prelude to the October 2018 parliamentary elections.
- For the first time, turnout increased by more than 4 percentage points (46.0 percent in 2013, 50.46 percent in 2017). This increase testifies to the growing political engagement of citizens; on the other hand, it was achieved mainly by a deeply antagonistic and ethnically framed electoral campaign in the country's capital, Riga. The results showed that the ethnic factor has become even more persistent during recent years. The ethnic vote is still the most important political factor in Latvia.
- A pro-Western, European social democratic party is still the biggest deficit in Latvian politics. The appearance of such a democratic and effective leftist party would provide a big chance to change the traditional, ethnically rigid political landscape and to promote socially balanced development of the country.

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Introduction

On June 3, Latvia held regular elections in its 119 municipalities. These elections did not mark any serious break with the previous development of local politics; they also brought no serious surprises or scandals. However, the elections clearly showed the general public atmosphere in the country, the society's preferences, and possible long-term tendencies. Significantly, this election showed certain developments in the Latvian party landscape in both the right and left wings of the political spectrum. In many cases, this year's local elections were seen as a prelude to the October 2018 parliamentary elections, which are seen as the major political event in the country. This year's local elections were notable in terms of electoral turnout: for the first time, turnout increased by more than 4 percentage points (46.0 percent in 2013, 50.46 percent in 2017). This increase can be interpreted in several ways. On one hand, it testifies to the growing political engagement of citizens; on the other, it was achieved mainly by a deeply antagonistic and ethnically framed electoral campaign in the country's capital, Riga.

The general context of the local elections

In order to explore these tendencies, it is necessary to provide some background about local politics in Latvia. First of all, there is only one level of local self-government in Latvia. Latvia is a unitary country, divided into five administrative districts with no autonomous functions. Below this level, there are 110 districts (*novadi*) and 9 republican cities. Among EU member states, Latvia has the highest proportion of its population concentrated near the capital: Riga with its suburbs is home to 52 percent of the country's population. Since the demographic situation is problematic due to low birth rates and emigration, some rural districts have become increasingly unsustainable in terms of public services such as education and transportation. This has led politicians to discuss possible municipal reform, which would merge existing districts into larger and more sustainable units. What happens with these plans remains to be seen. The problem is that Latvia recently ac-

complished a municipal reform, abolishing the Soviet-era system with more than 500 municipalities. Hence, one can observe a certain "reform fatigue" regarding the continuation of such reforms.

Electoral system in Latvia

The electoral system is proportional for Latvian local elections, based on an internally changeable party list method. Citizens vote for local municipal councils (*Dome*), varying in size from 7 deputies in the smallest districts to 60 deputies in Riga. No direct elections of mayors take place; they are elected by local councils. In all municipalities except those with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, only registered parties and their alliances can stand for election; no voters' associations are allowed. This monopoly of municipal parties in local politics is controversial in Latvia. On one hand, it is intended to strengthen political parties and to promote their links with grassroots politics; on the other, since parties are relatively unpopular in Latvia, this regulation is seen as too restrictive as it makes party affiliation a *sine qua non* for participation in local politics. However, party membership is not mandatory for individuals included on a party's list. This means that many candidates are actually non-partisan.

In terms of political competition, Latvian municipalities are quite diverse, and the competition doesn't always depend on the size of the municipality. Although the fiercest competition is in the largest cities, there are also smaller municipalities where many lists are submitted for the election. Due to depopulation, there are a few municipalities where initially only one list was submitted, which, of course, does not promote local democracy. Latvian municipalities are also diverse in terms of leadership. There are districts and cities where the chair of the council (or mayor) has not changed since the 1990s. In such cases, he (in far fewer cases, "she") is often regarded as the patrimonial "good house-owner" who takes care of the population. In other cases, however, leadership turnover is much higher. Nevertheless, in a country where the average duration of the national government is approximately 14 months, local politics looks like a realm of stability and predictability.

Election campaign issues

The main issues of the recent local elections were quite diverse. Among the most commonly discussed issues were the demographic sustainability of public services, taxes, the social safety net, employment, and governance and anti-corruption issues. A lot of attention was paid to local issues such as investment in public infrastructure (most of which is coming from EU funds), roads, school renovation, sports halls, and swimming pools. In many cases, the quality of the debate was quite low: a populist mood was rather widespread. In some cases, voters were simply bribed. In richer municipalities, such as Riga-near Jūrmala on the Baltic coast, citizens were bribed with promises “to pay 100 Euros yearly to each pensioner” if they would vote for the incumbent ruling party.

Traditional left-wing issues like social justice, access to and quality of public services, and equal opportunities figured prominently in electoral campaigns. However, in Latvia they were rarely treated in terms of “left-wing/right-wing” or “socialist/liberal” distinctions. Nominally right-wing parties, such as the center-right “Vienotība” (Unity) and Latvian nationalist “National Alliance,” often use redistributionist rhetoric for populist reasons, especially on the municipal level. At the same time, social solidarity is not among the priorities of these parties when deciding on taxation issues on the national level. Currently, the center-right ruling coalition in Latvia is working on a serious reform of the Latvian tax code. This discussion also affected campaigns for local self-governments in multiple ways. For example, the central government is planning to reduce the Personal Income Tax (PIT) by three percentage points, at the same time introducing some elements of progressivity (Latvia had flat PIT until now). This, however, would affect local self-governments negatively, since PIT has been their main source of income. Until now, the central government hasn’t found any credible solution for this problem; hence, tax reform was often discussed in electoral campaigns.

Finally, it is important to note that the Latvian party system has historically been based on ethnic cleavage. There are “ethnic Latvian” parties and “Russo-

phone” parties. On the national level, there is a high level of antagonism between them: “Russophone” parties have never been in power because of their position on citizenship, language, and geopolitical issues. On the municipal level, this ethnic distinction is somewhat blurred: Riga has been ruled for eight years by a Russophone mayor; in some municipalities, Russophones are casting their votes for “ethnic Latvian” parties. The recent election shows ambiguous tendencies. On one hand, in the capital city Riga the ethnic distinction has become more prominent; on the other, there are some signs that outside Riga it is weakening, with increasingly more people casting their votes regardless of the nationality of their preferred candidate.

The left-wing landscape

In order to evaluate the results of the left-wing or social democratic parties in this local election, it is necessary to identify the relevant parties. There is no obvious party in Latvia that could be named the social democratic party. However, among the parties that took part in this year’s election, there are three candidates that call themselves social democratic: the Latvian Social Democratic Workers’ Party (LSDSP), the Progressive Party (PROGRESĪVIE), and Concord, the Social Democratic Party (CSDP). Although they all call themselves social democratic, their political profiles are quite different. LSDSP is the nominal heir of the “old” Latvian Social Democracy founded in 1904. It was quite influential in the 1990s; however, the party’s leadership was involved in some high-level corruption scandals, and since the mid-2000s it has lost any influence on the national level, though it still has some representation in some municipalities. PROGRESĪVIE is an offspring of the youth organization of LSDSP, which split from the party because of its aged, post-Soviet leadership. Right now they are trying to create a modern, Western-style social democratic party, and this was their first electoral experience. The CSDP, in contrast, is an experienced major player in Latvian politics: it is the main representative of Russophone interests. CSDP has the largest faction in the Latvian parliament, or *Saeima*, where it controls 24 out of 100 seats. CSDP promotes its newly discovered social democratic identity; it is an

associate member of PES and the Socialist International. However, on the Latvian political landscape it is firstly perceived as a Russophone, not a social democratic party. This view is justified, since CSDP has succeeded in consolidating the Russophone vote in Latvia. There are three main topics distinguishing CSDP from the "ethnic Latvian" parties: language (CSDP is willing to introduce some official status for Russian in Latvia), citizenship (CSDP is willing to liberalize citizenship requirements for Soviet-era immigrants), and geopolitics (CSDP is openly friendly towards the Russian Federation and to the Kremlin in particular).

All three social democratic parties have their strengths and weaknesses. CSDP is among the most popular parties in Latvia, but its popularity comes mainly from ethnic cleavage. Both LSDSP and PROGRESĪVIE are recognized as social democrats by the general society, but are rather marginal in terms of popular support. The outcome of the recent local elections might provide us with some hints about the development of left-wing politics in the near future.

Successes and failures

As stated, local elections are usually perceived as a prelude or preparation stage for parliamentary elections, and, although there are structural differences between the two types of elections, some tentative forecasts can be made.

Of course, all three social democratic parties are very different in their ambitions and in their electoral support. To simplify, LSDSP is the party of the past – its electoral base and local cadres in several municipalities are inherited from "better times," i.e. from the 1990s and early 2000s. PROGRESĪVIE is (hopefully) the party of the future: this was their first electoral effort, which understandably produced rather ambiguous results. The party of the present is, however, CSDP, which did reasonably well this time and, most importantly, won the Grand Prix of municipal politics, i.e. the Riga City Council.

a) LSDSP is a party in decline. It has had no representation at the national level since 2002,

and no seats on the Riga City Council since 2009. Nevertheless, this time it managed to submit lists to seven municipalities, including Riga. Altogether, it proposed 131 candidates, which means that there are still some party loyalists. LSDSP didn't have candidates in any of the bigger cities. The remaining six municipalities were small, mostly rural, and didn't have much national visibility during the electoral campaign. However, LSDSP succeeded in winning some mandates in all six municipalities except Riga. The party's stronghold is Olaine, a district around 30 kilometers from Riga, where it won 10 mandates out of 13. This means that in some places local politicians find it comfortable to stand for election on the LSDSP list. Other places where LSDSP won a few seats are Lecava, Viļāni, Bauska, Saldus, and Riebiņi. Altogether, LSDSP won 17 mandates.

The party proposed its list in Riga as well. However, it didn't manage to get any seats, in part because of its inefficient choice of candidates. The candidate for Riga mayor was the former head of the Corruption Prevention and Combating bureau Normunds Vilnītis, who has very little charisma and is politically rather inexperienced. On the list, he was followed by long-term party leader Jānis Dinevičs, who has been the party's chairman ever since its decline began. In Riga, the party won a miserable 0.23 percent of the vote. The same level of support was shown by most opinion polls. There is no consensus among political analysts as to why LSDSP is still participating in such a hopeless battle and not closing down. There are several possible explanations. The first is the force of tradition: the party was in power in Riga from 2001 until 2005, and some of its leadership core still cannot reconcile themselves with present realities and are still hoping for the return of the "good old times." Secondly, even a small level of support might play a certain role when parties are negotiating electoral alliances for next year's national election. Hence, it is important to show that the party is still alive and capable of getting a few votes. In the next year, LSDSP will most probably stand for a national election on some kind of joint list of rather marginal parties – just like they did in 2014.

- b) **PROGRESĪVIE** proposed its lists in four municipalities, the largest being the city of Jūrmala, where it got no seats with 2.4 percent support. The party had 44 candidates in all municipalities. Its biggest success took place in the Aizpute district, a rather economically depressed area in the region of Kurzeme, where it received four out of seven seats on the local council. A majority of the candidates had been elected to the council of the Aizpute district before, mostly from the Union of Greens and Farmers. Their social democratic credentials are unknown. PROGRESĪVIE also got one seat in Mārupe, a rich suburb of Riga. There, the person who got the seat from the party's list had already been elected to the Mārupe district council from other parties' lists.

Possibly the biggest failure of PROGRESĪVIE was its incapacity to propose its list for Riga. True, the probability of gaining seats on the Riga City Council was very low for such a young party – the competition was too stiff. However, the Riga election has a lot of symbolic meaning. First of all, the electoral campaign and debates provide a much-needed platform for a new party to promote its people and ideas. Secondly, it might have provided PROGRESĪVIE with basic political experience, which they lack. PROGRESĪVIE has worked as an NGO for almost a decade. Now, however, it has to turn itself into an effective organization that can stand fierce political competition. This is probably the main challenge for this party.

- c) **CSDP** is one of the main players in Latvian local politics. It proposed its lists in 48 out of 119 municipalities, including in all big cities. CSDP proposed 621 candidates, 134 of whom were elected. This makes the party the fourth strongest in terms of municipal representation, the first being the Union of Greens and Farmers (more than 100 lists in different combinations), followed by National Alliance (61 lists) and Unity (46 lists).

CSDP got seats in 41 municipalities, and in seven out of nine big cities. This result largely repeats the party's achievement of 2013, when support

was more or less the same. CSDP retains two of its crucial positions in two municipalities where it got the absolute majority – Riga, where CSDP chairman Nils Ušakovs stays on as Mayor of Riga; and Rēzekne, where the same applies to Mayor Aleksandrs Bartaševičs. In Daugavpils, the party increased its representation from four to five deputies, and in Liepāja from three to four. In Jūrmala, Jelgava, and Jēkabpils, the result remained the same. In Liepāja, the party will work outside the ruling coalition; in Daugavpils, the second-largest city in Latvia, it will lead the ruling coalition and have its own mayor, former MP Andrejs Elksniņš.

In the countryside, CSDP's results correlate with the proportion of the Russophone electorate. This electorate is mostly concentrated either in the proximity of bigger cities (like Riga or Jelgava), or in Latgale, the south-eastern part of Latvia, which is historically rather multicultural. Districts including Garkalne, Carnikava, Babīte, Mārupe, Stopiņi, Jelgava, and Salaspils belong to the first category; districts such as Balvi, Viļāni, Aglona, and Zilupe belong to the second. CSDP has won no seats in purely ethnic Latvian areas – cities like Valmiera or districts like Kuldīga. This does not mean, however, that support for CSDP is always proportional to the number of Russophones in a municipality. In some municipalities, such as the city of Ventspils, there is quite a substantial proportion of Russophones. However, they are voting for ethnic Latvian mainstream parties, not for CSDP. This phenomenon is largely based on the authority of individual leaders such as the Mayor of Ventspils, Aivars Lembergs. In Riga, a substantial number of ethnic Latvians are casting their votes for CSDP, since they like the positive public image of Nils Ušakovs. This means that the influence of the ethnic factor is by no means total and unchangeable. However, it is still the single-most important predictor when dealing with the electoral choices of Latvian citizens.

This year's local elections in Riga showed that the ethnic factor has become even more persistent during recent years. First of all, CSDP lost 7 of its 39 mandates in the Riga City Coun-

cil. Support for the party fell from 58.52 percent in 2013 to 50.82 percent in 2017. There are strong reasons to think that these are the votes of ethnic Latvians who are no longer supporting Ušakovs and CSDP. True, CSDP still has some support among ethnic Latvians in Riga, as the share of the vote cast for CSDP is still considerably larger than the proportion of Russophones in the Riga electorate. Nevertheless, the decline is quite obvious.

First of all, the vote has been influenced by the pro-Kremlin attitude of CSDP after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the conflict in south-eastern Ukraine in 2014. Geopolitical and security issues like this cause great anxiety in Latvia. This especially applies to ethnic Latvians, who often have their own biographical reasons for not being too optimistic about Russia's intentions in the post-Soviet space. Ušakovs and CSDP have done nothing to make this anxiety disappear. On the contrary, Ušakovs has been explicitly silent about Russia's actions in Ukraine, and has even made fun of the Latvian "obsession" with the Soviet occupation.

This has led to a much higher level of confrontation in the Riga election. If in the 2013 election the rivals of CSDP reluctantly accepted its victory beforehand, this time the campaign was framed in much more emotional terms, representing CSDP as an existential threat to Riga and Latvia. Social networks, including Facebook and Twitter, played a significant role in polarizing society. Both supporters and opponents of Ušakovs created their own "bubbles" filled with emotional stories, biased reports, and emphatic pleas not to vote for "those traitors." The rise in electoral turnout can also be at least partly explained by this ethnic polarization.

Conclusions

This year's local elections did not bring any big surprises. In most urban municipalities, the incumbent parties and their leaders were reelected; the distribution of power remained the same. In Riga, the country's capital, the CSDP mayor remained

in place, securing a particular type of "division of power" for the next four years. In other words, the national government is dominated by ethnic Latvian parties, while Riga "belongs" to the Russians. However, there are some conclusions to be made in light of the approaching parliamentary election of 2018.

- After Crimea, the CSDP has been increasingly regarded as a pro-Kremlin party, and its isolation will persist independently of the party's result in next year's election. Fewer ethnic Latvians are willing to vote for this party, mainly due to the general atmosphere of geopolitical threat in the country. The ethnic vote is still the most important political factor in Latvia.
- In some municipalities, such as the city of Ventspils and the Salaspils district, the ethnic vote has been weakened due to the popularity of long-term local leaders who have earned public approval on both sides of the ethnic cleavage. There is nothing like this on the national level, which means that no significant changes are to be expected after next year's election.
- A pro-Western, European social democratic party is still the biggest deficit in Latvian politics. The appearance of such a democratic and effective leftist party would provide a big chance to change the traditional, ethnically rigid political landscape and to promote socially balanced development of the country. LSDSP is rather hopeless in this regard. PROGRESĪVIE is much more hopeful. However, this new start-up party also suffers from several serious defects by no means uncommon among Latvian political parties: weak leadership, narrow grassroots support in society, and limited understanding of the real needs of the Latvian people.

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