

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

CONTINUITY IN CHANGE?

Latvia's Local Governments after Regional Reform
and Local Government Elections

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Despite a substantial recent regional reform which was vigorously opposed by local leaders, the local government elections held in June 2021 did not alter the balance of power in Latvia.



As a political project, the reform may have achieved its goal to implement efficiency gains, yet the phenomenon of "strongmen" mayors continues to persist.



A record-low voter turnout and a general discontent with parties and government performance may be an indication that a chance to find a widely accepted and long-term regional reform solution was missed.

Latvia's eighth regular local government elections since the renewal of independence in 1991 were held on Saturday 5 June 2021. Both citizens of Latvia and other European Union Member States resident in Latvia and registered in a municipality 90 days before the election were eligible to vote. While turnout fell dramatically from 50.4% in the previous 2017 vote to just 34% in 2021, those who did bother to vote tended to support political continuity, particularly in Latvia's larger regional towns and cities. At the same time, there was no major backlash against the governing coalition parties, in what was the first test of the public's response to the government's contested Covid-19 restrictions on public gatherings that most impacted the retail and hospitality sectors.

DISCONTENT WITH THE STATUS QUO

The first post-Soviet era local government elections were held in 1994 and returned 4,771 deputies in 594 local governments. Following a reorganization of local governments in 2008, the previous 2017 election saw 1,554 deputies elected in 118 municipalities (not including the capital city of Rīga). In contrast, the 2021 elections planned to elect 683 local council deputies (with 13-23 councilors per municipality according to population size) in 41 municipalities (6 cities and 35 counties. The capital city Rīga did not vote in 2021) following a politically contentious territorial reform adopted by the parliament in 2020.¹ In the event, the election only went ahead in 40 municipalities after Latvia's Constitutional Court ruled against the planned merger of two counties – Varakļāni and Rēzekne – less than ten days before the election. The Central Election Committee took the decision to cancel voting in both Rēzekne/Varakļāni and neighbouring Madona county, although voting eventually went ahead in Madona county after the parliament passed a law establishing Varakļāni into a separate county.

There had been concern that changes to the electoral law, barring lists of residents from standing for election and instead only allowing Latvia's 50 registered political parties and 7 political party alliances to compete, would result in less competition at the local level. However, this does not appear to have been the case. Instead, local government deputies, activists and businessmen transitioned to party lists at least partially fulfilling one ambition of this reform, which was to encourage increased membership in political parties across Latvia.² A total of 324 lists with 5,599 candidates planned to compete in the election, with Ropaži (14) and Jūrmala (13) having the highest number of competing parties. On average, there were 136 candidates competing for election in each municipality. Half of the candidates were between

the ages of 41 and 60 years although just 31 candidates were under 20 years of age, reflecting the dire demographic trends afflicting Latvia's regions over the last three decades.

In a sense, these elections were far more "local" than those in previous years. An early municipal election was held in Latvia's capital city Riga in August 2020 after a series of corruption scandals had engulfed the municipality. The city's long-serving mayor, Nils Ušakovs- social democratic party "Harmony" (Saskaņa), had his office raided by Latvia's anti-corruption police (KNAB) and was subsequently suspended from the post by Juris Pūce the Minister for Environmental Protection and Regional Development (from the liberal Development/For! (Attīstībai/Par!) Party alliance). Subsequent internal feuding in both the social democratic party "Harmony" and among other smaller parties in the municipal government led to decision-making paralysis. Latvia's parliament eventually voted to dismiss the Riga City Council and installed a temporary administrator until an early election could be called.³ As a result, Rīga, which is the uncontested political, economic, and cultural centre of Latvia, did not participate in the 2021 election. This meant that the battle for control of the capital city did not dominate media headlines, as was the case in previous local government elections. This may have meant that there was marginally less interest in municipal elections than in previous years, but it also meant that the national media did pay more attention to other cities and counties.

A REFORM TO TACKLE REGIONAL DISPARITIES

Latvia's parliament adopted a new law on "Administrative Territories and Populated Areas" on 10 June 2020. It was signed into law by President Egils Levits twelve days later on 22 June. It was the most contested major legislative reform in recent years, with more than 800 amendments being submitted and discussed over 120 combative hours of parliamentary committee meetings and equally prickly parliamentary plenary debates. The new law came into effect after the local government elections on 1 July 2021. This was the second major shake-up of Latvia's local government in just over a decade following the 2008 reform that cut the number of municipalities from 548 to 118 (9 cities and 109 counties).

Regional reform was one of the key priorities of the ideologically diverse five-party coalition led by prime minister Krišjānis Kariņš (New Unity- Jaunā Vienotība) that took office in January 2019. The Union of Greens and Farmers (Zaļo un Zemnieku Savienība), which held the prime minister post before the election and is a reactionary fierce defender of Latvia's regional cities and rural regions, was left in opposition. As a result, there was a political "window of opportunity"

¹ The new law on municipal elections states that 15 councilors are elected in municipalities with a population up to 30,000, 19 councilors in municipalities with a population between 30,001 and 60,000, and 23 councilors in municipalities with a population over 60,000. 13 councilors are elected in cities with a population up to 50,000 and 15 councilors in cities with a population over 50,000.

² Latvia has long had the lowest rate of political party membership in the European Union. Just over 1% of adult citizens are party members.

³ See Jānis Ikstens. 2020. "Corruption as a game changer. Lessons learned and context to the Riga city council snap elections", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Riga Office, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/baltikum/16951.pdf> for a full account of the 2020 Riga municipal election.

to undertake a radical reform of Latvia's local government system. This was seen as necessary because the previous 2008 reorganization had failed to slow-down two important negative trends. First, continuing demographic decline in Latvia's regions. Second, the related economic unviability of smaller local governments and their resulting inability to deliver the key functions and services legally expected of them.

In demographic terms, one-third (627,000 people in 2020) of Latvia's population lives in the capital city of Rīga and another 374,000 in the surrounding suburbs (known as Pierīga), meaning that 52% of Latvia's population lives in and around the capital city. The Pierīga suburbs have been the only local government units in Latvia to experience consistent population growth over the last three decades, as ambitious, young Latvians migrated to the Rīga metropolitan region for greater educational and employment opportunities. For example, between 2010 and 2016 nine suburban counties close to Rīga each created more new jobs than the whole of Latvia's easternmost Latgale region. Second, a suburbanization trend has simultaneously seen families and young professionals steadily migrate from cramped apartments in the city of Rīga to larger, greener suburban homes in the suburbs.

Urban and rural territories in Latvia's regions have obviously borne the brunt of these trends, seeing their populations steadily decline and age. Even during the pandemic year of 2020, when there were relatively limited opportunities for both internal and external migration, the population decreased in eight of Latvia's nine "Republic Cities" (the exception being Jūrmala, essentially a wealthy beachside suburb of Rīga) and modestly increased in just 19 of Latvia's then 109 counties, fifteen of which were in Pierīga.

At the same time, a clear gap in the provision of services has opened up between Rīga, Pierīga and the regions. This is particularly acute in the provision of education. For example, in 2019 twelfth grade students in Latvia's rural schools received an average grade of 25.4% in the centralized mathematics exam, compared with a national average of 32.8% and 37.2% for twelfth graders in Rīga. OECD PISA mathematics test data (taken by fifteen-year old's in OECD states all around the world) in 2015 revealed the same trend, with students in Latvia's rural territories (defined as having a population of 3,000 or less) scoring an average of 454 points, compared to students in Riga scoring 496 (a gap of 42 points) or the national average of 482 (a gap of 28 points). In comparison, the point gap between Estonia's rural territories and the capital Tallinn was 24 points, while the gap to the national average was just 11 points.

These negative demographic and human capital trends have made Latvia's regions increasingly unattractive to foreign investors. Significant investments of EU funds on regional infrastructure, including roads, cycle-paths, education infrastructure, water treatment facilities, public parks and even concert halls have done nothing to reverse these trends in recent years.

REORGANIZATION AS A POLITICAL PROJECT TO KEEP REGIONS FUNCTIONAL

The 2020 law on "Administrative Territories and Populated Areas" aims to tackle these concerns by creating bigger municipalities with a greater capacity to deliver better services to local residents. A 2019 research paper by economists at the Bank of Latvia argued that increasing the average size of Latvia's local authorities from an average population of 16,000 (in 2019) to at least 20,000 would save local governments 196 million EUR in annual spending through more efficient merged services and lower administration expenses. Without a reorganization of local government, the average municipality in Latvia would shrink to 15,000 people in 2030 and 14,000 in 2040. Local governments had already shrunk by an average 1,500 people between 2010 and 2018. The shrinking size of administrative units also meant that 39 of Latvia's 109 counties had a population smaller than the minimum 4,000 people foreseen in the 2008 law. Another 55 counties were also breaking the law by failing to have a town or village with a population of at least 2,000 people within their borders. Many of these local governments lacked both the financial and human resources to effectively deliver the services – such as education and promoting business – that was their legal obligation.

As a result, a regional reform creating larger administrative units capable of delivering higher quality services to residents and attracting investment and jobs was one of the priorities of the Krišjānis Kariņš's government that took office in January 2019. The reform faced major opposition from influential lobby groups, particularly Latvia's Large City Association (*Lielo pilsētu asociācija*) whose leader Viktors Valainis, a parliamentary deputy from the Union of Greens and Farmers personally submitted hundreds of amendments to the law during the parliamentary debates, and the Latvian Association of Local Governments (*Latvijas pašvaldību savienība*). In addition to concerns that individual politicians may have had about the loss of political influence following county mergers, these associations also expressed concerns about job losses in the public sector (a major source of employment in more isolated rural regions) and that the larger towns in the merged units would attract greater resources, centralize services and weaken already faltering smaller towns and villages. Some, typically small and wealthy, municipalities used up significant resources in opposing their planned mergers. Ikšķile, a small, wealthy suburban town 30 kilometres from Riga with a population of just 7,000, energetically opposed its merger with Ogre (as well as Ķegums and Lielvārde counties) a much poorer, more industrial town of 23,000 people. Ikšķile's inhabitants and political leaders were largely concerned about pooling their much higher tax revenue with larger and poorer Ogre and how this would impact the quality of Ikšķile's services and public investments. Similar concerns were held elsewhere whenever wealthier administrative units were forced to merge with more disadvantaged neighbours.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe also expressed a critical opinion on the pro-

Table 1
Latvia's Six "State City" Municipalities, 2021

City	Population	Number of Councilors
Daugavpils	90,390	15
Jelgava	60,487	15
Jūrmala	57,806	15
Liepāja	75,895	15
Rēzekne	29,744	13
Ventspils	37,032	13

Source: Latvian Central Election Committee (2021)

posed reform in a report published in December 2020 following a complaint from the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Authorities. It argued that the reform process indicated a deterioration of local democracy in Latvia because of a lack of consultation with local authorities in the framework of the territorial administrative reform.

Nevertheless, the reform went ahead and it has certainly met the main aim of creating substantially larger local government units. In the 2021 election the smallest county was Valka with a voting population of 8,571, compared to the electorate of 957 in Baltnava County, the smallest unit in the previous 2017 election. The average size of a local government from 1 July 2021 will be 28,000 people, creating efficiency savings of 200 million EUR a year according to the then Local Government and Environment Minister Pūce. Another major change was the creation of six "state cities" (*valstspilsētas*) in place of the previous nine "republic cities" (*republikas pilsētas*). These are the six regional cities that have the scale to function as wider centres of regional development and will be charged with attracting both domestic and foreign direct investments that will create new jobs.

Spirited opposition to the reform continued until the very last moment. On 28 May Latvia's Constitutional Court ruled that parliament, which had merged Varakļāni with Rēzekne only during the third and final reading of the law, had ignored the key aims of the legislative reform (efficiency rather than cultural history) and that Rēzekne County did not have the necessary status as a national centre of development to absorb Varakļāni county. It also stated that the self-identity of the counties' residents also had to be taken into account (and the overwhelming majority of a poll of Varakļāni residents – 84% – wished to be merged with Madona). Varakļāni's situation is complicated by its location on the historic border between the two Latvian regions of Vidzeme and Latgale, giving the county a divided identity. Historically, it has been a part of local government units with both Rēzekne and Madona counties. The Central Election Committee cancelled the planned local government elections in Rēzekne County as well as Madona County (which was mooted as a likely alternative merger partner for Varakļāni County). Unexpectedly, Latvia then tottered on the edge of a constitutional crisis as a group of parliamentarians, including the governing New Conservative Party (Jaunā konservatīvā partija) and the National Alliance (Nacionālā apvienība), threatened to ignore

the Constitutional Court's ruling and once again vote to merge Varakļāni with Rēzekne. The following day president Levits intervened to insist that parliament must respect the Constitutional Court's ruling and urgently called a meeting with representatives from the five-party ruling coalition. A compromise was reached that saw parliament eventually vote to keep Varakļāni as a separate county with a population of just 3,000 residents, thus expanding the number of local governments in Latvia to 43. However, this decision will have to be revisited in the coming months and years as Varakļāni County clearly lacks the financial and human resources to function sustainably in the long-term.

THE COVID-19 IMPACT FACTOR

The 2021 local government election took place under the extended cloud of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, it was not clear that the vote would go ahead as scheduled until the early months of spring when the Covid-19 infection rate began to flatten out and gradually recede. After all, the Covid-19 pandemic had seen the 2020 early local government election in Riga delayed several times before finally being held in late August 2020. The pandemic had two different impacts on the election – technical and political.

The technical dimension took the form of strict epidemiological instructions on the location, layout and voting process at polling stations. This was designed to allay voter fears about the safety of voting. More than one-third (36.3%) of respondents to a March 2021 pre-election poll of voters commissioned by the Central Election Committee had stated that the Covid-19 pandemic would likely negatively impact their decision to vote in the election. Unsurprisingly, more than half (52.1%) of voters aged 64+ were particularly concerned by the pandemic and stated that it would have an impact on their willingness to cast a vote.

The political impact on the public was largely shaped by the government's fiscal and epidemiological policy responses to the pandemic. In fiscal terms, it seems that multiple Latvian governments' strict spending discipline, dating back to the 2008-2010 financial crisis, has become deeply ingrained into orthodox economic policy. While the Latvian government did fund furloughed workers and subsidise wages, defer taxes, provide loans and guarantees to struggling firms as well as targeted sectoral support (e.g. for the healthcare and

transport sectors), this amounted to a comparatively modest 8% increase in government expenditure, the sixth smallest increase in the EU-27 and significantly less than Estonia (10%) and particularly Lithuania (24%). The epidemiological response saw a first state of emergency declared from 13 March to 9 June 2020. Schools, theatres, restaurants, and other public places were shuttered, although restrictions started being eased in May as the daily infection rate fell to double and then single digits. However, the second wave that began in the autumn of 2020 proved much harsher and longer and a state of emergency was re-introduced in November and a curfew in December as infections spiked. The state of emergency ended on 7 April 2021, but many restrictions continued into May and June.

WIDESPREAD DISSATISFACTION

The pandemic has had a significant impact on public attitudes towards the governing parties. The SKDS polling company's March 2021 "Latvia Barometer" saw 55% of respondents agreeing that Latvia is "going in the wrong direction" and just 19% agreeing that it is "going in the right direction" while 71% of respondents agreed that the economic situation was "bad". The same survey found that the public's satisfaction with government performance had fallen for the sixth month in a row, with only 16% of respondents satisfied and 80% dissatisfied. The spring 2021 Standard Eurobarometer 94 painted a similar picture with just 21% of Latvians satisfied "with the measures taken to fight the coronavirus by the government", which is less than half the EU-27 average of 43% and also the lowest level of satisfaction among EU member states.

This extreme level of dissatisfaction is rather puzzling in the sense that the Latvian economy has been relatively mildly hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. GDP shrank by just 3.6% in 2020, the ninth "best" indicator in the EU-27 and far less severe than the double-digit recession in Spain or the 8% declines seen in France, Italy, and Greece. Unemployment also rose modestly by less than 2% over 2020.

There appear to be three possible explanations for this seeming disconnect between the comparatively modest economic impact of the pandemic and the public's dissatisfaction with government. First, a popular populist politician, Aldis Gobzems, has used the political opportunity of the crisis to constantly criticize the government (frequently urging the US-born prime minister to "go home") and has thus managed to focus and magnify the discontent of those who have been furloughed, lost their income or become disenchanted by the extended stay-at-home measures. A survey of political attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe found that 48% of respondents in Latvia believed that the government was exaggerating the number of Covid-19 infections in Latvia while one-third (32%) of respondents believed that Covid-19 was created by a hidden elite to control the public. Second, the pandemic has magnified the inequality gap in Latvia. Low earners (those with a gross monthly salary of between 400 and 700 EUR) and those with just a general secondary education suffered the highest job losses in 2020, while men

with a higher education and individuals earning over 3,000 EUR a month saw increased employment opportunities. Third, there is also a diffuse feeling, which is backed up by economic data, that Latvia's neighbours have weathered the pandemic better – the first quarter of 2021 saw Latvia's GDP contract by 2.6% while neighbouring Lithuania saw growth of 1.8% - and that they might continue to pull away from Latvia in an economic sense. Nevertheless, the election was framed by a sense of public disaffection with the state of government and the economy.

KEY ISSUES IN CITIES, SUBURBS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

The Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying economic malaise were the key background conditions to the 2021 local government election. However, key voter concerns, and political debates between competing candidates and parties, were more local in nature. The election campaign highlighted differing key issues in the new "state cities", the Pierīga suburbs of the capital and Latvia's rural regions. However, there were also issues which were common to all the administrative units.

Party programs, which can be found on the Central Election Committee web site, shared many characteristics across cities, rural regions as well as Pierīga and reflected the key decentralized functions and services that municipal governments are expected to deliver. Among the main social concerns were public transport, public housing and security (with the social-democratic SSD program in Liepāja being typical in stating that the municipal police should be there "to help, not punish"). Major infrastructure issues included road maintenance, parks and children's playgrounds and developing "tourism objects", which parties across the board saw as potential economic growth areas. In terms of schooling, free-lunch programs were popular, while in rural regions parties promised to guard against the closure of small, local schools which are often the economic and cultural heartbeat of rural communities (although expensive to maintain and typically providing a poorer quality of education than larger schools with greater resources). Parties typically also tended to promise maintaining a rich cultural life (which has been aided by major EU Regional Fund investments in concert halls and museums over the last decade). Other major concerns included attracting jobs and investment (although these promises tended to be vague) and fighting depopulation.

"STRONGMAN" MAYORS

There were two additional key issues in "state cities" – economic development and support for established "strongman" mayors. Ventspils and Liepāja are two big port cities in Latvia's western region of Kurzeme. Both have Special Economic Zones (SEZ's) that have been quite successful in attracting foreign direct investments, but the ports have seen significant falls in cargo flows in recent years (10% in Liepāja and by one-third in Ventspils in just 2020) as Russia continues to redirect transit flows to its own newly constructed ports on

the Baltic Sea. As a result, diversification of the economy – building an IT village and reconstructing the huge, abandoned metallurgical plant in Liepāja, or constructing a wind energy park and developing a cultural quarter in Ventspils – were key points of debate, along with opposition party claims that it is time for a change of power in these cities that have been dominated by small cliques clustered in influential local parties (the Liepāja Party and Latvia and Ventspils, respectively). Indeed, local “strongmen” have long dominated power in other key “state cities” such as Jelgava and Rēzekne and the political campaigning often breaks down into a choice of maintaining continuity or finally bringing about change. Accusations of municipal corruption tend to fly about, particularly in Latvia’s second biggest city of Daugavpils, which has seen successive mayors fall after multiple corruption scandals. This is also the case in Ventspils where Aivars Lembergs, who has effectively run the city since the late 1980s, continues to be the first candidate in the governing Latvia and Ventspils party list, despite finding himself in prison since February 2021 when he was found guilty on charges relating to bribery and money-laundering and sentenced to five years in prison.

RURAL AREAS

The campaign in the small, largely wealthy suburbs of Pierīga tended to focus on how to spend money rather than on how to attract jobs and investment. In contrast, party programs in Latvia’s poorer rural regions gave greater salience to the delivery of core social services, especially health-care and education, as well as maintaining public transport connections and fixing roads.

In Latvia’s rural regions, however, party programs gave greater salience to the delivery of core social services and maintaining transport connections. Access to healthcare remained a particular concern in Latvia’s sparsely populated and ageing regions, with fewer newly qualified doctors and other medical personnel being prepared to work in rural areas when there is demand for their services both in Rīga and elsewhere in the European Union. Party programs also made general promises to maintain nurseries and schools, even as a steep decline in student numbers continues and shows no signs of abating. Maintaining roads and regional bus net-

works are also a feature of most programs. Promises to attract investment and new jobs tend to focus on the construction of industrial parks, rather than identifying areas of strength or competitive advantage, and indicate a general lack of ideas and vision for how to develop Latvia’s moribund rural regions. Either new public housing or housing subsidies were the typical instruments proposed to attract new residents or to mitigate the flight of existing residents.

The absence of Rīga from the municipal election led to a greater focus on the regions from the national media. Latvia’s public media organized a string of televised debates covering every new municipality and developed a voting advice application (*novadu škirotava*) to help voters choose the party closest to their values and policy interests. Local radio and television, newspapers and Latvia’s many news portals also covered the election. Latvia’s anti-corruption bureau (KNAB) was also been kept busy, having received more than 350 reports alleging election campaigning irregularities. In one case, KNAB seized 11,000 copies of a pre-election newspaper in Ventspils that broke election rules as it was funded by an unidentified third party. Nevertheless, the campaign was largely free of scandal and controversy.

LOW TURNOUT – DISCONNECTED VOTERS?

The 2021 local government election results were eagerly awaited as the established balance of power in many local governments had been altered through local government mergers and the abolition of lists of residents from standing for election. The election also saw several innovations intended to encourage participation. For the first time voters could vote at any polling station in their municipality, with a voter’s passport or identity card being scanned to ensure that the individual is listed in the relevant voter register and had not voted earlier. Voters also had the opportunity to cast their vote earlier in the week before the election. Postal voting from abroad was also allowed for the first time.

However, these innovations had little impact and turnout declined sharply from 50.4% in 2017 to just 34.0% in 2021, well-below the previous lowest turnout of 46.0% in 2013.

Table 2
Turnout in local government elections in Latvia. 1994-2021

Year of election	Turnout (%)
1994	58.5
1997	56.8
2001	62.0
2005	52.9
2009	53.8
2013	46.0
2017	50.4
2021	34.0

Source: Latvian Central Election Committee (2021)

Pre-election polls had indicated that a significant number of voters, particularly pensioners (who are typically among the most active voters in Latvia), would stay at home because of the risk of Covid-19 pandemic. The significantly sized group of Covid-denying voters may also have stayed at home as the major covid-denying party formed by the populist parliamentarian Aldis Gobzems in January this year – Law and Justice – did not participate in the elections.

CONTINUITY IN CHANGE

The election results continued two established, pre-territorial reform, trends. First, Latvia's two major "regional" party alliances - the Latvian Union of Regions (Latvijas Reģionu Apvienība) and the Union of Greens and Farmers – each won the biggest share of the vote in five local governments while the Farmers' Union additionally won the biggest share of the vote in four local governments. These parties have their power base in Latvia's regions and were expected to do well. Three governing coalition parties did better than expected, with the economically liberal Latvia's Development (Latvijas attīstībai) coming first in four local governments, and New Unity and the National Alliance in three local governments. The social democratic party "Harmony" came first in two. The remaining fourteen local governments were won by a combination of small, local parties, as well as local party and national party alliances and, curiously, one local authority saw the faded Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party (Latvijas Sociāldemokrātiskā strādnieku partija) win the biggest share of the vote. Local government politics in Latvia remains fragmented with small, regional parties balancing the influence of national, parliamentary parties.

Second, the "strongmen" mayors of Latvia's larger cities also fared well in the 2021 vote and are well-positioned to keep hold of the mayor's office for the next four years. The city of Jelgava's mayor Andris Rāviņš, who has held the post since 2001, saw his Union of Greens and Farmers finish first with one-third (32.3%) of the vote (and 6 of 15 council seats), significantly more than second-placed New Unity (13.6%). Aleksandrs Bartaševičs, who has been the mayor of the eastern city of Rēzekne in the Latgale region since 2009, saw his social democratic party "Harmony" win 63.2% of the vote and 8 of 13 council seats. Valmiera's mayor Jānis Baiks, who saw his office raided during a corruption investigation in 2019 and who has held the office since 2014, similarly saw his For Valmiera and Vidzeme (Valmierai un Vidzemei) party win 55% of the vote and a majority 12 of 19 council seats. In Liepāja, Uldis Sesks, who held the mayor's post between 1997 and 2018 (when he stepped down to take up the vice-mayor's position in a power-sharing deal with his coalition partner Jānis Vilnītis from the Latvian Union of Regions), saw his Liepājas Party win 41.2% of the vote and 6 of 15 seats. He is also expected to return to the mayor's post.

It was also unsurprising to see Aivars Lembergs, who has been the effective mayor of the wealthy port transit town of Ventspils since 1988, win re-election with his political vehicle For Latvia and Ventspils (Latvijai un Ventspilij) scooping up

54.3% of the vote and a majority 7 of 13 council seats. Lembergs received the highest number of voter "pluses" in the Ventspils poll, despite being in prison since February 2021 when a court found him guilty of bribery and money-laundering following a court case that dragged on for more than a decade. Lembergs has technically been suspended from the mayor's post since 2007 but has appeared to continue running the city from the backseat. His election has raised some interesting constitutional issues that will likely be decided by Latvia's courts. Can (and should) Lembergs participate in council meetings from behind bars? How (and should) he vote from prison (a particularly interesting question as his vote is needed to maintain For Latvia and Ventspils' majority)?

REGIONAL DISPARITIES AND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Latvia's Social Democratic parties had a mixed election day. On the one hand, the pro-Russian-speaker and left-leaning social democratic party "Harmony" strengthened its political dominance in Latvia's eastern region of Latgale, winning the biggest share of votes in the region's two cities Rēzekne (63.2%) and Daugavpils (42.3%) and seats in all the region's counties. However, with just 7 of 15 seats in the Daugavpils City Council, the social democratic party "Harmony" quickly sealed a coalition deal with the single elected deputy from Latvia's Russian Union (Latvijas Krievu savienība), a reactionary pro-Kremlin party whose party program promised to invest energy and finances in promoting Russian culture and renewing Soviet era monuments. The social democratic party "Harmony" council leaders are likely to agree to support these socially polarizing policies in order to have Latvia's Russian Union support for their planned investment strategies. Latvia's oldest social democratic party, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party (which traces its history back to 1904), won 55.6% of the vote in Olaine county (where it already held power). However, it remains a minor player in national politics since a series of political and corruption scandals ripped the party asunder in the early 2000s. Latvia's newest social democratic party, the Progressives (Progresīvie), fared poorly in the election, winning just one seat (in Rēzekne) in the six "State City" municipal councils. Its progressive policies on taxation, same-sex marriage and other "red-button" issues appear to have little traction outside the capital city of Rīga.

To sum up, the 2020 regional reform appears to have had little impact on the 2021 local government election. The "strongman" mayors were reelected to power, the Union of Greens and Farmers and the Latvian Union of Regions remain the most influential parties outside Rīga, and the political balance between small, regional parties and local branches of the national parties has remained in place. The impact of the reform will be felt in the coming years, as larger local governments will be expected to deliver better services, attract more investment, better jobs and curtail the gradual depopulation and economic decline that has marked Latvia's regions for the last three decades. If that fails to happen, then politicians will once again revisit and redraw Latvia's local government map.

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FES IN THE BALTIC STATES

Shortly after the restoration of independence, in 1992, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung started its activities in the three Baltic States and opened offices in Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius. The core concern was to support the democratic transition processes, to accompany the Baltic States on their way to the European Union and to promote the dialogue between the Baltic States and Germany, and among the countries of this region. The current focus of the work of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is:

- strengthening democracy and active civil society;
- supporting the European integration process;
- contributing to the development of a common European foreign and security policy;
- promoting a fair and sustainable development of economic and social policies in the Baltic States and in the EU.

CONTINUITY IN CHANGE?

Latvia's Local Governments after Regional Reform and Local Government Elections



Politicians have brushed-off the record-low electoral turnout of 34% as nothing more than public reaction to the risk of Covid-19 infection. However, coming after a historically-low turnout in the 2018 parliamentary election, it continues a worrying and persistent trend of voter disengagement from politics.



The biggest losers in the election are the For! half of the Development/For! parliamentary alliance which won just 10 local government seats (in contrast to the 84 won by Development) and the New Conservative Party which failed to win a single seat in half of the 35 municipalities it contested. Both will be concerned about what awaits them in the October 2022 parliamentary election.



Despite a string of corruption scandals, parliamentary schisms and a poor performance in the 2020 municipal election in Rīga, the social democratic party "Harmony" remains in good health. Voters in its eastern region power-base of Latgale turned out to return the party to power in both major cities and it won seats in every county in Latgale.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
<https://baltic.fes.de>