



Latvia in flux?

How the Russian invasion of Ukraine transformed the Latvian party system

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Summary

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Latvian political system has undergone several seismic shifts. Formerly dominant parties have been ousted from the Latvian parliament. Prime ministers and presidents have resigned. The initial political response to the invasion by most Latvian political parties aggravated interethnic relations in the country. At the same time, however, diverging attitudes towards the invasion among Latvia's Russian-speaking population constituted a transformative moment for the party system. New parties have sought to attract both Latvian- and Russian-speakers, thus bridging the ethnopolitical gap that for decades has pervaded the Latvian party system.



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Introduction

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Latvian political system has undergone several seismic shifts. Formerly dominant parties have been ousted from the Latvian parliament (Saeima); prime ministers and presidents have resigned and been replaced; and the previously politically consolidated electoral bloc of Russian-speakers seems to have disintegrated. In this text, I attempt to describe these processes, and account for the reasons behind them. I make two major points, which may seem paradoxical.

Firstly, the initial political response to the Russian invasion led to a flurry of nationalist initiatives that aggravated interethnic relations in the country. Secondly, the diverging attitudes towards the invasion among the Russophones constituted a transformative moment for the Latvian party system. Paradoxically, this paved the way for new parties that have been able to attract both Latvian- and Russian-speakers, thus bridging the ethnopolitical gap that for decades has pervaded the Latvian party system and kept the two linguistic groups separate in the political arena. In other words, the invasion has had different consequences in the short-term and in the long-term: while it caused interethnic relations to reach their nadir during the months following the invasion, it has also constituted an opportunity for the party system to overcome its entrenched ethnic divisions.

Before venturing into the claims, I will briefly explain what I mean when I talk about party systems. Scholars such as Giovanni Sartori and Peter Mair claim that party systems can be distinguished based on

certain prominent features. One categorical distinction is between a *moderate pluralist* party system and a *polarised pluralist* one. According to Sartori, polarised party systems exhibit *centrifugal* competition between parties, meaning that they foster and reward increasing radicalisation of differences.¹ Mair, meanwhile, focused on change. He argued that a party system “determine[s] the terms of reference through which we, as voters and as citizens, understand and interpret the political world.”² Change in a party system, then, can have wide effects on how politics is perceived by the whole electorate, and may yield unpredictable and far-reaching consequences for the political system at large. Moreover, on cause of change can be “the disappearance of one of the relevant anti-system parties from a system of polarised pluralism”.³

In this text, I examine the possibility that the Latvian political system is currently undergoing a moderation of its previously polarised political system due to the disintegration of the formerly unified electoral bloc consisting of the Russophone population. Before this claim is expanded upon, I will give a brief historical background of the Latvian Russophones and their political mobilisation.

Background

After Latvia, like Lithuania and Estonia, regained independence in the early 1990s, the country rapidly developed into a stable democracy, which opened the door to both EU and NATO membership in 2004. During 50 years of Soviet occupation, Latvia’s demography had changed dramatically, as citizens from other Soviet republics settled

¹ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, Colchester: ECPR Press, 2005 [1976], p 120

² Peter Mair, *Party System Change – approaches and interpretations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 9.

³ Mair, 53.



in Latvia. In 1989, only 52 per cent of the population was categorised as ethnically Latvian. That share had reached 62 per cent by 2022, due among other things to a higher propensity of non-Latvians to emigrate.⁴ The largest minority group is composed of ethnic Russians, who predominantly live in the large cities and in the easternmost region of Latgale. Alongside other minorities with ancestry in other Soviet republics, they constitute a grouping that are commonly referred to as “Russian-speakers”.

A socioeconomically and geographically variegated group, the minority should not *a priori* be seen as a natural political collective. However, since the election of 2011, Russian-speakers were largely politically united in their support of the *Harmony* party – a party belonging to the family of European social democrats, but which also espoused social conservative values, besides championing the rights of Latvia’s minority groups. Despite its status as a minority party, Harmony was the largest party within the Saeima between 2011 and 2022, occupying between 18 and 31 percent of the seats in parliament during this period. Harmony’s popularity did not, however, mean that the rest of the party system accepted it as a legitimate potential coalition partner. In fact, they refused to co-operate with it, thus politically isolating Harmony and Russophones in general. Furthermore, the ideological distance between Harmony and the rest of the party system has increased, which is exemplified by differences of opinion on fundamental issues such as the status of the Russian language in Latvia, where the ideological distance between Harmony and the rest of the party landscape has increased. In this way, the pre-2022 Latvian party system can be categorised as a polarised pluralist

system, in which political poles became increasingly distanced over time.

By January 2022, opinion polls showed that Harmony was still the largest party in Latvia by a large margin. Nine months later, its voters had all but abandoned ship. The party was ejected from the Saeima in the October elections, paving the way for a transformation of the Latvian party system. In the following, I will describe the immediate consequences of the October elections for the party system. Secondly, I will expand upon my first claim regarding the aggravated interethnic relations in the wake of February 24th. Thirdly, the claim regarding the disintegration of the Russophone electoral bloc will be developed. Lastly, I will assess the current climate in the Latvian party system, and the prospects which may be engendered by the apparent party system change.

Moments of transformation: The post-invasion elections

In the elections to the Saeima in October 2022, the four largest parties from the previous election all failed to win representation. In other words, parties representing two-thirds of the seats in the previous parliament were abandoned by the voters and ejected from parliament. This included Harmony, but also the three largest government parties, who were deserted in a similar fashion. The clear winners were *New Unity*, a moderate right-wing party which, in a complex parliamentary situation, had been selected to broker and lead a motley coalition between 2018 and 2022 despite holding less than seven per cent of the seats. Following the election of 2022, the party suddenly found itself the most popular in the country. It opted for renewed co-

⁴ For more information, see Latvian official statistics, *Latvijas oficiālā statistika* (<https://stat.gov.lv/en>, accessed 2024-09-03)



operation with the longstanding foremost nationalists of the Latvian party system, the *National Alliance*, as well as the *United List*, a rival but ideologically proximate centre-right party.

In the run-up to parliamentary election of the president, held six months after the parliamentary election, the incumbent president – who had been the nominee of the National Alliance – decided to abandon his pursuit of a second presidential term. In his stead, the most – and, arguably, only – popular Latvian politician, foreign minister Edgars Rinkēvičs of the ruling New Unity, secured a parliamentary majority for himself

as head of state. The political reshuffle was then completed in September of 2023, when the tripartite coalition government met a premature end following internal divisions. The National Alliance and the United List were replaced in office by the *Union of Greens and Farmers* and the socially liberal *Progressives* – both of which had supported the candidacy of the new president. Subsequently, prime minister Krišjānis Kariņš resigned, and former welfare minister Evika Siliņa was elevated to the post of prime minister. The Latvian party landscape before and after the 2022 election is presented in the table 1.

Table 1. Selected parties in the 13th and 14h Saeima (2018-2022, 2022-2026)

	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*
	Harmony	Progressives	Stability!	Greens and Farmers	New Unity	United List	New Conservative	National Alliance	Latvia First
Kariņš I (2019–22)					PM	N/A	Coalition	Coalition	
Kariņš II (2022–23)					PM	Coalition		Coalition	
Siliņa I (2023–)		Coalition		Coalition	PM				

Notes. An empty box means that the party either is in opposition. A diagonal down border means that the party was not represented in the Saeima. PM = party of the prime minister. Coalition = junior coalition partner. The table is not exhaustive: not all parties in the 13th Saeima are included. The left-to-right sequence of the parties with an asterisk above their names is derived from the EU political barometer (Caravaca et al 2022). The placement of Stability! on the left-right scale is based on the author's judgement.



The new coalition

Preceding the selection of Siliņa as prime minister in 2023, New Unity had been clear in its ambition to invite the National Alliance to join the new government. However, the nationalists, having governed uninterruptedly for twelve years in an otherwise chaotic Latvian party system, seemed to prefer returning to opposition rather than assume a diminished role in a new coalition.

It would not have been surprising if the National Alliance would have left the cabinet with a spirit of satisfaction. After all, the incoming coalition would still be led by New Unity, its longstanding coalition partner. The programme of Siliņa's new cabinet, which pledged to develop and sustain "a Latvian Latvia", even echoed the slogan of the National Alliance.⁵ The nationalist deputies did not, however, seem overly impressed with the incoming coalition, as indicated in their remarks in the debate on September 15th, hours before the cabinet would be approved by the Saeima.

In the first contribution to the debate, Raivis Dzintars, leader of the National Alliance, explained the rationale behind the party's decision not to join the new coalition. Or, rather, he explained the *morality* behind the decision. Dzintars addressed New Unity's turn towards their new coalition partners:

There is no longer a dividing line ... between right and wrong or good and evil, between values and the betrayal of those values ... We fight the biggest battles within ourselves. And that goes for every single one of us in this room. And it is these small inner

victories that are building real and strong foundations for something much more significant and greater than what will become today.⁶

According to Dzintars, the government's deal with its new coalition partners, particularly the socially liberal Progressives, constituted a step on a perilous path that would endanger the moral purity of the state. It was implied that the politicians of the centre-right New Unity, and more specifically Siliņa herself, had lost the inner, moral battle, striking a Faustian pact in which the integrity of the Latvian nation has been bargained away for a few more years in power.

It is hard not to interpret Dzintars's remarks as testament to the decisive ideological pivot that the seemingly minor coalition shift, in the eyes of the nationalists, could entail. This reaction is, in some ways, puzzling. It can be interpreted as an overly dramatic political outburst, or as a real and honest fear that the new government indeed heralded a meaningful ideological change. Additionally, it could reflect a metamorphosis of the Latvian party system, in which the National Alliance would find itself in an increasingly peripheral position. In this light, the inauguration of the new coalition should not be seen as an isolated political event, but rather as one of the steps in a transformative process that was set in motion on Thursday February 24th.

⁵ Latvian government declaration, "Deklarācija par Evikas Siliņas vadītā Ministru kabineta iecerēto darbību 2023. gada 15. Septembrī" (<https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/media/16704/download?attachment>), 2023-09-15, accessed 2024-09-03

⁶ Raivis Dzintars, *The third (extraordinary) session of the autumn session of the 14th Saeima of the Republic of Latvia on September 15, 2023*, parliamentary debate, 2023-09-15 (https://www.saeima.lv/lv/transcripts/view/2487#section_1), accessed 2024-09-03



Post-invasion politics in Latvia

As described above, the 19 months separating February 2022 from September 2023 featured the ejection of the four largest parties from the political arena, the formation and collapse of a government, and the resignations of the heads of government and state. Simultaneously, the period was marked by a frenzy of political activity, with the aim of strengthening the position of the Latvian nation and the Latvian language vis-à-vis its Russophone minority. This ambition was described explicitly by nationalist deputy Jānis Dombrava in a special session of the Saeima on the morning of the Russian invasion: “In the near future,” he declared, “the Saeima will decide how to break Russia’s influence in Latvia.”⁷

The political project heralded by Dombrava linked the Russophone minority with the internal security of the state, thus *securitising* issues of cultural and social policy in the domain of integration. The National Alliance wasted no time in setting this project in motion. For instance, it was manifested by legislation that limited the scope for Russian-speakers to commemorate events of special significance, such as the Victory Day on May 9th. The state also set about toppling monuments that commemorated the Soviet Union, most notably the Victory Monument, which was demolished five months after the

invasion. Furthermore, lawmakers in June approved an accelerated education reform to replace Russian as a language of instruction within education, and in September introduced amendments that would see all Latvian residents holding a Russian passport – some 20 000 individuals⁸ – to compulsory language tests, which had to be passed in order to stay in Latvia. During these critical months, the ambition of “breaking Russia’s influence” dominated Latvian politics and provided nationalist forces with legitimization for policies that would have been considered unattainable before the invasion. Before the October elections, all parties except Harmony were united in supporting these measures.

After the elections, however, the ‘Latvian’ side of the ethnic divide has found itself less unified. In 2023, a ban was proposed on the use of foreign languages in future election campaigns which would restrict the possibility for the approximate tenth of the population who lack proficiency in the Latvian language to engage in the political debate.⁹ Both the left-leaning Progressives as well as the Farmers’ Union and the populist Latvia First chose to abstain from supporting the legislation, which was subsequently subject to criticism by the Council of Europe in a report in February 2024. The Council found the legislation to be in violation of several articles within the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.¹⁰ In May 2024, both the Progressives and Latvia First joined Stability!

⁷ Jānis Dombrava, Remote Emergency Session of the Saeima, 2022-02-24, accessed 2024-09-03, (https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS13/saeimalivs_imp.nsf/0/B2E2FFBC70A5F92DC2258805004DD8C5?OpenDocument)

⁸ Vita Anstrate, “In order to extend residence permits, more than 20 000 people will have to pass a Latvian language test” [automatically translated], *Lsm.lv*, 2022-12-11, accessed 2024-10-04 (<https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/11.12.2022-uzturesanas-atlauju-pagarinasanai-vairak-neka-20-000-cilveku-bus-jakarto-latviesu-valodas-parbaude.a486495/>)

⁹ *Lsm.lv*, “Latvian is the mother tongue of 64 % of the population of Latvia, 2023-10-24, accessed 2024-09-03, (<https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/24.10.2023-latvian-is-the-mother-tongue-of-64-of-the-population-of-latvia.a528983/>)

¹⁰ Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, “Fourth Opinion on Latvia”, *Council of Europe*, 2024-02-22, p 38



in opposing legislation that would forbid pre-election political debates to be held in the Russian language. The Farmers' Union abstained.

In short, the drive to break Russian influence through linguistic and cultural measures was weakened after the months that immediately followed the Russian invasion, when it was at the front and centre of Latvian politics. The invasion undoubtedly opened a window of opportunity, which was seized upon by Latvian nationalists. After the elections, however, the nationalists then found the levers of power to be out of reach for the first time in twelve years. In the next section, I argue that an important reason for this development can be found by examining developments within the Russophone electoral bloc since the invasion.

The disintegration of the Russophone electoral bloc and its consequences

As described above, the post-invasion legislative flurry was mostly driven by the National Alliance but supported by all parties except Harmony. These measures undoubtedly served to raise ethnic tensions. Surveys conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in the summers of 2022 and 2023 found that the share of Latvian Russian-speakers who believed that “serious ethnic conflict” would take place in Latvia increased from 67 per cent to 79 per cent (for Latvian-speakers, this number remained stable at 75 per cent).¹¹

The Harmony party, on the other hand, was paralysed in the new political climate. Despite the party unambiguously condemning the invasion, the party and its

voters were repeatedly castigated as a “fifth column” by their nationalist colleagues and were heavily criticised for their opposition to legislative initiatives that claimed to enhance the security of the Latvian nation state. Harmony was, in other words, torn between the need to show loyalty to the Latvian state and the need to prove to its Russophone electorate that it would continue to defend their interests.

However, the already eclectic and variegated Russophone minority was further divided by diverging attitudes towards the invasion. An estimated 15 per cent supported the Russian action, 25 per cent supported Ukraine and the rest took a neutral, or agnostic, stance.¹² The task of keeping this diverging group consolidated would prove insurmountable for Harmony, despite its efforts to combine vehement condemnation of the invasion with opposition to the subsequent nationalist turn in Latvia. Instead, their voters turned either to the more populist and overtly Russophone-friendly Stability! party, or to the parties vying to attract an interethnic pool of voters, such as the populist right-wing Latvia First or the socially liberal Progressives.

The disintegration of the Russophone electoral bloc, as evidenced by the demise of Harmony, had crucial consequences for the Latvian party system, as the champions of the Russophone minority were partially replaced with non-ethnic parties that hoped to bridge the interethnic divide. One of these parties, the Progressives, were shortly afterwards brought into government, together with New Unity and the Union of Greens and Farmers. Thus, the anti-pact directed against parties that attracted Russophone voters did not seem to have survived the ejection of Harmony from the

¹¹ Reinhard Krumm, Krists Šukevičs & Toms Zarinš, *Under Pressure – An analysis of the*

Russian-speaking minority in Latvia, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, July 2023, p 6

¹² Krumm, Šukevičs & Zarinš, 10



Saeima. Not even the clearest successor in terms of defending the Russophone interest – the Stability! party – was ostracised to the same extent, as the party enjoyed good relations with another opposition force, namely the right-wing Latvia First, which has been increasingly critical to nationalising legislation following the election.

The developments between February 2022 and September 2023 seem to indicate that the Latvian party system is undergoing important change, as a wider range of possibilities for interparty co-operation is emerging. The transformation seems, however, to be opposed by the National Alliance and the nationalist political sphere in general, which are directing the same adversarial strategy against the parties attempting to bridge the interethnic divide that they used against Harmony. This has been evident not least in their attacks on the Progressives since that party's inclusion in cabinet. The Progressives have been labelled as a "pro-Kremlin party" by National Alliance deputies,¹³ while conservative thinkers have claimed that "[t]here is currently no political force more dangerous to the country than the 'Progressives'," due to the party's ability and ambition to attract minority voters.¹⁴

The vitriol directed towards the Progressives by Latvian nationalists should not only be seen as tactic to delegitimise a political opponent in hard competition for a place beside New Unity in cabinet. It is rather a sign of a deep discomfort with the transforming party system. As noted above, the Progressives joined the populists of

Stability! and Latvia First in opposing ethnolinguistic legislation in 2023. And soon afterwards, the party was invited to form part of the government – at the expense of the National Alliance and the United List. Before the demise of Harmony, the National Alliance was consistently in government, partly due to the tradition of non-cooperation with the minority party, which forced most 'Latvian' parties to co-operate in order to achieve a working majority. When Harmony disappeared, this privileged position was suddenly undermined, and the possibilities for political co-operation expanded. It would thus be politically rational for the National Alliance to strive for reinstituting the old party system, in which their political influence was all but guaranteed.

In the final part, we will look more closely at political developments since the inauguration of the new government and assess the nature of the Latvian party system following the transformation set in motion by the invasion.

Towards a post-ethnic party system?

To summarize, the party system in Latvia is in a state of flux following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the two subsequent elections. The disintegration of the Russian-speakers as an electoral bloc has not only spelled the demise of Harmony, but simultaneously opened up the "market" of Russophone voters – a segment which seems to be of special interest to a range of political forces, from the social liberal

¹³ *LSM Editorial Staff*, "The National Union draws "red lines", ZZS would join the coalition with a clear plan: party representatives on possible government scenarios" (automatic trans.), *LSM*, 2023-08-15, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/15.08.2023-nacionala-apvieniba-velk-sarkanas-linijas-zzs-pievienotos-koalicijai-ar-skaidru-planu-partiju-parstavji-par-iespejamiem-valdibas-scenarijiem.a520163>

¹⁴ Bens Latkovskis, "The 'progressives' are gradually starting to show their national danger" (automatic trans.), *Neatkariga.lv*, 2023-10-20 (<https://nra.lv/neatkariga/komentari/bens-latkovskis/430626-progresivie-pamazam-sak-izradit-savu-valstisko-bistamibu.htm>)



Progressives to the anti-establishment Latvia First party, both competing with – and among young voters even outcompeting – the more overtly ethnic Stability! party for the Russian-speaking vote.

Since New Unity reformed the government to include the Union of Greens and Farmers and the Progressives, the flow of legislation that sought to alter the power balance between majority and minority has diminished greatly. Instead, the government has been able to focus on issues that had long been blocked by the National Alliance during their 12 years in government. After September 2023, Latvia legalised same-sex partnerships and ratified the Istanbul convention on the prevention against violence towards women. Ethnopolitical issues have been sidelined in favour of socially progressive legislation. The central locus of politics seems to have dropped its previous fixation on ethnocultural and linguistic issues.

In this text, I have argued that the main reason for this shift has been due to the changes in the party system which has led to a less polarised mode of politics. While these socio-cultural issues may prove to be equally contentious, the step away from ethnopolitics may provide the entirety of Latvian society with some much-needed relief following the turmoil over the last two years.

However, it should be expected that ethnopolitical actors – both within the National Alliance and Stability! – may continue to portray ethnopolitical questions as moral struggles between “good and evil” in order to recreate Latvia’s polarised and centrifugal party system, which arguably favours more extreme parties. It will be essential for the new government to keep their heads cool to move the political field towards less emotive issues, with the ultimate goal of precluding ethnic violence.



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