

Latvian government collapses

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A month after Prime Minister Einars Repse announced that his 14-month-old government was stepping down, Latvia remains in political turmoil. On January 28, one of the parties making up Repse's centre-right government, the First Party, resigned, leaving the prime minister without a majority in the 100-seat parliament.

The government had been dogged for months by allegations of corruption and mismanagement, resulting in the establishment of a parliamentary committee of inquiry to investigate claims that Repse bought several properties at favourable credit terms last year. The dispute between Repse and the First Party erupted after he dismissed its leader from the post of deputy prime minister, after it voted with the opposition to set up an inquiry into the allegations of financial impropriety made against the prime minister.

Repse resigned on February 5, insisting that he would seek to form a new government. "The prime minister chose to resign because he doesn't think it possible to work in a minority government," said a spokesman for Repse's New Era Party. "He will continue running this country until parliament is ready to elect a new government."

Under constitutional rules, Repse is permitted to continue leading the country until a new government can be formed.

The collapse of the Repse government came as little surprise to many Latvians. Not only has the Baltic country of 2.3 million people had several unstable governments since it gained independence from the USSR in 1991, but the coalition led by Repse has shown signs of strain throughout its time in power.

It is widely believed that the government would have fallen apart last year had it not been for the coalition parties' acceptance of the need to present a united face during the referendum campaign that culminated in the country voting to join the European Union in

September.

Following the referendum, Oskar Kastens, chair of the parliamentary faction of the First Party, demanded the resignation of Repse, alleging that the prime minister was guilty of corruption and was riding roughshod over the wishes of other coalition members. The strongman style of Repse, a former central banker, angered his three coalition partners who almost managed to oust him last September.

Immediately following the resignation of the First Party, Repse claimed that his premiership could continue with the support of his two remaining coalition partners, the right-wing anti-Russian Fatherland and Freedom Party, and the Greens and Farmers Union. However, as this would have left his government six seats short of a parliamentary majority, Repse would have required an agreement with one of the opposition parties. This left him with little room to manoeuvre, as the main opposition People's Party was in talks with the First Party.

The other opposition groups have their main base of support among the Russian-speaking minority that makes up over one third of Latvia's people—precisely the section of the population against which Repse's government, and especially the Fatherland and Freedom Party, has aimed its chauvinistic assaults. The last act of Repse's government before its resignation was to ensure the passage of a law dictating that Russian-language schools should conduct the majority of classes in Latvian.

Latvia's president, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, has hastily sought the formation of a new government without Repse as leader. The Latvian elite are worried that the government crisis will damage the country's position as it prepares to join the European Union on May 1 and NATO later in the year. In an expression of the contempt felt in ruling circles for the democratic system, President Vike-Freiberga pledged on Latvian

television to carry on “business as usual,” and that a new government would be arranged without recourse to fresh parliamentary elections. Aigars Freimanis, the director of the First Party’s social research company, told *Agence France Presse*: “It is very hard to give a prognosis of how long it will take to form a new government. There are two main arguments why politicians should do it quickly. The first: the public is tired by all these political games and...the long process of government forming could harm Latvia’s international prestige.”

Vike-Freiberga has proposed a “supra-right” coalition headed by Indulis Emsis of the Greens and Farmers Union, which would also incorporate the Fatherland and Freedom, First, and People’s parties. It was also mooted that Repse’s New Era Party could join the coalition, giving the new government 80 out of the 100 seats in parliament, with the opposition consisting of parliamentarians who largely represent ethnic-Russian voters.

Repse has for now rejected New Era’s entry into this coalition, instead calling for new general elections from which he hopes to fare better than his adversaries. Like President Putin in Russia, Repse, whose victory in the October 2002 elections came as something of a surprise for many commentators, has benefited from the antipathy felt by the working class towards most of the country’s politicians.

Many political insiders have been critical of Repse’s calls for fresh elections, including Aivars Lembergs, one of Latvia’s richest and most powerful men. He has claimed that Repse had been pushing for his coalition partners to withdraw their support since 2002: “Thus he [Repse] would be the victim, no new government would be set up, and even the president would not be able to set up a new government without his permission and would be forced to stage a referendum for new parliamentary elections.”



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