

Former Nazi soldier appointed to Latvian parliamentary committee

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20 November 2010

On November 8, a former member of the National Socialist Waffen SS was elected chairman of the parliamentary committee of the Latvian government responsible for dealing with the Russian minority in the Baltic state.

The 86-year-old deputy, Visvaldis Lacis, will head the parliamentary committee responsible for the implementation of new nationality laws. Lacis is member of the neo-fascist party All for Latvia! which entered parliament following the October 2 elections. The party demands a prohibition of the Russian language in schools and the deportation of ethnic Russians, who constitute around a quarter of the country's inhabitants.

Lacis, who fought in the Second World War against the Soviet Union as a member of the Latvian Legion of the Waffen SS, has published numerous articles and books glorifying Hitler's Germany, the Waffen SS and the war against the Soviet Union. He is admired by Latvian neo-fascists and maintains close contact to extreme right-wing thugs and organizations responsible for a series of provocations and acts of violence against minorities. Together with such elements, Lacis regularly celebrates the invasion of the Soviet Union by German troops in 1941.

Since the independence of the country from the Soviet Union practically all Latvian governments have sought to mobilize extreme right-wing, anticommunist forces. Lacis has also been the recipient of government honours for his record against the Soviet Union. His appointment as the chairman of an official parliamentary committee represents, however, a hitherto unknown degree of cooperation with the neo-fascists.

Head of government Valdis Dombrovskis, 39, has long pushed for the inclusion of the neo-fascists in his

new government but had been forced to back down due to opposition inside his own right-wing, neo-liberal electoral pact, Unity.

The federal elections at the beginning of October were followed by four weeks of discussions and negotiations over the composition of the new government. The outgoing government parties Unity and The Union of Greens and Farmers commanded 55 of the 100 seats in the new parliament and rapidly agreed to continue their coalition under Prime Minister Dombrovskis. But a prolonged debate then took place over whether to bring ultra-right forces into the government.

In the end there was general agreement not to officially allow the ultra-right into the government, but eight deputies from All for Latvia! and Fatherland and Freedom voted in favour of Dombrovskis and confirmed his appointment as prime minister.

Despite any agreements to the contrary, the government is full of ultra-right figures.

The foreign affairs minister, Girts Valdis Kristovskis, chairman of Dombrovskis' Unity barely survived a vote of no confidence last week after he admitted that in an email exchange with a Latvian doctor living in the US he had expressed the type of racist nostrums typical for All for Latvia! His most prominent defender in the parliamentary no confidence debate was former SS-man Lacis.

The deputy prime minister and defence secretary in the new government is the former foreign affairs minister, Artis Pabriks. He stands for an unwavering pro-European policy and sharp demarcation from Russia.

The promotion of neo-fascists and the stirring up of ethnic tensions against the Russian minority are closely bound up with the country's economic problems and

the associated social attacks on the working class. Latvia has been hit by the international economic crisis like no other European Union country. In 2009 the economy slumped by a total of 18 percent and according to the Latvian treasury national GDP is due to decline by at least 3 percent this year.

The problems of the former “Baltic Tiger” had already begun before the outbreak of the international financial crisis. Following the explosion of a real estate bubble, GDP had already slipped into the red in the second quarter of 2008. By the end of 2008 Latvia confronted bankruptcy and was only rescued by an emergency credit from the International Monetary Fund and the European Union totalling €7.5 billion.

In return the government committed itself to a dramatic austerity policy, which is currently being intensified. The new government has so far committed itself to further savings of €600 million, despite the fact that previous budget cuts have massively worsened living standards.

Half of the country’s hospitals have been closed and there is no longer any sort of adequate health provision. In the remaining hospitals medicines are in short supply. The number of doctors and maintenance personnel has been reduced to a point where vital operations can no longer be carried out.

Wages for public employees have been slashed by up to 60 percent and even senior civil servants need a second job in order to be able to pay the bills. There are widespread fears of a harsh winter, which could lead to many deaths among those unable to pay their heating bills.

Irrespective of the social consequences, Dombrovski and his government have decided to intensify their austerity course.

The new cabinet consists of a mixture of old and new faces from Latvian politics. Dombrovski has filled two key posts with close supporters—Artis Kampars as finance minister and Andris Vilks as economics minister. Vilks was, until recently, chief analyst of the Swedish bank SEB. The Swedish banks, which invested heavily in the Baltic states, are urging even harsher budget cuts in order to limit their losses.

The deliberate inclusion of extreme right-wing elements in the government is aimed at deflecting attention from the social consequences of the government’s policy and serves to divide the

opposition to its radical austerity measures.



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