

Right-wing governing coalition wins parliamentary elections in Latvia

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The right-wing government of Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma looks likely once again to form the government in Riga following parliamentary elections on Saturday. The prime minister's declared goals are a continuation of severe austerity measures and an intensification of the confrontation with Russia.

As in 2010, the party with the largest vote was the pro-Russian Harmony Centre led by Riga mayor Nils Usakovs, which won 23 percent of the vote. In 2011, it received 28 percent of the vote. The members of the right-wing government coalition—Straujuma's Unity Party, the nationalist National Alliance, and the Union of Greens and Farmers—together won 60 percent.

In addition, the radical free-market party For Latvia from the Heart and the Alliance of the Regions, a coalition of prominent local politicians, will also be represented in parliament.

Voter participation fell to 56 percent, significantly below the 62 percent four years ago. The highest turnout was in Riga, at 70 percent, and the lowest in the predominantly Russian-speaking region of Latgale, with 47 percent.

Of Latvia's 2 million inhabitants, around a quarter are ethnic Russians. There are an additional 280,000 Russian-speaking residents who have no right to vote. After the country's independence in 1991, Russian-speaking residents only received citizenship if they or their forefathers had lived in Latvia before 1940. All others had to pass a language test and an exam in Latvian history and constitutional principles before being granted citizenship.

The crisis in Ukraine and the European Union's (EU) conflict with Russia were the dominant issues in the election. The Latvian government, a member of the EU and NATO, vehemently urged tough sanctions against Russia. As votes were being cast, Straujuma stated that

the election was focused "on what is happening in Ukraine."

At the same time, she warned that a victory for Harmony could threaten Latvia's freedom. "The direction in which Latvia will develop is being decided today," stated Valdis Dombrovskis, Straujuma's predecessor.

Harmony leader Usakovs made a point of meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin prior to the election. Harmony maintains close ties to the Russian oligarchs and represents a small layer of the Russian minority in Latvia that has benefited from commerce with Russia.

As at the last election, Harmony is striving for a place in government. But Latvian President Andris Berzins firmly rejected this, declaring it "made no sense." The mandate to form a government would be given to Straujuma, he added.

Latvia obtains virtually all of its gas from Russia, and Russian investors play an important role in the Latvian economy. The embargo on certain foodstuffs imposed by Russia in response to EU sanctions has hit Latvia's agricultural sector hard.

Latvia, like the neighbouring Baltic states of Lithuania and Estonia, is playing a leading role in encouraging EU states to take a hard line towards Russia. Military spending has been increased and an expanded NATO presence approved. All three countries support the stationing of NATO troops and the conducting of military exercises on the Ukrainian border.

Straujuma backed the coup in February in Kiev, which was carried out with the assistance of fascist forces and drove pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich from power. The brutal action by the Ukrainian army and fascist militias in the east of the

country was hailed as a struggle for “independence.”

Brussels responded with relief to the confirmation that the right-wing government would remain in Riga. Since Latvia will take over the EU presidency next year, the concern was that a government influenced by pro-Russian forces would have altered the stance towards Moscow.

The anti-Russian course is not only to be explained by the right-wing character of the governing parties. The aggressive foreign policy also serves to divert attention from the deep domestic social crisis. Already in the aftermath of independence in the 1990s, the privatisations and social cuts were accompanied by anti-Russian chauvinism. Since the global financial crisis in 2008, the government has implemented draconian austerity measures under pressure from the EU, throwing broad sections of the population into poverty.

This also provoked tensions within the government. At the end of last year, then Prime Minister Dombrovskis resigned following fierce infighting within the governing coalition. Through the encouragement of hysterical anti-Russian sentiments in the aftermath of the coup in Kiev, Straujuma managed to hold the coalition together.

The economy shrank by more than 20 percent after 2008. In Latvia today, 90,000 more people live in poverty than in 2010. The rate of poverty has risen from 14 to 20 percent. Hundreds of thousands of people are leaving the country, with the population having dropped from 2.7 million when the Soviet Union collapsed to just 2 million. The Baltic state is among those in sharpest decline in the EU.

According to a World Bank report, the poorest 40 percent of the population have been affected most by austerity measures. Wages in the public sector were cut between 40 and 60 percent, pensions were cut and the public health care system barely exists. Half of all hospitals in the country have been closed. In some rural areas there is no longer any health care provision.

Latvia adopted the euro on January 1, 2014. Since the right-wing government came to power, everything has been done to meet the Maastricht criteria in order to join the Eurozone. For the majority of Latvians, the introduction of the euro meant further social hardship. More than half of all Latvians oppose the euro, according to a poll.

The introduction of the new currency will be

accompanied by enormous price rises. In neighbouring Estonia the euro was introduced in 2011 and the cost of living has increased drastically. In 2012, the rate of inflation was 4.7 percent. At the same time, wage rates dropped, producing a visible increase in poverty.

It is against this backdrop that the promise of US President Barack Obama should be evaluated. In early September he guaranteed the Baltic states assistance in a conflict with Russia, thereby giving the unstable Baltic regimes a blank cheque to provoke a war with Russia. Anger over declining living standards is widespread among the population. This increases the Latvian government's desire to divert attention away from domestic tensions through a conflict with Moscow.



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