Latvian Greens and neo-fascists in coalition

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Maris Kucinskis of the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS) is poised to head a new governing coalition in Latvia. He was nominated to be the successor of Laimdota Straujuma of the right-wing conservative Unity Party who resigned at the beginning of December. The new coalition government, like the previous one, will consist of the Union of Greens and Farmers, Unity and the extreme-right National Alliance (NA).

The formation of a new government marks a further shift to the right in the Baltic state which is home to approximately two million people. Straujuma stepped down under pressure from coalition partners and the European Union.

It has already become clear during negotiations on the new government that extreme right-wing forces will dominate the policies of the country, which shares a border with Russia. Straujuma had already sharpened her rhetoric toward Russia, calling for a stronger presence of NATO troops in the country. Domestically, she continued the brutal austerity measures begun in 2008 which eliminated a large part of the country's social infrastructure. The extreme right National Alliance controlled the ministry of justice under her administration, and the NA is expected to take over the ministry under Kucinskis.

Last week, the co-chair of the National Alliance, Raivis Dzintars, told the press that his parliamentary fraction would unanimously support a coalition with the Union of Greens and Farmers. This agreement was reached because the prime minister designate has granted the extreme right more influence in the government coalition than his predecessor. While there was tension between Straujuma and the NA on the direction of the country's refugee policy, the incoming government will adopt the policy of the neo-fascists.

Kucinskis has ensured that the coalition agreement will include an absolute freeze on the acceptance of refugees into the country. Any further entries will be blocked, and the government would not agree to a quota for the admission of refugees. The Straujuma government had earlier consented to the entry of just 531 refugees from the Middle East and Africa.

Augusts Brigmanis, the chairman of the Greens' parliamentary fraction, declared in October of last year that 70 percent of Latvians were against the admission of refugees, a fact which he could not, however, substantiate. He openly declared on national television that if one told the refugees how poor social benefits in Latvia were, they wouldn't want to come anyway. "Personally I do not want to see them here," said Brigmanis.

The openly racist and anti-democratic character of the new government also finds expression in a proposed ban on burkas. Minister of Justice Dzintars Rasnacs from the National Alliance discussed the plans on LNT, a Latvian television channel: "Such a ban will be introduced. The respective draft decision has been already worked out." He included in this a ban on traditional Islamic dress in all public places. According to Rasnacs, the ban would protect "Latvian culture."

Unity has also insisted that the Latvian language be adopted as the country's official language. This is a blatant act of discrimination against the large Russian-speaking minority in the country, already disadvantaged for years. The government also wants to abolish the Latvian media council because they have not taken sufficiently harsh action against Russian-language media and have thereby—in the words of the pro-government newspaper *Latvijas Avize*—encouraged "Russification."

The anti-Russian chauvinism and the ongoing provocations against Russia have intensified in the last week. They reached a high point with celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the Barricades on January 20 and 21. In January 1991, there was fighting between the

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Popular Front of Latvia, which sought independence from the Soviet Union, and special units from the Soviet ministry of the interior. Four civilians were killed and more than 100 were injured.

Against the backdrop of the current conflict with Russia, officials warned that Russia posed a threat to Latvian independence. There was a campaign for a firm stance against Russia in the Ukraine conflict at numerous official events. The previous government had already increased NATO troops in the country and raised the defense budget on the basis of this “threat” from Russia.

Two high-ranking generals of the US Army were in the Latvian capital of Riga on January 20 and 21, meeting with the head of Latvian armed forces, Lieutenant General Raimonds Grabue. They took part in memorial events and visited a military base in Adazi. The Adazi base is to undergo $8.3 million in improvements by 2017. This is part of a broader build-up of NATO troops in Baltic countries directed against Russia.

Along with the continuing military build-up, austerity measures will be considerably deepened. Since the beginning of the worldwide economic crisis in 2008, the government has penalized the country with draconian austerity packages and largely destroyed social infrastructure. Between 2008 and 2012, around 50 percent of the country’s clinics were closed. The health care budget was again cut in 2016, while the defense and domestic security budget was increased by 180 million euros.

The destruction of the public health care system has dramatic consequences. In mid-December, Anna Kivite of the Riga Stradins University reported to members of parliament that the number of new HIV infections in Latvia is three times higher than the European average. In 2014, Latvia had the second highest rate, with 17.3 new infections for every hundred thousand inhabitants. This was only surpassed by Estonia, with 22 cases. The European average for new infections is 5.9. For every 6,000 persons infected, only 1000 receive the necessary medication, explained Jana Feldmane of the ministry for health.

Despite these facts, Kucinskis leaves no doubt that he will continue the strict austerity measures. National bank chairman Ilmars Rimsevics has reaffirmed the demand for a debt-free budget and further tax relief for businesses.

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