

Political Parties: Welcome to the 21st Century

Summary conclusions/ideas from public policy forum organized by think tank Providus

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Rationale for organizing a forum on political parties

In a modern democracy political parties are unpopular entities. Opinion polls show that only 15% of EU citizens and 7% of Latvia's citizens report trusting political parties. It comes as no surprise then that citizens do not wish to become party members – Latvia's largest party has a membership of only 4000. In the recent years Latvia has witnessed numerous discussions and initiatives on alternative ways of participating, for example, referenda or online petitions, however, political parties (and issues relating to their development and professionalism) have been overlooked. Furthermore, the weakness of Latvia's political parties has been identified as the main obstacle to smart policy making by good governance experts interviewed by Providus. For this reason Providus organized a forum on this issue on November 25, 2016. Full agenda of the program is available here ([link](#)).

What are the main challenges for political parties in the 21st century?

[Summary of discussion where the following participants shared their ideas: Tarmo Juristo (Head of Management Board, think-tank Praxis, Estonia), Doru Frantescu (Director of Vote Watch Europe), Andris Piebalgs (Chair of Vienotiba), former European Commissioner for Development), Smári McCarthy (Member of Parliament, Pirate Party, Iceland) Nico Lange (Head of Policy and Consultations Department, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Germany), Vita Matiss (visiting Professor at Riga Graduate School of Law). Discussion was moderated by Krista Baumanė, Director of PROVIDUS. Video recording of this discussion is [available online](#).]

The future of political parties is unclear even at a conceptual level. It has been argued that parliamentary democracy is impossible without political parties but this apparent certainty is being challenged. Can there be a political system that would be appropriate for the contemporary world and that would not require political parties? Nevertheless, political parties need to change – the golden age of political parties (with large membership, extended and hierarchy-based structure, clear ideological positioning) is not coming back.

Contemporary political parties face **an increasing struggle in attracting new members**. There are several reasons for this struggle – firstly, low trust in political parties makes politics an undesirable occupation. Secondly, there are other ways for contemporary citizens to influence politics (for example, by joining civic society organisations, by signing petitions, by sharing political information via online social networks, by producing policy oriented research) and they are not sufficiently motivated to join political parties. Thirdly, political parties themselves do not have much motivation to increase their membership and attract young or diverse people– even such a large party as Germany's CDU is male-dominated and the average age there is 59.

Our era is that of a rapid change. In such circumstances, political parties **struggle in coming up with a long term political vision**.

The environment for dissemination of political information has changed. **Voters have an increasing amount of political information**, but it is getting more and more challenging to evaluate the trustworthiness of this information – mass media and political parties are unable to act as gatekeepers of untrustworthy information to the same extent as they did prior to the era of online social networks.

Citizens are to a lesser extent than before identifying with traditional political cleavages of right-wing/left-wing political parties. Instead there are other criteria: for example, parties of the establishment (insiders) and parties outside of establishment (outsiders). Voters themselves increasingly stay out of regular politics (do not join political parties), therefore, they identify themselves with anti-system (anti-establishment) parties, thus giving those parties additional weight.

The very organization of ‘establishment’ political parties prevents the emergence of charismatic, outspoken and colourful political leaders – the necessity for compromises is in-built in the very structure of contemporary political parties. Hence, they privilege compromise-oriented leaders. The problem: compromise-oriented politicians are rarely charismatic, so it is difficult to compete with populists.

When politics and media are highly polarised **it is close to impossible to convince voters that compromises are a good thing.** But it is impossible to imagine politics without any compromises!

Our era demands that complicated issues are explained in a simple manner. That is not always possible, because politics and governance is a complicated effort that necessitates plenty of compromises. People who work on complicated issues every day tend to assume that political parties are primarily problem-solving machines (without being aware that voters’ emotions matter as well.)

Political parties are tempted to borrow populist techniques: for example, to oversimplify complicated issues or to take a negative stance against some idea (rather than to come up with new solutions), to harness fear rather than to increase voters’ understanding. Politics is an occupation where one must learn not only to appeal to voters’ rationality but also to touch their hearts – especially, to assure voters of their safety. It is important to learn from populists, but it is also important to not cross the line where politics gets to be too emotional or too simplistic.

Political parties struggle in engaging their members and broader society in decision-making. Traditional means of political participation are not sufficiently engaging. Only some parties have managed to find a way of even using the knowledge of their broader membership.

What are contemporary political parties doing right to address these problems?

[Summary of discussion where the following participants shared their ideas: Tarmo Juristo (Head of Management Board, think tank Praxis, Estonia), Doru Frantescu (Director of Vote Watch Europe), Andris Piebalgs (Chair of Vienotiba), former European Commissioner for Development), Smári McCarthy (Member of Parliament, Pirate Party, Iceland) Nico Lange (Head of Policy and Consultations Department, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Germany), Vita Matiss (visiting Professor at Riga Graduate School of Law). Discussion was moderated by Krista Baumane, Director of PROVIDUS. Video recording of this discussion is [available online](#).]

- Some political parties are currently experimenting with citizen engagement in decision-making trying to find the best forms of consultations;
- Some political parties are focusing on offering solutions to serious problems that are important to society;

- Some political parties are re-imagining their own internal procedures so that they become more transparent and more open to participation from members and broader society. For example, the sittings of the board of a political party may take place in a public space or clear and strict start/end time regulations can be introduced for each party meeting so that also those people who have limited time in the evenings (for example, parents with small children) might take part;
- When a political party is in power it: a) tries to create such social safety nets that benefit people who might lose the most out of turbulence caused by globalisation – hence, populist parties are not as important in Denmark, Canada, France, Switzerland as elsewhere in the Western world; b) tries to support quality media and citizen education.

What are the challenges that are specific to Latvian political parties and how could they be solved?

[Summary of discussion where the following participants shared their ideas: MEP Artis Pabriks (Vienotība), Aigars Rostovskis (Chair of the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry), Inguna Sudraba (No Sirds Latvijai), Juris Pūce (Latvijas Attīstībai), Sergejs Dolgopolovs (Saskaņa), Inga Bērziņa (Kuldīgas novadam). Discussion was moderated by Iveta Kazoka, Senior Researcher at PROVIDUS. Video recording of this discussion is [available online](#)]

Some of the features of an ideal political party – charismatic leadership and quality work in engaging party members' in party's activities in such a manner that new ideas are created, but at the same time party is able to implement long-term policies.

Main problems of political parties in Latvia:

Excessively strict regulation on creating a new political party and dissolving an old political party – for example, the need to involve a notary to confirm each initial member's identity. Solution: to re-examine political party regulation; maybe it would be better to allow people to register as a member of a political party via social networks (and be officially confirmed as a member after paying the membership fee?)

Weak competition among political parties on policy visions. There are several political parties in Latvia whose ideological orientation and policy ideas are very ambiguous. At the same time, it seems that there is not much of a demand in society for more ideas-oriented political parties. This problem can only be solved on a societal level – if, before elections, civic society organisations and other activists would agree on higher standards for political parties. More funding for quality political broadcast in media could be allocated from state budget, especially before elections. It is possible that political parties would be more motivated to produce clearer policy visions if governments in Latvia would be more stable – then prime ministers would need not only to be accountable for the previous actions, but also for futures vision. To do that, prime ministers need to have more influence over the choice of ministers and the overall work of the government.

Due to small membership in political parties, **political parties struggle in finding appropriate candidates even for top jobs** – political parties are also almost unable to ‘grow’ new political leaders. How could this be solved? Political party funding system could be tweaked in a manner that parties are more motivated to increase their membership and to focus on educating their members (workshops, lectures, seminars, mentoring programs, etc.) Political parties themselves think of attractive ways how to offer their members new skills/new knowledge by participating in party’s activities. Regional political parties should not be forgotten – they might be even more successful in socializing new politicians as compared to national level political parties, so one should not burden them with excessive administrative regulation.

Political parties are not prestigious – work in a political party is not perceived to be respectable. Distrust in political parties cannot be changed by efforts of political parties alone – there must be a cooperation among journalists and opinion leaders as well.

Excessive demands towards political parties – there is a feeling in Latvian society that a political job should be a sacrifice in the name of public benefit, so it should not be remunerated properly. This perception can not disappear by attempts of political parties alone; it is important to support quality journalism that would appreciate the challenges and the complicated nature of a political job.

Latvian political parties face a problem of attracting clean funding while suspicious private donations are ruinous to parties’ reputation. Solution: to reconsider political party funding system by providing more state funding and by encouraging parties to increase their membership.

Regular members of a political party lack opportunities to influence its decisions. Solutions: one might consider stricter regulations on party internal democracy or better targeted state funding to political parties (for example, requirements/support for more frequent meetings, education programs for members of political parties).

How to encourage constructive interaction between politicians and journalists?

(discussion following screening of fragments from TV series „Borgen”)

The third session of the forum focused on three complicated, ethically-ambiguous fragments depicted in the Danish TV series “Borgen” that are important in context of interaction between journalists and politicians in Latvia.

(1) To what extent (if at all) a politician may pick topics/questions for an interview?

Points mentioned during the discussion: a) in general, politicians (especially if they hold some offices) should be able to respond to any question by a journalist, but at the same time there is nothing wrong in wanting to know interview topics in advance. This allows a politician to better prepare himself/herself, hence, deliver a higher quality discussion. A journalist may nevertheless deviate from agreed topics, but only as an exception rather than as a rule. B) Politicians should not ask journalists to send the text of their interview for pre-approval (in the case of print/online written media) – except if there is prior agreement

between journalist and politician to double-check some facts or there is some other reasonable agreement. C) What should be done if a journalist purposefully misrepresents the statements of a politician or violates some other professional standards? There isn't a universal answer: in general, it is OK in such cases to go to a court or to decline further interviews with this journalist, but such an action should only be exceptional and only if there is a clear bad faith on behalf of the journalist. Each media outlet should have a method to recall false information and to apologize for its mistakes.

- (2) In which cases (if at all) a journalist or an editor is allowed NOT to cover some issue of public importance if there is such an agreement with a politician (political official)?

Points mentioned during the discussion:

- (a) As a matter of exception, such situations – where public benefits that would arise out of publication of some information would be less than potential harm – are possible. For example, media might choose not to publish some information in some circumstances if national security is at stake. And yet it must be kept in mind that this is always a high-risk situation from the point of view of public benefit: for example, in case of Latvia it is unclear the journalist should inform the public that some bank or banking system in general is struggling (it might encourage a bank-run). That's why an experienced editorial team that can estimate public benefit/harm is ever more important. Besides, at a later point, when the situation is less risky, the journalist should have an opportunity to publish his/her findings.
- (b) It is permitted and even good for public officials (including politicians) to organise press briefings where also off-the-record information on some situation is being disclosed to journalists so that they have better awareness of the overall situation;
- (c) In Latvia, there is a tendency to consider journalists as public benefit watchdogs while politicians are perceived to be people in need of control. It is important to remember that politicians have been elected to their offices, and hence they also represent public interest – therefore, their opinion on what should/should not count as public benefit should not be easily discarded.

- (3) Contemporary media are expected to make a show out of political discussions, thus there are insufficient opportunities to discuss important political issues. To what extent is this an issue?

Points mentioned during the discussion: 1) Political discussion on TV, especially prior to elections, should be sufficiently engaging so that the audience watches them, therefore, they must be dynamic. At the same time, the show-format should not trivialize the complexity of issues. 2) Politicians should be able to prepare themselves for TV discussions – therefore, even if the discussion is organized as a TV show, politicians should know the nuances of the format of discussion in advance.

How to encourage public demand for better, evidence-based policy making?

At the end of the policy forum there were six World Café discussions. Their most interesting findings can be found below.

1. Which ideas do Latvian political parties currently address either insufficiently or not at all?

In terms of content of ideas:

The place of Latvia in a globalized world; long-term trends (robots versus jobs, global warming); solutions to integration challenges; life-long learning policies; issues regarding political freedoms; protection of minorities; environmental responsibility; anti-corruption; healthcare reform.

In terms of form:

Political language is incomprehensible; orientation towards opinions/positioning rather than new solutions; unclear political positions; lack of political ownership of ideas

Important factors that need to be taken into consideration:

- 1) Political parties do not disclose the sources for their positions/proposed solution (what is the basis that one solution would work better than another?);
- 2) Political parties are weak in terms of their capacity to explore some issues in greater (analytical) depth – they do not produce their own research;
- 3) Governance problem in parties themselves – members of political parties tend to lack opportunities to engage.

2. What kind of information is required by a voter prior to elections?

Some ideas in terms of information on parties and candidates: political party positions presented in a multiple choice personality/political party test; information on who is the candidate from a party to become prime minister; summary of deeds and misdeeds while in office; information on party sponsors; information on educational achievements; most popular tweets; electoral promises not fulfilled; independent evaluation about candidates' professional capacities; savings/debts; marks in college/university; special knowledge usable for work in parliamentary committees; clarity as to ideological affinities with parties at EU level; populist statements; evaluations as to the internal democracy within each party.

Skills and opportunities: 1) Voters should be taught to identify false information/populistic promises (via workshops, TV shows, events); 2) there should be an APP to ask candidates' questions.

Problems: it is important to engage those voters that never vote or who are going to vote for the first time; the problem of political opinion polls – should they be prohibited a month before elections so that they would not influence election results?; party platforms should be 'translated' in a simpler language.

3. How to strengthen resilience against populism?

What is populism: unrealistic election promises; confronting elite vs the people; purposeful misleading of the public; high emotions.

Why is there a demand for populism? Contemporary era demands simplicity and emotionally-charged messages for any message to stand out in the general stream of information; low understanding of politics; dissatisfaction with social inequality; sense of danger arising from refugees, migrants, foreign enemies, economic turbulence.

What could be the solutions? Media literacy skills should be developed so that everyone can cope with the large amount of contradictory information; people should be oriented towards taking more responsibility over their own life-choices; civic education programs should encourage a more enlightened perspective on politics; new political visions coming out of mainstream political parties; decisions that have been taken should be better explained.

4. What are the best arguments to convince society that the current state funding to political parties is not sufficient?

One should focus more on these two arguments:

- In the long term it costs more for a society to tolerate a system where a political party distributes kickbacks to businessmen as a repayment of their donations. Not only does such a system corrupt state procurement, but it also discredits politics as an occupation.
- State funding to political parties is an investment in more visionary and intellectually more capable governments. Political parties would have more opportunities to engage new political leaders that would later be ministers or prime-ministers and would make decisions that are important for the development of the country. If political parties would have adequate funding, new leaders would be able to incrementally gain political experience (and not get, as is the case right now, high offices immediately), they would also be less inclined to do everything in their power to not leave their posts – as political parties would be able to remunerate them using their own resources.

5. How to improve the quality of TV discussions prior to elections?

It is important to keep in place the system where both the public broadcasters and private broadcasters organize election debates. There should be more discussions in Russian language – the number of those discussions have been insufficient.

One should consider segmenting political broadcasts into topics and different target audiences (not all social groups need to watch the same debates).

World Café brainstorming is a good method for discussing the most appropriate formats and the contents of election discussions with members of the public and political parties.

6. How should political parties increase their membership?

It is critical to improve the image of political parties. Currently, a person is not interested in telling others that they are a member of some political party – such disclosure is even a risk (rather than being a sign of civic activism). It is important to change the perception that civic activism, such as signing petitions, engaging in NGOs, holding the government accountable, organizing discussions, is an alternative to party memberships. Membership in a political party should be considered as a normal form of civic activism.

Political parties need to have not just a clear vision and ideology, but they should also work on encouraging internal solidarity and team-work. For this purpose, common trainings, team-building activities, brainstorming sessions, etc. are very much needed so that party members not only get new skills but also a feeling of being a part of a team.

Practice-sharing among political parties should be encouraged – parties should have opportunities to learn from others; informal interaction among party members would also help in reducing party polarisation and would lead to a reduction of stereotypes.