

13. POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND THE EU IN LATVIA'S

REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

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Latvia's representative democracy is not set up along the traditional basis of left and right ideologies. The ethnic division between 'Latvian' and 'Russian' parties still plays a major role in determining the agenda of the Saeima (parliament). All the major political parties in Latvia support the European Union, although they sometimes object to specific policies proposed by EU institutions, especially relating to EU budgetary and migration policies. Even though issues related to the EU were almost irrelevant in domestic politics for several years, Latvia's political parties have increasingly aligned themselves with European political groups. However, the process of integrating into European political families has not yet resulted in clearer ideological affiliations.

13.1 *Saeima* and ideologies: where does the EU fit in?

The divides in the Latvian political system are along ethnic and geopolitical rather than traditional left-right lines, based on economic premises¹ – the role of economic ideologies has not been widely developed in the modern Latvian democratic period. It is substituted by a 'catch-all' approach, where parties pick and choose

¹ A. Cheskin and L. March (2016), "Latvia's 'Russian left': trapped between ethnic, socialist, and social-democratic identities", in L. March and D. Keith (eds), *Europe's Radical Left: From Marginality to the Mainstream?*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 231-252.

the agenda items best suited for a momentary appeasement of the electorate, regardless of their belonging to a traditionally rightist or leftist political spectrum; this is widely recognised as populist politics.² This chapter explains in depth the most recent current trends in Latvian politics, considering the increasing divisions between socially liberal and conservative political streams, as well as the related trend of a growing debate surrounding intergovernmentalism versus federalism in Latvia's attitude towards the European Union. It then illustrates the management of EU affairs at a parliamentary and governmental level, before proceeding to an in-depth analysis of the influence of EU affairs on domestic politics and political parties.

13.1.1 The divides in Latvia's representative model

Latvia's electoral system is proportional with a 5% electoral barrier and open party lists. This means that voters vote for the party list as a whole, but can then make adjustments by using their personal preference voting option. All elections over the last decade have demonstrated that Latvian voters use this instrument actively to influence the results, and hence the results are tailor-made. To a considerable extent, this option allows the democratic system of the country to absorb the general trend of people voting for personalities rather than for parties. Party allegiance among voters is not a widespread phenomenon in modern Latvian politics, and therefore open party lists allow people to vote for specific candidates and their policies. Moreover, it increases accountability and puts the burden of active campaigning on individual politicians.

The 5% electoral barrier was introduced after Latvia regained independence to prevent the extreme parliamentary fragmentation that occurred between the world wars. Although this has dramatically reduced the number of political parties able to gain public support, it has not brought a parliamentary majority to any of the elected political parties – coalition governments formed of no less than three political parties have been the norm. Moreover, a

² K. Bukovskis and I. Bruge (forthcoming 2019), "The Financial Crisis and the Curse of Latvian Left Parties", in K. Roder and M. Holmes (eds), *The European Left and the Crisis*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

single party has only seldom managed to acquire significantly more seats than the others. Therefore, majority coalition governments in Latvia (and some minority coalition governments, such as during the 9th *Saeima*) create a situation in which the political process needs to be based on consensus and political bargaining.

The level of unpredictability in voter turnout and allegiances, alongside the electoral system and the fact that politics is divided along geopolitical and ethnic party lines instead of economic ideologies, makes government formation extremely difficult. Coalition-building often involves most of the political parties elected to parliament, and it can be a lengthy process if the election outcome does not result in a clear winner. The most recent government formation process, following the 13th *Saeima* elections on 6 October 2018, involved a record-breaking period of coalition-building. All 7 political parties won between 8 and 20 seats in the 100-person unicameral parliament, which vividly demonstrates the volatility of the Latvian party system and coalition governments. Moreover, the Latvian state has had 14 prime ministers and 21 governments in less than 30 years.

The fact that politics is divided along geopolitical and ethnic party lines instead of economic ideologies makes government formation extremely difficult.

Government volatility and the bargaining process is further complicated by the fact that individual politicians frequently tend to change their political parties both before the elections and afterwards during the coalition-building process. Individual politicians switching political parties or establishing new ones before every election, political parties being dissolved and renamed, and electoral associations (*vēlēšanu apvienība*) being created before each election are a regular trend at municipal, national and European Parliament levels. This situation exacerbates the situation of grand political and economic ideologies mattering very little.

And as a result, the bargaining process over Latvian government ministries during the coalition-consolidation process takes place with little influence of political ideologies. "Obstructions of coalition partners" are often brought into the equation. Personalities, party financiers and interests, the electoral base, and bargaining power matter much more than ideologies do, and often

even more than having concrete positions on specific issues. Outspoken differences tend to be 'reconciled' when the coalition-building process takes place. Consequently, coalition parties, ministers and ministries continue to struggle over the interpretation of and priorities of agreements made in the coalition-building process.

A notable exception to general coalition-building trends has been the role of the Social Democratic Party Harmony (officially translated as "Concord"). In spite of winning the most votes in national elections for the past 10 years, Harmony has never been part of any national government. The fact that it is seen as a 'Trojan horse' for Russia in Latvian politics has it a sizeable party that is nevertheless 'unacceptable' in coalition negotiations. Harmony is the leading 'ethnic' party, and it has a major stake in questions relating to linguistic rights, non-citizens' rights and 'friendly' relations with Russia. However, it plays its cards wisely and rarely instrumentalises these questions in its rhetoric. Although smaller parties such as the Latvian Russian Union are more pro-Russian in the political spectrum than Harmony, they have not garnered sufficient public support to be elected to the national parliament. However, neither of the pro-Russian parties are anti-EU, and Harmony even has a federalist position on the future of the EU. On the other side of the spectrum is the right-wing National Alliance, which espouses the idea of "Latvia for Latvians". Meanwhile, other mainstream political parties are situated between these two extremes.

This demonstrates the original core structure of Latvian party politics - political divides based on ethnicity (pro-Russian speaking versus pro-Latvian speaking) and geopolitical positioning (pro-Russian Federation versus pro-West). The primary divide in Latvia is ethnic, and this spills over into centre-right and centre-left ideological stances. For this reason, whereas the overall representation of the opinions and values of Latvia's society has been well in line with most of the categories reviewed in the European Values Study,³ there is an ongoing discussion about the

³ Social Sciences of GESIS - Leibniz Institute in Cologne (2008), "EVS 2008 - Variable Report Latvia" (https://dbk.gesis.org/dbksearch/file.asp?file=ZA4767_cdb.pdf).

lack of representation of the interests of Harmony voters in Latvia's parliament and about finding a viable alternative to the party.

13.1.2 Party ideologies and the Saeima agenda

Overall, the party programmes and agenda play a minimal role in defining the parliamentary agenda, which thus far has arisen out of political bargaining and compromise. The issue of party platforms can be viewed through two prisms. First, in the pre-election period, party programmes cover long-standing issues related to the rule of law and governance, the legal status of minorities, strengthening the judiciary's powers and independence, patriotism, education reform (including a transition to the Latvian language, decreasing the number of schools and enhancing education quality), tax reform (implementing a progressive tax), a united property tax, families, various administrative reforms, increased health and retirement benefits, families, patriotism, etc. The issues that serve as a 'glue' for the coalition have largely remained unchanged from 2014 to 2018.

The second phase follows in the post-election period. Judging from the work the last parliament carried out, several substantive issues can be seen in this phase: education reform, pension indexation, tax reform, administrative reform, and healthcare reform. Despite the fact that the previous coalition, led by the Greens and Farmers Union, referred to themselves as the "champions of good deeds", many of the tasks remain incomplete and will now be carried over to the current coalition. These issues are widely recognised as especially important in the face of high emigration rates, which make optimising the management of Latvia's welfare system an urgent matter. Recently elected parties have expressed concern over the status of the rule of law and governance, the size of the administration, 'payday loans', closing gambling halls, raising the minimum wage, doubling pensions, increasing child benefits, paying higher salaries to doctors, and cancelling the 'green energy' surcharge (which is widely unpopular and considered fraudulent).⁴

⁴ Re:Baltica, "Who is who in the upcoming Latvian parliamentary elections?", 14 August 2018 (<https://en.rebaltica.lv/2018/08/who-is-who-in-upcoming-latvian-parliamentary-elections/>).

It is interesting to note that the current coalition agreement includes article 2.8., which stipulates that:

The cooperation partners respect each other's right to direct the draft laws and the right to vote differently in such cases as:

2.8.1. granting citizenship to minor children of non-citizens born in Latvia;

2.8.2. extending the rights of unmarried spouses;

2.8.3. the Cohabitation Law;

2.8.4. the restitution of the property rights of Latvian Jewish communities lost as a result of the Holocaust;

2.8.5. the Council of Europe Convention on Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

The coalition agreement is not legally binding, but rather an 'unwritten' political tradition in Latvian politics, and as it usually includes clauses similar to this one, this situation is not unprecedented. However, the array of issues on which the 13th *Saeima* 'agree to disagree' is much wider and exemplifies the breadth of disagreement the coalition partners must bridge to reach a consensus.

13.1.3 The relevance of EU issues in Saeima party politics

Although for a long time the traditional divisions and specific character of the Latvian political party system meant that many initiatives related to any of the categories of social diversity were often omitted, new issues dealing with narrow topics and the entertainment value of politics are emerging as dominant in political discussion. Some of these could potentially create serious new divisions if there is enough political charisma, talent and drama to elevate them to the level of national and fully fledged political debates. For instance, the clash between the 'catch-all' parties, which advocate for the demolition of old institutions and elites, and the introduction of a "just state" is now becoming more relevant (as could be seen, for example, in the aftermath of the October 2018 elections). However, the "struggle against oligarchs" has been a recurring theme in Latvian political rhetoric. With actual indictments and court cases pending, many of the former (and

recently elected) politicians/political forces could be forced to exit politics.

Extremely low levels of public trust in the national parliament and ministries (according to Eurobarometer, only 19% of the population trust the parliament and 28% trust the government),⁵ together with a high index of corruption perceptions among the Latvian population (Transparency International's CPI put Latvia in 41st place in 2017 and 2018), create the perfect grounds for a "justice against corruption" theme to become a serious topic in many future elections. However, the real concern in Latvia, as in rest of Europe, lies in the fact that the reputation or qualifications of politicians is losing all relevance; it is their ability to orate and appeal to the masses in expressing popular views (such as that the media and the state administration are engaged in conspiracies to cover up large-scale corruption scandals) that matters in the new game of Latvian politics.

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Here, it should be briefly mentioned that Latvia's investigative media platform *Re:Baltica* has been highly engaged in the pre-election process by uncovering promises unsupported by evidence and untruthful information in the election campaign, most of which came from the new populist party KPV. This episode was clearly an example of discrediting 'fake news' promulgated by political forces. Various online media tools created by public broadcasters or liberal media – such as *ir.lv*, *Ir Politiskajā Tinderī* (Political Tinder)⁶ or LSM's *Partiju šķirotava* (Party Sorter) – were good examples of attempts to make sense of Latvia's political spectrum by offering comprehensive questionnaires to the 'better

⁵ Portal "Tvnet.lv", "Kritusies iedzīvotāju uzticība politiskajām partijām" [Decrease in people's trust in political parties], 17 June 2018 (<https://tvnet.lv/4518329/kritusies-latvijas-iedzivotaju-uzticiba-politiskajam-partijam>).

⁶ Portal "IR.lv", "Ar kuru partiju tev ir pa ceļam, noskaidro "Ir Politiskajā Tinderī"" [Which party is heading your way? Find out in Political Tinder], 11 September 2018 (<https://ir.lv/2018/09/11/ar-kuru-partiju-tev-ir-pa-celam-noskaidro-ir-politiskaja-tinderi/>).

connected' electorate to direct them to the best-suited party. Following the election, leading internet news portals *Delfi.lv* and *Tvnet.lv* started to show TV debates ("20 minutes in the TVNET studio" or "Delfi TV with Janis Domburs"),⁷ which enable the electorate to become acquainted with the programmes of individual politicians and political forces in greater detail.

Socio-political issues and the juxtaposition of liberal against conservative values has been another increasing trend that is expected to continue to grow. Same-sex marriage, the legalisation of marijuana and sex education in schools are increasingly commonly discussed topics among politicians and in broader society. However, it is unlikely these will become strong positioning points for individuals or entire political parties. Although individual politicians will continue centring their careers on these issues, none of these are clear-cut enough to become decisive. Moreover, strong categorical positions and divides go against the political logic of a 'catch-all' approach adopted by a growing number of political parties and politicians. Hence, categorical politics based on new ideologies is almost impossible to market unless a strong catalyst appears, for example in the form of an external enemy or a dire situation. As a result, populism, both in form and substance (demagogy), has been and will continue to be a visible part of the Latvian political scene.

The fact that categorical positioning can do electoral damage is also visible in the fact that the traditional ethnic divide has been slowly fading out of fashion. Recent political developments brought about by the parliamentary elections of October 2018 demonstrate this dynamic. Although the coalition-building process and repeated exclusion of Harmony indicated that the 'ethnic question' has not fully disappeared from the picture, there was significantly less electoral rhetoric about 'Latvian' versus 'Russian' parties and instead a greater focus on the rule of law and oligarchy,

One of the most important trends has been that political parties are becoming more outspoken about the European Union.

⁷ Portal "Tvnet.lv", "Mārtiņš Daugulis" (<https://www.tvnet.lv/author/115947>); Portal "Delfi.lv", "Delfi TV ar Jāni Domburu" [Delfi TV with Janis Domburs] (<https://www.delfi.lv/delfi-tv-ar-jani-domburu/>).

particularly in terms of the elite operating against the interests of the masses.

Nevertheless, one of the most important trends has been that political parties are becoming more outspoken about the European Union. After years of silent acceptance (permissive consensus) in Latvia's firm pro-EU stance, both in general society and consequently also among Latvian politicians, since 2015 there has been a rise of voices openly critical of EU policies. Attitudes towards the role of the European Commission and supranational EU institutions in general could become a new (or just an additional) divide in Latvian politics.

At the same time, it is imperative to point out that Latvia does not have strong or popular Eurosceptic parties or politicians (that is to say, those who are advocating detachment from the EU, or a 'minimising' of Brussels power). This is clearly visible in all the election results. In spite of intergovernmentalist positions appearing among mainstream political parties, they still support Latvia's membership in the EU and the EU integration process. All Latvia's governing parties have increasingly been expressing a stronger interest in EU-related issues, although for many years it has been the Unity party and its members that have devoted themselves to foreign policy and to EU issues. After Unity lost many of its places in parliament, the party still managed to acquire the posts of prime minister and minister of finance, and it has retained its long-time position of being in charge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Another pro-EU political party, Development/Pro, took over the chairmanship of the European Affairs Committee in the *Saeima* and obtained the office of Minister of Defence. It is largely due to the activities of these two political parties, as well as some politicians with EU expertise from other political parties, that EU issues have prominently entered the public sphere and have gained substantial media interest. Some recent examples of this include biological farming, the intensive versus sustainable farming debate, and migration issues (including Latvia's contribution to the EU Africa fund and FRONTEX). However, these issues have been

primarily mobilised as domestic issues with an EU dimension, as that makes them easier to ‘sell’ to the population.

The 2019 European Parliament elections were expected to make debates surrounding EU issues even more prominent, as highly knowledgeable candidates had been chosen as frontrunners in the current election campaign. Latvian parties submitted 16 lists, of which 6 appeared to be serious contestants. According to polls, Harmony (15%), Development/Pro (10.6%), New Unity (11.7%), National Alliance (8.1%), Latvian Russian Union (5%) and Progressives (4.5%) were all likely contenders for seats in the EP.⁸ Many of these Latvian EP candidates were considered political and diplomatic ‘heavyweights’ with international experience. In previous EP elections, the ability to show credentials from past achievements has largely been the key to success; this election seems to present an array of polarised candidates who hold strong opinions on Latvia’s presence in the EU and the future shape of the Union. Despite these discussions remaining largely low-key, for the first time they seemed to be more about Europe and less about internal political quarrels. This should be counted as a significant ‘Europeanisation’ achievement.

13.2 Shaping EU policies at a national level

The Latvian system of managing EU affairs and coordinating the decision-making process was established in 1995, when Latvia officially submitted its bid for EU membership. Shortly after the submission, the European Affairs Committee was established with the task of overseeing and coordinating parliament’s involvement in the transposition of the *acquis communautaire* into Latvian legislation. Parliamentary scrutiny and the active involvement of the European Affairs Committee is a standard that has been retained beyond 2004, with slight adjustments to the procedures during the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European

⁸ Jānis Geste, “Partiju reitingi: pirms Eiroparlamenta vēlēšanām lideros “Saskaņa” un “Jaunā vienotība” [Party ranking: prior to EP elections, “Harmony” and “New Unity” in the lead], 18 April 2019 (<https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/partiju-reitingi-pirms-eiroparlamenta-velesanam-lideros-saskana-un-jauna-vienotiba.a316480/>).

Union.⁹ The system involves all line ministries, social partners and other NGOs, as well as other state institutions like the Bank of Latvia, the Cabinet of Ministers and the *Saeima*.¹⁰ If the co-responsible institutions, local governments and social partner organisations, associations and foundations fail to agree on a national position in accordance with the procedure provided for in cabinet regulations, then the different opinions are indicated in the national position.

The division of responsibilities between ministries and government institutions is determined by Cabinet Regulation No. 141,¹¹ which defines and maintains a list of competences. The “Procedure for the development of the Republic of Latvia's national position in the EU and related instructions and information circulation” of 2009 defines the procedure for adopting a national position. It explains that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the main ‘hub’ that ensures the smooth circulation of information between social partners (such as trade unions, depending on the sector), local governments, the ministries and the Cabinet of Ministers, and, eventually, the *Saeima*.

Every line ministry, in cooperation with other institutions and social partners, develops national positions for the issues in their field of competence. The ministries maintain structures for coordinating EU issues – these can include specific departments for coordinating EU issues, as well as individuals who supervise the procedure. Furthermore, the positions are coordinated in meetings between senior ministry officials and are confirmed either by the

⁹ Likumi.lv, Kārtība, kādā izstrādā, saskaņo un aktualizē mandātus un nodrošina to izpildi Latvijas prezidentūras Eiropas Savienības Padomē laikā [Procedures for the Establishment, Coordination and Updating of Mandates and their Enforcement during the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union], 2014 (<https://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=269235>).

¹⁰ The Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “ES jautājumu koordinācija Latvijā” [Coordination of EU matters in Latvia], 01 March 2018 (<https://www.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/eiropas-savieniba-arpolitika/es-jautajumi-arlietu-ministrijas-kompetence/es-jautajumu-koordinacija-arlietu-ministrija/es-jautajumu-koordinacija-latvija>).

¹¹ Regulation No. 141 of 28 March, 2018, “On Ministry Competence Division on European Union Issues”.

responsible minister or by the Cabinet of Ministers, depending on the issues covered by the position. The national position is then adopted via a vote in the Cabinet of Ministers.

The role of presidential powers (veto power and decree power) and executive powers (some role in cabinet formation, cabinet dismissal and the dissolution of parliament) has not been exercised in relation to EU affairs aside from occasional comments or representative involvement. Although President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was active on the international scene – including pushing for Latvia’s EU membership – sitting presidents have generally been reluctant to engage with and actively participate in EU-related matters. The visible exception to this was the signing of ratified EU treaties, but those have not been contentious points. Therefore, on EU affairs, despite the overall ‘representative’ (and relatively weak) role of the president, the relationship between the parliament and the president has been positive and has not been marked by obstruction.

13.2.1 *The Saeima European Affairs Committee*

When it comes to overseeing the actions of ministers in the Council, the Cabinet of Ministers must obtain a mandate from parliament via the ‘parliamentary scrutiny process’ before it is able to take a

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position on an EU issue; as part of this process, positions are reviewed by the European Affairs Committee of the parliament.¹² Its functions include the *ex ante* review and adoption of Latvian national

positions, monitoring of investments from EU funds, ensuring the closer involvement of NGOs and civil society in the EU’s legislative processes, as well as monitoring cooperation with the EU’s neighbouring countries. This stands in contrast to other member states, where the parliament has the ability to issue mandates or

¹² Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS, EUROPEUM Institute of European policy, Institute of Public Affairs (2014), “Opportunities for the Organized Civil Society to Influence EU Decision-Making via National Positions”, Riga (http://providus.lv/upload_file/Projekti/Eiropas%20politika/2014/EU_decision%20making_petijums.pdf).

resolutions (and must be given adequate time to do so). The parliament scrutinises not only the activities of representatives of the Council of the European Union, but also the European Council. European Affairs Committee meetings take place once or twice a week depending on the number of national positions that need to be evaluated.

The framework of the *Saeima* European Affairs Committee is legally established by the parliament's order roll (*Saeimas Kārtības rullis*), in which Article 104 highlights the roles of committees, in this case that of the European Affairs Committee:

104. (1) After examining all the proposals, the president shall put to a vote the bill as a whole, with the adopted proposals.

(2) If the *Saeima* adopts the bill in this way, it shall be returned to the responsible commission for preparation for the third reading. After the adoption of the bill in the second reading, the *Saeima* shall decide on a deadline for the submission of proposals. This time limit may not be less than five days.

(3) If the *Saeima* does not accept the draft law in the second reading, it shall be returned to the responsible committee and may be re-submitted for a second reading in accordance with the provisions of Articles 94 and 96.

Therefore, in Latvia, executive-legislative relations are primarily based on a model where the mode of interaction between the parliament and the government is balanced in favour of the parliament. Parliament enjoys both non-partisan control powers and 'penalty' powers over the executive branch. Furthermore, within the European Affairs Committee, opposition representatives are granted the same rights to question the line ministers and to vote for or against a position. But since the opposition will not vote against national positions unless the parliamentarians have clear and strict objections to the document, this does not often lead to noticeable disagreements.

Yet the European Affairs Committee often clashes with line ministries on national positions, and line ministries do not regard the parliamentary scrutiny process as a mere formality. Although ministers and ministry representatives tend to be able to explain their arguments to the members of the European Affairs Committee

in a convincing way, political approval is only given by a majority vote in the committee. As a consequence, suggested amendments are usually included in the final national position for the minister that represents Latvia at the respective Council formation.

13.2.2 EU topics and the Saeima

The European Affairs Committee is often the main arena for debates on EU issues. As the committee meetings are in most cases open to the public, members of the committee tend to appeal to the NGOs and mass media that are occasionally present. Despite this, the parliament of Latvia has been relatively inactive in sending opinions to the European Commission.¹³ Nevertheless, it has experience in engaging in both yellow-card (subsidiarity check) and green-card (sending proposals to European Commission) procedures.¹⁴

Migration and the refugee crisis have become exceptional issues due to the activity of some members of the *Saeima* – this led to a ruling that mandates measures on these matters to be adopted not only at the committee level, but also after plenary discussions. Most debates on EU positions happen on several foreign policy issues, most notably in terms of positions on Russia, Belarus or Ukraine-related issues that are presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Foreign Affairs Council. The often conservative positions put forward by the Ministry of Justice tend to be challenged not only by committee members from opposition

¹³ Directorate-General for Internal Policies, *The Role of National Parliaments in the EU after Lisbon: Potentialities and Challenges*, pp. 21–23 ([http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/583126/IPOL_STU\(2017\)583126_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/583126/IPOL_STU(2017)583126_EN.pdf)).

European Commission, *Annual report 2017 on relations between the European Commission and national parliaments*, p. 6 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/law/law-making_process/documents/annual-report-2017-relations-between-european-commission-national-parliaments_en.pdf).

¹⁴ Directorate-General for Internal Policies, *The Role of National Parliaments in the EU after Lisbon: Potentialities and Challenges*, pp. 27 and 38 ([http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/583126/IPOL_STU\(2017\)583126_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/583126/IPOL_STU(2017)583126_EN.pdf)).

parties, but also by representatives of coalition partners. Similar challenges are faced by the Ministry of Agriculture in its support for intensive farming.

General parliamentary discussions on important EU topics take place during annual parliamentary debates on foreign policy. The content of these discussions follows the annual report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,¹⁵ which covers key EU-level issues. Historically, issues related to migration or the country's stance on Russian aggression have caused the most polarisation among parliamentary parties. Party ideologies are also more visible in these discussions, as individual members of the coalition government parties are not afraid to scrutinise the stance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this way, the debate in 2018 featured disagreements on Latvia's stance regarding the EU's future and a multi-speed Europe, priorities for the EU's multi-year budget, support for the diaspora, the reaction to Russian military exercises, and the EU's stance on Catalanian independence.¹⁶

The most recent debate at the start of 2019 saw sharp clashes on the stance towards the EU's transatlantic relationship. The opposition, in line with their ideological position, criticised reliance on a partnership with the US for geopolitical security. Furthermore, the debate covered the topics of Brexit, China's political ambitions, the future of the EU, the role of NATO in the context of defence and security, and others.¹⁷ Somewhat similarly to previous years, the issue of migration saw disagreements between government parties.

¹⁵ The Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019), *Annual Report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the accomplishments and further work with respect to national foreign policy and the European Union* (<https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/62322-annual-report-of-the-minister-of-foreign-affairs-on-the-accomplishments-and-further-work-with-respect-to-national-foreign-policy-and-the-european-union-2018>).

¹⁶ Jolanta Plauka, "No šaha partijas līdz cirkam" [From a chess party to a circus], *Diena*, 28 January 2018 (<https://www.diena.lv/raksts/latvija/zinas/no-saha-partijas-lidz-cirkam-14189722>).

¹⁷ Portal "LSM.lv", "Opozīcija kritizē tradicionālo ārlietu ministra ziņojumu" [Opposition criticises the traditional annual report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs], 24 January 2019 (<https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/opozicija-kritize-tradicionalo-arlietu-ministra-arpolitikas-zinojumu.a307142/>).

Given the broad spectrum of parties that position themselves as conservative, and the fact that the newly elected parliament had already decided not to join the UN Global Migration Pact, the debate saw criticism towards the stance of (and specific actions of) the foreign minister, who represents the New Unity party.

Overall, ideologies play a part in these discussions in two ways. In line with their ideological position, the opposition often criticises positions with a favourable stance towards NATO and Western partnerships. Among political parties that mostly represent ethnic Latvians, the biggest clashes have occurred recently between liberal and conservative viewpoints, especially on migration.

13.2.3 International cooperation

Latvia and its decision-makers have not been shy of international collaboration at the parliamentary level, and even at the level of large municipalities. At the same time, the lack of English-language skills often become a trivial reason for limited collaboration with other EU member states. Again, with a younger generation of politicians coming to the stage, the intensity of contacts is increasing. Overall, Latvia also sees itself as a frequent user of the Early Warning System, and it is engaged in political dialogue and inter-parliamentary cooperation.

The European Parliament elections and EU-level political parties are becoming a significant tool and channel for the integration of Latvian politicians. Many of Latvia's political parties, as will be further elaborated below, have established connections with and membership in EU-level political parties and are attending common events. This 'internationalisation' of Latvian politicians and political parties lays the foundation for further engagement on EU issues – however, as will be demonstrated further, the devil is in the details.

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13.2.4 Overall expertise on EU issues

The level of skills and knowledge about the EU have been increasing throughout Latvia's EU membership. The overall positive attitude of Latvia's population towards the EU in the 1990s was related to modernisation and promises of security and welfare for the country. An understanding of the functioning of the Union was limited to experts at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other state institutions, as well as a few politicians, academics and journalists. Since gaining EU membership, the trend of increasing expertise has been growing. An increasing number of people with both practical and academic experience in EU affairs are becoming visible in the media and the skillsets of decision-makers have increased dramatically.

A major turning point that increased expertise was the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2015. This can be considered to be a membership test for the country, which only joined the EU in May 2004. The mobilisation of national administrative and expert resources was most prominent during the six-month period, and this provided a successful result. Due to recurring issues such as the Multiannual Financial Framework, Eurozone membership, or the future of the European Union, the level of expertise and skills continues to increase. Brexit discussions are expected to increase EU awareness not only among decision-makers, but also in the wider population. Finally, and maybe most importantly – the younger generation of politicians, experts, decision-makers and the general population is becoming more visible. The number of 'millennials' educated since the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the first EU-related study programmes (which were opened in 1998), with or without additional experience in western universities, has been significantly increasing. This has created a substantial pool of EU-skilled people on which to draw.

In the Latvian expert community, academia and think tanks, the traditional trends have been to think in terms of "islands of competence", where people often focus on single-question issues. Latvia's foreign affairs expertise also has a strong Russia/Central Asia focus, taking attention away from EU issues. This is gradually changing, and many think tanks are more visible on EU issues – for instance, Providus, which has a strong focus on migration issues, citizen engagement and strengthening the influence of Latvia at the

EU level; the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, which covers EU-Latvia relations in various sectors, including the future of the EU, the EU budget, Brexit, and shifts in the Economic and Monetary Union, in addition to having a strong eastern focus (in terms of transatlantic security, EU-China relations, EU-Russia relations, and EU-ENP relations); and the Baltic International Centre for Economic Policy (mostly focusing on EMU-related issues).

13.3 The Euro-integration of Latvian political parties

As mentioned earlier, policy-making and government has historically been dominated by Latvian-identifying parties, while the Russian-speaking minority is represented by a limited number of other parties that work in the opposition.¹⁸ The Latvian-identifying parties have seen a significant fragmentation within the centre-right, resulting in parties aligning with similar political families on the EU level. As a consequence, the consolidated Russian-speaking party has aligned itself with the centre-left. The October 2018 parliamentary election saw new parties with clearer ideological positions gain prominence, which seemingly had the potential to alter previous alignments with European political parties.¹⁹ Nevertheless, centre-right fragmentation remains severe, and the leaders of four out of the seven political parties currently represented in Latvia's parliament have expressed their desire to join the European People's Party or are already members thereof (this includes New Unity, the New Conservative Party, KPV.LV and the Greens and Farmers Union).

¹⁸ R. Nakai (2014), "The influence of party competition on minority politics: A comparison of Latvia and Estonia", *JEMIE*, 13, 57.

¹⁹ I. Ijabs (2018), *2018 Parliamentary Elections in Latvia*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/baltikum/14739.pdf>).

Table 13.1 Party affiliations at the EU and national levels

EP group	Associated Latvian party (elected MEPs)	EU political party (associated MEPs)	Latvian members (national MPs, of 100)	Expressed some interest / application in process (current national MPs of 100)
EPP Group	New Unity (4)	EPP (211)	New Unity (8)	Green and Farmers' Union** (11) New Conservative Party (16) KPV.LV (16)
S&D Group	Harmony*** (1)	PES (182)	Harmony (23) LSDSP (0)	Progressives (0)
ALDE Group	Green and Farmers (1)	ALDE (49)	For Latvia's Development* (0)	Latvian Regional Alliance (0) Proud to serve Latvia/Riga (0) Development/Pro* (13)
ECR Group	National Alliance (1)	ACRE (44)	National Alliance (17)	
Greens/EFA Group	-	EGP (36)	Latvian Green Party** (0)	Progressives (0)
Greens/EFA Group	-	EFA (6)	Latvian Russian Union (0)	-
ECR Group	-	ECPM (2)	Christian Democratic Union (0)	For Latvia From the Heart (0)
Represented in the national parliament / In parliament from 2014-2018 / Between 2% and 5% in 2018				

* Development/Pro is a party alliance that consists of the liberal For Latvia's Development and the centre-left Movement Pro. The former is a member of ALDE.

** The Latvian Green Party is a member of the Green and Farmers Union.

*** The currently elected MEP no longer officially represents Harmony, and has instead joined the Latvian Russian Union.

An analysis of political party platforms for the EP 2019 elections shows that 9 out of 16 parties running in Latvia have indicated their preferred European party affiliation,²⁰ while the various dimensions of current EU-level alignment are shown in Table 13.1. Parties with the longest parliamentary history also have the most visible ties with their EU families. However, most experts acknowledge that the impact of European political parties on national politics in Latvia is very limited. A compilation of survey responses on interactions between European political parties and their current full-member Latvian counterparts (see Table 13.2) provides a general overview of the impact they have had. On the one hand, all of them use European political parties as platforms for political engagement, and European political parties have had an influence on the national positions of the parties on important policy questions – for example, the quota system for asylum seekers. On the other hand, almost none of the parties found European political foundations to be significant actors – instead, Latvian parties have closer ties, with political foundations, with parties in Germany and the Scandinavian countries. These have contributed significantly more, especially in terms of support for youth political engagement.

²⁰ Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS (2019), "Analysis of the Latvian political party programs for the 2019 EP elections", Riga (http://providus.lv/article_files/3548/original/PARSKATS_-_EP_v%C4%93l%C4%93%C5%A1anu_Latvijas_partiju_programmu_anal%C4%ABze.pdf?1556633251).

Table 13.2 An evaluation of cooperation between European political parties and the associated Latvian national party

	Unity Party	Harmony	National Alliance	For Latvia's Development
Involvement with the European political party	3	2	3	3
Involvement with the European political party foundation	1	0	1	0
Impact on national positions	2	1	3	3
Impact on party programmes	2	1	1	3
Access to funding	2	1	2	1
Platforms for political engagement	3	3	3	3
Influence on organisational development	1	1	1	3

Notes: (3 - significant, 0 - not significant). The assessment was made by the author based on semi-structured interviews with four party representatives.

Table 13.1 also shows that previously existing ideological gaps are now being filled by newly established parties, which has the potential to further facilitate EU-level alignment in the future. This is visible, for example, in Development/Pro, a largely liberal coalition that is represented in the national parliament, or the Progressives, who are engaging in a more active campaign on green issues.

Yet this also highlights some ideological conflicts that prevent new parties from engaging in European-level politics. As mentioned earlier, two of the largest newcomers to the national parliament, the New Conservative Party and KPV.LV, have both indicated a desire to join the EPP. Similarly, the Progressives, which have modelled themselves on the socioeconomic traditions of the EU, would prefer to join PES, but, in light of the position held by Harmony, the party has chosen to highlight their European Green identity instead. Since none of the parties holding a full membership have indicated an openness to other Latvian parties joining, they could continue to block this kind of alignment, which highlights an

important barrier of entry for new political parties into the EU political families.²¹

While the general ideological positions for these parties are clear, specific stances on various EU-level issues are barely available for some of the parties. Since Development/Pro includes a party that is a member of ALDE, it has already begun to develop its EP election campaign based on the published ALDE manifesto. The stance of other new parties is less clear, with the only available information being some early indications from surveys conducted during the national elections (see Table 13.3).

Table 13.3 Party responses to a survey prior to the national elections

	Support for same-sex civil unions	Voluntary acceptance of asylum seekers from conflict zones	Support for an EU army	Stricter EU-level money laundering regulations at the cost of Latvian banks	Prioritisation of domestic issues rather than EU issues
Development/Pro* (13)	5	3	4	5	1
New Conservative Party* (16)	1	1	4	4	5
New Unity (8)	5	3	1	5	4
KPV.LV* (16)	4	3	3	4	5
Latvian Russian Union	1	4	2	2	4
Latvian Regional Alliance	1	1	4	3	4
National Alliance (13)	1	1	1	5	4
Progressives*	5	5	5	5	1
Harmony (23)	3	3	5	3	3
Greens and Farmers (11)	1	1	2	4	5

²¹ Interviews with party representatives during 2018.

Notes: Parties could pick an answer between 1 and 5, where 5 – fully agree, 4 – agree, 3 – agree and disagree, 2 – disagree, 1 – fully disagree). An asterisk (*) indicates political parties that ran in the national elections for the first time. The numbers following the party names indicate the number of MPs they have in parliament (out of 100).

This indicates some initial political positioning for the parties. For example, Development/Pro and the Progressives are the only parties that clearly stand for deeper EU integration. Similarly, parties are split on the issue of same-sex civil unions, and hold mixed positions on asylum seekers and on decision-making in national parliaments versus the EP. And while KPV.LV, branded as the populist party of Latvia, has demonstrated some conservative leanings when opposing the UN Global Migration Compact,²² their answers to the survey are less ideologically clear. These positions will, of course, become clearer during and after the 2019 EP elections, but, at least for the New Conservative Party and KPV.LV, this stance is currently unlikely to be significantly influenced by European political families.

Overall, it can be concluded that alignment with European political families is becoming stronger. Nevertheless, it is unusual that four political parties that are perceived to be highly dissimilar by Latvian voters and the media have all chosen the European People's Party as their preferred political family. The barrier for national parties to be included in the major families, given the close ideological positions of parties, will, therefore, remain an important obstacle to transcend.

Conclusions

In the Latvian political system, major ideological disagreements mostly occur between parties representing ethnic Latvians or ethnic Russians. This is supplemented by discussions dealing with their geopolitical stance towards the West and/or Russia. A relatively new trend has been disagreements between parties identifying as liberal and conservative, and an even newer trend is to see divisions

²² Portal "LSM.lv", "Saeima rejects UN migration compact", 6 December 2018 (<https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/saeima/saeima-rejects-un-migration-compact.a302055/>).

between a federalist or intergovernmentalist stance on the EU and the powers of the European Commission. Despite their divisions, there is traditionally a fairly broad coherence on most EU issues among coalition parties due to very low levels of openly anti-European sentiment. As for Latvian parties and their relationship with European politics, the alignment of these parties with European political families is becoming stronger, although many of the current frontrunners have still not formed alliances with EU-level political parties and will make their bids only after achieving victory at the EP elections. This means that while established parties have already begun this process, newly elected parties are just now starting to initiate new partnerships on a European level.

The Latvian system has a strong parliamentary scrutiny process for establishing national positions for both the Council and the European Council, conducted by the European Affairs Committee of the *Saeima*. The system was originally introduced to give Latvia's EU accession process additional political legitimacy – the parliamentary dimension has been preserved and has turned into an important forum for debating EU issues and national positions due to its accessibility. The drafting of national positions and the coordination process offers a significant number of opportunities for it to be influenced by civil society and social partners.

Therefore, it is clear that not only has the overall state of Latvia's democracy matured over the years, it has grown to encompass a wider representation of ideological views (i.e., moving beyond identity politics). It has also become more open and active regarding EU issues and problems. But just as in other member states, the 'catch-all' approach and the use of populist methods for attracting an audience are prevalent and continue to secure victories. Voters searching for charisma and personalities, in addition to modern technology and the media, are turning politics into a volatile theatre. The volatility in voter support for parties is greatly influenced by the popularity of preferential candidate voting, leading to the discontinuity of political coalitions and programmes and difficulties in forging new governments. It is evident that the Euro-integration of the Latvian political party system is part of an overall learning curve and continued Europeanisation.

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