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# Formation of political parties and electoral coalitions – a case of Latvia

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## Abstract

This paper is about formation of political parties and electoral coalitions in Latvia after country gained independence in 1991. Latvia as well as Lithuania and Estonia are the only post soviet countries who are members of European Union and NATO, which itself points to their early recovery from the fall of the Iron Curtain. This paper is focused on certain issues that often can not find a theoretical explanation. Latvia as a post soviet state theoretically accepts the principles of Western democracy, but is struggling with moral consequences of the Soviet political culture. Two main issues are discussed: party distribution based on the national question and the meaning of ideology in the process of formation of electoral coalitions. In this paper an appropriate theoretical approach is quoted. Institutionalization is viewed as the basis for research of political parties, as well as Maurice Duverger behavior of political parties and contemporary literature that specifically addresses the current political party activities, particularly before elections. This paper shows the methods, through which behavior of political parties before the election are studied, which is supplemented by specific examples.

**Keywords:** party politics, electoral coalitions, party ideology, national question.

## Introduction

The only post-Soviet states within the European Union and NATO are Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. In contrast to the Western Europe, the above mentioned northern European republics, after regaining independence, entail a sometimes different legacy of political culture; in this particular case, focusing on the phenomenon of Latvian political parties on the basis of ideological differences on the national question. In general it can be said that Latvia as a post-Soviet state theoretically accepts the principles of Western democracy, but is struggling with moral consequences of the Soviet political culture. Case of Latvia in this paper is viewed from two points of views. First of all there is national question, which already 2 decades after regaining independence is the key trump card of elections. The Second issue that appears is the amount of pre-electoral coalitions and lack of ideology within them and raises the hypothesis: *unity of ideology is not the reason for parties to merge and create party coalitions.*

Political party distribution is a key issue of contemporary Latvian political life. The left-right distinction is different from the accepted in Western countries and always asks for more explanation. Nowadays it has caused two, created on a national basis, party coalition blocks that do not include theoretically adopted ideological division. It is so deep-rooted that the party program is left in the background, and the emphasis is primarily nationality. As a result, the left-oriented party is associated with the impact of national minorities and right wing is attributed to nationalists or otherwise not russians.

Political parties are one of the main attractions of democracy that can determine national goals both, externally and internally. The struggle of political parties for their supporters on the national principle can not provide the stability neither in Parliament nor in the public desire.

Parliamentary elections are the interaction between voters and those who want to be elected. In the case of Latvia, this interaction does not develop, because the parties do not reveal their potential course of actions to the voters, but rather are looking for the negative, in actions of political rivals.

## Theoretical approach

“Development and formation of party structures are explored by scientists with the help of the core values of institutionalism. The most commonly used Alan Ware’s guidelines marks that the political struggle is the mediator of the institutional environment and an important factor in this approach is the rivalry. So, first of all, this approach refers to the democratic-liberal regimes. As Mark Debus wrote in the European tradition in the study of coalition politics, the focus is not primarily on rational choice assumptions (Laver, 1986:32; Laver and Schofield, 1998:7f.). Instead the influence of the respective institutional setting on the one side and the political culture on the other side on patterns of party competition and coalition politics is under consideration from a more inductive standpoint (e.g. Pridham, 1986a; Strom, Budge and Laver, 1994; Kropp, Schuettmeyer and Sturm, 2002: 10f.).”(1;107)

There are four influential factors of coalition formation that are not covered by formal models in coalition formation research:

1. The structure of the respective electoral system that could influence not only the overall structure of the party system, but could also lead towards pre-electoral alliances;
2. Constitutional provisions that could determine what kind of majority is not only sufficient, but moreover required for a sustainable and successful government;
3. The party composition of the incumbent (coalition) government, because their policy position determines the status quo and therefore should influence the degree of policy change that could be implemented by subsequent government;
4. The role of the head of the state, who can accept or refuse the demission of a current government and in some countries has the right to name a formateur that leads and organizes the coalition negotiations.”(1;107)

In the case of Latvia the main factors of the current system of coalition politics is the existence of parliamentary political system (multi-party system), proportional electoral system and historical and cultural perspective.

“One major institutional provision that influences coalition formation is the required majority for building a sustainable government (Strom, Budge and Laver, 1994:310.). While the office-orientated coalition theories assume that coalition government’s majority in the parliament or the number of players inside a coalition should be as small as possible, one could argue that countries with a highly fragmented society over-sized majorities or the inclusion of the special interest parties is required. This is not only for reasons of government stability. In some situations it is also necessary for a government to have the support of a large majority in parliament, so that no special bargaining process beside the one during the coalition formation process must take place in case of changes of the constitution, for instance.”(1;108)

One often mentioned factor that influences patterns of party politics are electoral system. According to Maurice Duverger:

“...an electoral system based on proportional representation should lead towards a multi-party system with stable, immovable and independent parties. Following the “Duverger law”, electoral systems can systematically enlarge or decrease the number and strength of parties in the respective parliament. With regard to coalition politics, this leads to a small or large number of potential coalitions in the parliament (Laver,1989). Beside these more general patterns that could result from the structure of the electoral system, other specifications of the electoral system like numerical that a party has to skip to win seats in the parliament could influence the stability of party system. Some electoral systems constitute incentives for political parties both to take a specific programmatic position and to form a priori alliances with other parties. One example is the “single transferable vote” system. Here, political parties are invited to form alliances before election that include the appeal to their voters to choose with their lower preference votes candidates from the respective other party belonging to the electoral alliance.”(1;110)

“In most democracies, single parties are unable to command a majority of the support in the legislature. Thus, political parties who wish to exercise executive power are typically forced to enter some form of coalition. In effect, they can either form an electoral coalition with another party (or parties) prior to an election, or they can compete independently at election time and form a government coalition afterwards.”(3;1)

“A pre-electoral coalition is a coalition of parties that do not compete independently in an election, either because they publicly agree to coordinate their campaigns, run joint lists, or either government together following the election.”(3;12)

## National matter

In Latvia, the division of political parties on the right and on the left is based on national principles - namely, right wing political parties are considered to be Latvian ones, and, accordingly, the left wing are Russian parties (26.6% of the population of Latvia are Russians). Latvia and Estonia in comparison with Lithuania have adopted an unusual policy. An unusual policy relating to electoral system.

“It raises in particular one of the central issues of the post-coloniality: whether those who are labeled the colonial other should enjoy the same entitlements to membership of the citizen-polity as those of the nation who claim a privileged relationship with the sovereign homeland. It in effect represents a tension between universalist and particularist notions of distributive justice. The former hold that, irrespective of ethnic difference, those who reside within the sovereign territory at the moment of the declaration of the independence should have a right to membership of that citizen-polity. On the basis, Lithuania, along with most of the other post-Soviet borderland states, can legitimately claim that their citizen-state formations are constructed on the basis of universal principles: all those resident in the national homeland at the moment of the declaration of the independent statehood were granted the right to membership of the citizen-polity. In contrast, particularists argue that, while members of the core nation have a special ancestral purchase on the privileges of homeland, the settler communities do not have the same automatic rights to membership. It is this modality of citizenship that has been adopted by Estonia and Latvia. Legitimised on the basis that, like Lithuania, their states were illegally incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940, both national governments argue that only citizens of the previous inter-war polity and their descendants have an automatic right to membership. Others, primarily Russian-speakers who settled in Estonia and Latvia during the period of Soviet rule, can be admitted to the citizen-polity only upon meeting certain preconditions. These include a residency qualification, calculated from the base year 1990, a knowledge of the national language and a declaration that an applicant has never served in or was never affiliated with the occupying Soviet forces.”(2;125)

“As a result the social status of third of the population of Estonia and Latvia, made up more or less exclusively of Russian-speakers of whom the majority have little or no command of the respective state languages, has been redesigned. Their status has been demoted from that of citizens to that of denizens, in which certain privileges not accorded to “foreigners” exist, but in which those rights enjoyed by the national majority are denied.”(4;94)

We can say clearly that the national cleavage is a cause of particular electoral behavior of political parties. It can be seen as a reason for the fact that the parties before the elections merge with the tendency of creating the two-block system. In more simple term – Latvian parties merge with Latvian and Russian with Russian. It creates a certain environment that does not require generally accepted ideology. National matter takes precedence over political ideology.

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“Ethnopolitical elites have shown a propensity to make rational political choices by selecting a course of action with a particular political outcome in mind. Thus political rationality is served if nationalizing elites secure political power positions by mobilizing their constituents along ethnic lines through convincing them of the costs and benefits that will accrue from taking certain political actions. Under such circumstances, ethnopolitical codes can be used, adapted and invented by nationalizing elites in order to secure those political outcomes that are considered beneficial to the titular nation.”(1;98)

## Methodological approach

This national gap offers an interesting question in particular on the Latvian political scene – pre-electoral tendencies of the Latvian politics. This aspect may require both, positive and negative hypothesis - the political

struggle of this kind leads to political stability, or, on the contrary, destroys and prevents the decision-making processes, both, internal and external policies.

For a deeper research both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. Necessary data are obtained from a variety of sources - official statistics, media (press, television, internet) news related to party alliances creation, as well as obtained new both quantitative and qualitative data. To understand the target – to analyse formation principles of electoral coalitions in Latvia – 5th – 11th. Saeima, parties have to be compared. Firstly, it gives a chance to analyse how many parties or party alliances are similar or different and to separate factors of conjunctive and conflicting views. Secondly, using content Analysis allows to find out is the party alliance able to exist and on what basis it functions. For example, before 10th Saeima elections, there were four new electoral coalitions created – „Unity”, „For a good Latvia”, „Harmony Centre” and „Responsibility – Social Democratic Alliance of Political Parties”. It can be noted that political parties with different ideologies creating an electoral coalition enters parliament and even wins the elections. This can be seen as evidence that ideology is most likely not the primary selection factor for voters and parties themselves.

Using the example of electoral coalition “Unity”, which was created before 10<sup>th</sup> Saeima elections. Electoral coalition was formed by merging three political parties - The New Era Party (liberal conservative), Civic Union (nationalism) and Society for Other Politics – social democracy. To find principles of unity each party program was analyzed and content analysis was used to find relevance between three previously mentioned parties. Analysing the existing programs of the parties, it is conducted that theoretically to build a common political coalition is impossible. Practically “Unity” won the elections with 33 mandates in 100 seats parliament. A big role in this case is played by the fact that “Unity” was reportedly founded in a bid to form a counterweight to the left-wing “Harmony Centre”(Russian influence party coalition). Organizational issues of political parties obtain specific relevance in pre-election period, what provokes public debate about purposes of political parties in running parliamentary elections. After the collapse of Soviet Union Latvia experiences a tendency, that every newly created political power wins parliamentary elections, followed by tendency to create coalitions of political parties before the elections, thereby creating opportunity for ideologically unstable and weak parties to enter the parliament.

## Conclusion

Right-wing (Latvian criteria) party block is variable and unstable. It is designed as a left-wing confrontation. Short term and fragile parties and alliances are created. With each new election party exhausts its resources and lose their voters exacerbated by the economic situation and social problems in the country. Latvian voters do not vote for ideology because there is a lack of interaction between elite and society. Remains such factors as nationality and the human factor, that is, the candidate's personality, regardless of party affiliation. Multi-party system leaves much room for morally not particularly attractive things, such as the surfing of candidate from one party and to another, again adding, regardless of ideology.

Advantage of the tendency to create more electoral coalitions is that it reduces party fragmentation, which in theory is a good tendency, but the case of Latvia can lead to a rivalry between two-party blocks, the electorate will be a difference in nationality and the difference will be the nationality of electorate.

Amount of Pre-electoral coalitions is increasing and, consequently, increases the difficulty to establish a stable parliamentary coalition. Referred tendency represents a discussion about the reasons why such pre-electoral coalitions are formed. Existing theory confirms the fact, that the coalitions of parties without a common ideological basis are formed with the aim to get as much mandates in parliament as possible. Such coalitions possible have the same goals, but not the same way in achieving the goals. In contrast to parliamentary coalitions, pre-electoral coalitions don't have unity directly at level of ideology and party programs, that requires deep point of view, and match of setting. Party coalitions that are created with the aim to get as much seats in parliament as possible, but after the analysis of party program are distinctly different, can't work in parliament whose mission is an effective public administration. This is also the case when from remainders of failed political parties or alliances of parties formed new political force is incapacitated, because in case of Latvia, there is not enough political resources to create a high quality party coalition. Pre-electoral coalitions brings together goals, rather than the means to achieve them.

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## **Bio-note**

Kristiana Kalnina is a doctoral student of Political Science at the Riga Stradins University, Latvia. She received her B.A. of International Relations at the same university and the main research was based on comparative politics, namely comparing behavior of political parties in Latvia after 1991. with party politics of post IIWW Germany. It resulted in authors more in-depth interest on internal policy and formation of political parties. Latvian political environment is very productive in the field of political parties. After successfully obtaining a master's degree, doctoral studies followed. Within the framework of practice Kristiana worked on her research at the Kaunas University of Technology, where she collected data on Lithuanian party politics, which allows the space for comparative politics, namely comparing Latvia and Lithuania. Kristiana is lecturer at Riga Stradins University and teaches the course: political parties and interest groups and works at Ministry of Interior of Republic of Latvia.