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PROFILE

The curious case of the Latvian Greens

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In Latvia everything began with the movement to save the environment.
(Dainis Ivāns 1988¹)

Introduction

The natural environment has been central to Latvian identity and culture since the mid-nineteenth-century first ‘awakening’ (*atmoda*) of Latvian nationhood. Over 100 years later, pollution and other threats to the environment caused by breakneck Soviet industrialisation and reckless agricultural management led to environmental movements spearheading public mobilisation against these harmful Soviet policies in the 1970s and 1980s. These first eco-warriors later played a central role in organising the independence movement that ushered Latvia towards independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The following two decades saw the Latvian Green Party (*Latvijas Zaļā Partija* – LZP) become an enduring part of the Latvian party system, enter government and even produce Europe’s first green prime minister in 2004.

Paradoxically, however, these political achievements have been accompanied by a simultaneous fracturing of the contemporary environmental movement. LZP’s ongoing Machiavellian electoral alliance with the Latvian Farmers’ Union (*Latvijas Zemnieku Savienība* – LZS), a conservative agrarian party, has led it to adopt reactionary socially conservative policies that are out of kilter with the generally progressive liberal policies of green parties in Western Europe. Moreover, the resulting Green/Farmers Union (*Zaļo/Zemnieku Savienība* – ZZS) is financed by the domestic oil and transit

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industry, and dominated by an influential and wealthy local politician (known in Latvia as an ‘oligarch’) who has faced corruption and money-laundering charges since the mid-2000s. These features have alienated younger grassroots activists attracted to the more left-wing European vision of environmentalism, largely discredited the party, and marginalised green policies.

Historical background

Soviet occupation brought radical changes to the management of Latvia’s economy and natural resources with many negative environmental consequences. Rapid and intense industrialisation transformed Latvia’s economy, demography (with the accompanying influx of Russian-speaking industrial workers) and cities, while the collectivisation of agriculture changed the rural areas. Three decades of negligent Soviet environmental management resulted in high levels of agricultural, industrial and air pollution as well as inefficient use of Latvia’s few natural resources. By the 1980s, Latvia had the second highest level of air pollution in the Soviet Union and its capital city, Riga, which had no wastewater treatment facilities, had the second dirtiest drinking water in the Soviet Union. Latvia even experienced a cholera outbreak in 1988.

Small, informal organisations emerged in the 1970s to address these issues. One group started renovating the small ‘bourgeois’ monuments and country churches that had been deliberately neglected by the Soviet regime. These groups networked and socialised like-minded activists, enabling them to take full advantage of the increased political freedoms offered by the ascent to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. The most significant early pro-independence environmentalist organisation was the Environmental Protection Club (*Vides Aizsardzības Klubs – VAK*), which challenged the authority of the Soviet state by successfully opposing the construction of both a hydro-electric power (HEP) station on the river Daugava, and a metro system in Riga. It operated in relative political freedom because, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, environmental issues were not regarded as directly challenging the communist system. However, VAK used these environmental activities as a springboard for actions directed against the Soviet regime. Indeed, one of the founders of VAK, the journalist Dainis Ivāns, went on to become the Chairman of the Latvian People’s Front (*Latvijas Tautas Fronte – LTF*), the chief pro-independence organisation that managed Latvia’s transition to independence in 1991.

Environmental issues were also a proxy for nationalism. Indeed, VAK’s conception of the natural environment included national culture and the Latvian environmental movement has always been closely identified with Latvian nationalism. The construction of the Daugava HEP station and the Riga metro system would have resulted in a further influx of Russian-speaking immigrants, which caused concern because the 1989 Soviet census confirmed that decades of Russification had left ethnic Latvians a bare majority (52%) in Latvia. VAK became one of the founders of the Latvian Citizens Committee

(*Pilsoņu Komiteja*), the most radical nationalist pro-independence organisation, thereby tying the Latvian green movement to radical nationalist groups.

The Latvian Green Party

The next step in the politicisation of the environmental movement was the creation in 1990 of the LZP, whose leadership included many prominent VAK activists. However, the party struggled to attract the corporate financing needed to compete successfully in Latvian elections (only in 2012 did Latvia introduce partial state financing for parties). As a result, LZP pooled its resources with other green movements to form the Green List (*Zaļais Saraksts – ZS*) in the first post-Soviet elections in 1993, but won just 1.19% of the vote, well below the 4% (raised to 5% in later elections) threshold needed to gain entry to parliament. In the six subsequent national elections LZP forged a string of pragmatic electoral alliances as a tactic for exceeding the 5% threshold in parliamentary elections (see Table 1). As this electoral strategy implies, LZP had not elaborated a coherent ‘green’ political agenda, but pragmatically steered its way from one potentially useful (in terms of financial or popular support) coalition partner to another. In 1995 it successfully shared a ticket with the nationalist Latvian National Independence Movement (LNNK), but in 1998 enjoyed a less successful electoral coalition with the Christian Democrat Union (*Kristīgi Demokrātiskā Savienība – KDS*) and the leftist Labour Party (*Darba Partija – DP*).

However, in the 2002 election LZP formed a fateful electoral alliance with LZS. In 2006 the alliance was joined by the small For Latvia and Ventspils party (*Latvijai un Ventspilij – LuV*), which is the political vehicle for the mayor

Table 1. Green Party performance in parliamentary elections in Latvia 1993–2011.

Election year	Alliance partner(s)	% of vote	Total number of seats (Greens in brackets)
1993	Green NGOs	1.19%	0
1995	Latvian National Independence Movement	6.32%	8 (4)
1998	Christian Democrat Union/ Labour Party	2.29%	0
2002	Latvian Farmers’ Union	9.44%	12 (4)
2006	Latvian Farmers’ Union/For Latvia and Ventspils	16.71%	18 (3)
2010	Latvian Farmers’ Union/For Latvia and Ventspils/Liepāja’s Party	19.68%	22 (5)
2011	Latvian Farmers’ Union/For Latvia and Ventspils/Liepāja’s Party	12.22%	13 (4)

Source: Latvian Central Election Commission.

of the oil-rich transit port city of Ventspils, Aivars Lembergs (see Galbreath and Auers 2009). The ZZS has been generously funded by Ventspils' oil and transit interests, and the party has long been nicknamed the 'Green-Farmers-Oil' party. ZZS has certainly appealed to both environmentalists and farmers (despite the often contradictory demands of both groups). Indeed, it held the environmental and agricultural ministerial posts for much of the first decade of the 2000s (the Green Party's Indulis Emsis was Minister of the Environment [1993–1998], as was his party compatriot Raimonds Vējonis [2002–2011]). However, in election campaigns green ideas have been marginalised and the alliance has primarily campaigned on populist nationalist, xenophobic, homophobic and Eurosceptic issues. This has alienated and split the green movement at grassroots level and led to the bizarre situation of green issues being marginalised in the European Union (EU) state with arguably the most electorally successful Green Party. The 2010 and 2011 ZZS party manifestoes had no more emphasis on environmental issues than other competing parties. This low status of environmental issues is also reflected in individual attitudes. A 2008 special Eurobarometer poll on the environment in Europe, found that among the EU-27 states Latvia had the fewest respondents – 71% compared to the EU-27 average of 86% – who believed that people's individual responsibility could play a role in protecting the environment (European Commission 2008). Latvia has surprisingly few green policies. There is, for example, no municipal sorting of waste or any tax inducements for buying 'greener' vehicles. Latvia's second-place ranking in the 2012 global Environmental Performance Index owes more to the post-1991 collapse of the industrial sector, the 2009–2010 recession that saw the state suffer a remarkable 25% fall in gross domestic product, and integration into the EU (requiring adoption of the environmental *acquis* while benefiting from significant funding for environmental initiatives), rather than concerted green policies or the promotion of environmentally friendly lifestyles.

The reactionary conservative values of ZZS are also very different from the core values of mainstream green parties in Western Europe. Indeed, in many ways ZZS resembles a contemporary radical right populist party rather than a mainstream green party. In 2003 two leading green deputies – Arvīds Ulme (the founder and leader of VAK for more than two decades) and Leopolds Ozoliņš – authored a public letter of support for Aivars Garda, leader of the neo-fascist Latvian National Front, who was charged with inciting social hatred through a series of homophobic comments and articles in the movement's newsletter. Indeed, Ulme and Ozoliņš have long maintained close and friendly links with the Latvian National Front, even posing for the organisation's 2006 'de-occupation' calendar, which promotes the forced repatriation of post-Second World War Russian-speaking migrants. This nativism is also reflected in a core Euroscepticism. VAK, LZP and, to a lesser extent, ZZS campaigned for a no vote in the 2003 referendum on accession to the European Union, and LZP has maintained a consistently Eurosceptic position since then. Indeed, in a recent article entitled 'Who owns Latvia?', Ulme (2011) argued that Latvia had 'sold

its soul' upon entering the EU, and that it was now time for the country to exit the union.

These radical-right populist positions have led to a fracturing of the Latvian environmental movement. In 2004, several senior officials and half of VAK's regional branches defected, citing the negative influence – of policy and perceptions of corruption – of ZP's role in the ZZS alliance. The defectors formed Latvia's Green Movement (*Latvijas Zaļā Kustība* – LZK) which now competes with VAK for members and resources, and has a generally more open and tolerant platform, although it does not compete in elections.

ZZS has also found itself on the wrong side of the corruption debate. In May 2011 the Latvian president called a referendum on the recall of parliament, arguing that a number of 'oligarch' parties, particularly ZZS, were attempting to 'privatise' Latvian democracy. It was time, the president declared, for Latvia to 'restart' its democracy, fight the cancer of corruption and remove the 'oligarchs' from the legislature. This left ZZS in a difficult position. It was inextricably tied to the main target of the president's ire. Lembergs, the *de-facto* leader of the ZZS (the alliance's prime minister candidate in the last three parliamentary elections), was detained and charged with money-laundering and corruption in 2006 and has been fighting court cases in the UK as well as Latvia. However, Lembergs is not the only high profile ZZS politician compromised by accusations of corruption. Indulis Emsis, Europe's first green prime minister, was embarrassingly forced to exit national politics in 2007 after he had mislaid a briefcase containing an unaccounted \$10,000 in cash in the Cabinet of Ministers building. Moreover, in an experiment in the days before the 2011 parliamentary election, a daily newspaper's undercover investigation found that Viesturs Silenieks, a co-chairman of the Green Party and prominent member of ZZS, had agreed to exchange political influence for a cash donation. The tide had turned against ZZS, and the resulting September 2011 early election saw ZZS's share of the vote cut in half, and the party's exclusion from government coalition for the first time in almost a decade.

Conclusions: whither the Latvian Greens?

The Latvian greens are an enigma. On the one hand, they can be counted among the most successful green parties in Europe, with ZZS having served uninterrupted in every government coalition between 2002 and 2011, and in 2004 producing Europe's first green prime minister. On the other hand, the reactionary, nationalist, Eurosceptic and homophobic values of both ZZS and LZP leaders have ideologically distanced them from their European counterparts and more liberal grassroots activists, while a lack of green policy initiatives has frustrated environmental campaigners. The compromises of the last decade have left the established LZP weakened, and the political space for a more modern and 'European' environmental party has appeared. However, the complexities of the slow-moving Latvian legal system, the core populist

appeal of the ZZS, as well as the continuing salience of money in Latvian politics means that the future success of the ZZS cannot be entirely discounted.

Note

1. Quoted in Dreifelds (1996, p. 54).

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