



Protests against the Lex CEU in Budapest in spring 2017: the slogan reads "new regime change, European democracy!"

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Unstable Stalemate: Latvian Liberalism in Limbo

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As part of a special issue on 'Lex CEU', this article discusses the processes of effective marginalization of 'liberalism' as an openly espoused political conviction in the Latvian public sphere. It considers the interaction of four factors: nationalism, the politics of privatization, the self-interest of some powerful Latvian politicians, and, after the turn of the millennium, the increasing influence of parties and organizations espousing 'family values'.

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Unstable Stalemate: Latvian Liberalism in Limbo

When Latvia held its first completely free parliamentary elections in 1993 two years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the winner was Latvijas Ceļš (The Latvian Way – LC), a self-proclaimed liberal party that gained a larger number of seats in parliament than any other political organization either before (during the interwar years) or since. Now, almost 25 years later, not a single party represented in the Latvian parliament identifies itself as liberal, and the word itself has become a term either of political abuse or ironic self-deprecation, a way of admitting that your views are largely outside the political mainstream.

Now, almost 25 years later, not a single party represented in the Latvian parliament identifies itself as liberal, and the word itself has become a term either of political abuse or ironic self-deprecation, a way of admitting that your views are largely outside the political mainstream.

That is not to say that nobody defends ideas that elsewhere would be labelled as liberal. It is just that they are generally given a different name and context. Politicians now speak of 'European' or 'Western' values when defending socially liberal positions. When someone wants to defend the market freedoms espoused by economic liberalism, she reaches for the word "competitiveness" or points to the standards set by international evaluations of the business environment, such as the World Bank's 'Doing Business'.

It is also not the case that socially or economically conservative policies have achieved some kind of hegemony in Latvian society or politics. This makes the liberal end of the political spectrum's lack of a clear ideological definition and orientation all the more striking.

How can we explain this curious evanescence of liberalism in Latvia over the last quarter century? And what do the future perspectives for liberal views in Latvia look like?

In trying to understand the effective marginalization of 'liberalism' as an openly espoused political conviction in the Latvian public sphere, we have to consider the interaction of four factors: nationalism, the politics of privatization, the self-interest of some powerful Latvian politicians, and, after the turn of the millennium, the increasing influence of parties and organizations espousing 'family values'.

A clash over human rights

The first attacks on liberalism in Latvia were closely tied up with issues of minority rights and the vexed question as to what place the hundreds of thousands of people who had moved to the country after its occupation by the Soviet Union should have in the Latvian polity. On the eve of the Second World War, some three quarters of the Latvian population were ethnic Latvian and only a little more than 10 per cent were Russian or Belarusian. A census conducted on the eve of independence in 1989 showed that the Latvian share in the population had fallen to 52 per cent, which was largely due to post-war emigration, while the percentage of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians had increased to 42 per cent. One of the driving forces of the independence movement were ethnic Latvians' fears that they were on the verge of becoming a minority in their own land, with the threat of extinction just over the horizon.^[1]

As a consequence, the first and most important question for the political future of the country after it regained its independence was: who is a citizen? Both Latvia and Estonia, which had experienced similar, though slightly less intense immigration after the war, decided that citizenship would be given to those who had been citizens at the time of the first Soviet occupation in 1940, along with their descendants. Because the incorporation of both states into the USSR had never been recognized by the Western powers and the countries were considered by most of the world to have legally regained their de facto independence rather than being newly established states, this approach to the question of citizenship was largely accepted by Western countries and international institutions such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe. It should also be underscored that the renewal of citizenship was not tied to ethnicity. There were cases of ethnic Latvians being denied citizenship because their ancestors had not lived in Latvia during its period of independence between the wars, and about one-third of the ethnic Russians living in Latvia did receive citizenship.

The really contentious issue was: what was to be the status of the people who did not qualify for citizenship? This is not the place to go into all the political wrangling that went on regarding this issue^[2], but it took over seven years to resolve, and various international institutions put a great deal of pressure on Latvia to come up with a settlement that would define the terms on which the 'non-citizens', as they came to be called, could be naturalized. Because the international institutions involved saw their mission as the protection of human and minority rights and the less restrictive options for naturalization were often defined as being 'liberal', Latvian nationalists often came to define themselves and their discourse in opposition to these terms and ideas and to present themselves as defenders of national and conservative values during the nineties.

This negative attitude towards human rights was only strengthened by the fact that Russia, as a matter of policy, consistently accused Latvia of 'massive violations of human rights'. For many people in Latvia, this tainted the concept of human rights as a whole, making it seem like a stalking-horse for Russian attempts to damage Latvia's reputation, undermine its efforts to join NATO and the EU, and ultimately reassert Moscow's influence over the country.

The bitter aftertaste of privatization

A second process undermining liberalism in Latvia was the traumatic economic transformation that the country underwent following the implosion of the planned economy. Many of the most drastic changes could not have been avoided no matter what policies the governments at the time might have pursued. The hyperinflation of the early nineties was imported from Russia when Latvia was still a part of the ruble zone. The sharp fall in GDP and the disintegration of trading ties with the Soviet successor states was an inevitable result of independence and the lack of competitiveness of many Soviet-era products on the world market. However, a third element of the economic transformation – privatization – was indeed in the government's hands, and in many highly visible cases the beneficiaries of this policy were clearly people with political connections. The considerable economic shifts along with a sense that the process had been unfair in some crucial respects created a great deal of bitterness. In the 1995 parliamentary elections, *Latvijas Ceļš* (Latvia's Way), which had proclaimed itself the leader of the liberal economic transformation, saw its share of the vote fall from 32 per cent to 15 per cent, while support for vehemently anti-liberal parties surged. In the following years, many of these populists disappeared and the political landscape stabilized, but *Latvijas Way* never fully recovered and was finally dissolved after failing to get into parliament in 2002.^[3]

It is in some sense ironic that this inchoate dissatisfaction with the results of the economic transformation and its identification with liberalism were increasingly stoked by one of the politicians who is seen by many in Latvia as the embodiment of the inequitable distribution of property and power that followed independence. Aivars Lembergs is one of Latvia's most influential politicians and is also regularly ranked as one of the country's richest people. While he himself vehemently denies it, it is widely assumed that both his riches and his ongoing influence on Latvian national politics are a consequence of his being the mayor of the city of Ventspils since 1988, which during the nineties was one of the main ports for Russian oil exports. As his wealth and power increasingly became targets of criticism, Lembergs decided to pursue a tried and true tactic for defending himself – he found an external enemy to attack.

Unmasking the 'sorosites'

The [Soros Foundation Latvia](#) (SFL) was founded in 1992, and for the first years of its existence it was quite uncontroversial. However, toward the end of the nineties it started to place an increasing emphasis on good governance, transparency and the fight against corruption. During the period, one of Lembergs' most vocal critics was the politically independent daily newspaper Diena.^[4] Coincidentally, the newspaper's longstanding editor-in-chief, Sarmīte Ēlerte, was also the chairwoman of the board of the Soros Foundation Latvia between 1997 and 2006.

In view of this double threat, it is perhaps not so surprising that Lembergs chose George Soros as his bete noire. Publications aligned with Lembergs began regularly attacking the 'sorosites' (sorosieši or sorosīti). They were accused of spreading values inimical to Latvia in the interest of giving Soros control of Latvian politics and of acting against the 'national bourgeoisie' – that is, the amalgamated political and business interests that Lembergs at one point professed to represent. The fact that the Soros Foundation had a hand in founding and supporting [Delna](#), the local chapter of Transparency International, which became one of the best-known NGOs in the country, only added fuel to the anti-sorosite fire.

This discourse failed to gain much traction outside the pages of one newspaper closely aligned with Lembergs – the Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze (NRA) – and some of the wider reaches of the internet, and it has not struck roots in the broader population. Nevertheless, the unremitting and concentrated attacks on Soros by the mayor of Ventspils and his allies did have an effect on the political elite, if only because Lembergs' influence meant that people who were either afraid of him or wanted to work with him tried hard to avoid being labeled 'sorosites'. Conversely, people who had been associated with the Soros Foundation in the past could expect a steady stream of negative publicity from Lembergs, his supporters in the media, and his political allies.

These attacks also made it harder for the SFL itself to cooperate with the government on various projects, since politicians often wanted to avoid giving Lembergs an excuse for attacking them. Despite this opposition, some of the foundation's most important projects have become firmly established in Latvia and continue to make an impact. The SFL was instrumental in the creation of both the [Riga Graduate School of Law](#) and the [Stockholm School of Economics in Riga](#). The main auditorium of both schools is named after Soros and is regularly used for conferences attended by ministers and politicians of all political stripes. Over the last few years, it seems that the anti-Soros rhetoric has lost in relevance. The pro-Lembergs paper NRA continues to occasionally publish articles 'unmasking' Soros, but aside from the occasional use of the word 'sorosite' as a pejorative for liberal, the billionaire philanthropist has

largely disappeared from public debate in Latvia. There is a sense that the anti-Soros movement has lost its energy.^[5]

The rise of 'family values'

As the ethnic issue has lost a good deal of significance in political life and Latvia's capitalist, free-market economic structure has become widely accepted, a new strain of anti-liberal, socially conservative activism has emerged. The catalyst for this development were the first gay pride parades in Riga.

Although there were some protestors at the first pride parade in 2005, the event was relatively calm compared to what took place the following year. In 2002, Ainārs Šlesers, who at the time was classed along with Lembergs as one of Latvia's "oligarchs", had founded a party (Latvia's First Party/Latvian Way) that professed to be a guardian of Christian values, which led fundamentalist Christian organizations to throw their support behind it. The year 2006 was an election year, and the party believed that staging opposition to the gay pride parade would be a good way to mobilize these voters. When the Minister of the Interior, who was a member of Šlesers' party, declared that he could not guarantee the safety of the pride march, the protestors who came out at the instigation of a Christian fundamentalist preacher along with a small group of right-wing extremists felt free to pelt marchers with bags full of excrement as they came out of church and surround the hotel where they were holding a conference. Nobody was injured, but as a result, the next few pride parades were organized for small groups of participants behind massive police barricades.^[6] Eventually, the organizers decided that the whole thing was too much trouble and took a break for a couple of years.

The tension associated with the gay pride parades subsided after Šlesers crashed out of politics in 2011, and in 2015 Riga hosted [Europride](#), Europe's largest pride march. Some 5 000 participants walked or danced down the central street of the city without incident, and many locals participated.^[7] In 2014, Latvia's Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs revealed that he was gay^[8] without any notable backlash or political effect, and he was re-elected to parliament in 2015 by a comfortable margin.

Nevertheless, the reaction against the issue of gay rights had introduced traditional, conservative 'family values into Latvian politics. In large part due to the efforts of Šlesers, the constitution was amended at the end of 2005 to define marriage as the union of a man and a woman. Although none of the other parties made a big deal out of family values, the vote in parliament was overwhelmingly in favour of the amendment.

This gave social conservatism a new breath of life in Latvia, and organizations like [Ģimene](#) (Family) began playing an increasingly visible role in Latvian politics. The spread of anti-gay rhetoric has also been furthered by the Catholic Church in Latvia, which probably has the most active members out of any religious confession in Latvia and is still quite influential in the eastern, traditionally Catholic part of the country. The Latvian Lutheran Church has been less vocal in this regard, but it is no less socially conservative and has the distinction of being one of the few Lutheran churches in Europe that does not ordain women.^[9]

As Šlesers' political influence waned, a new political force picked up the flag of social conservatism. In 2010, the nationalist Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK (For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Independence Movement – TB/LNNK), which had been in the electoral doldrums for a number of years, joined up with a group of young nationalists called Visu Latvijai! (Everything for Latvia! – VL) to form the

National Alliance. VL's right-wing ideology is much broader than the narrow ethnic focus of TB/LNNK and includes opposition to multiculturalism and Muslim immigration, which are not particularly relevant issues in Latvia, and to the supposedly corrosive influence of Western liberal values on the Latvian population. Despite their opposition to the recommendations of various Western countries and institutions on minority rights, the members of TB/LNNK came from a generation that grew up under Soviet rule and saw the West as their ultimate protector. As a result, they never overtly positioned themselves against the West. If their political position came into conflict with those of the Western countries, they rationalized the differences as stemming from the West's lack of understanding of the Latvian situation – if only they could explain themselves better, they said, the West would eventually come to agree with them.

The new nationalists from VL are from a younger generation and have fewer qualms about criticizing the West. To them the problem is not one of understanding. In their view, Western countries have succumbed to the enervating forces of multiculturalism and gay rights and are now trying to impose these values on Latvia and other Eastern European countries. VL's goal is not to reason with the Westerners, but to resist them.

Since 2010, the young and energetic politicians from VL have overshadowed the older TB/LNNK generation and are now, to a large extent, in control of the party. The National Alliance has also been part of the government since 2011.

It has often been noted that VL's ideological position, like that of right-wing nationalist parties in many other European countries, is congruent with the values espoused by Russian President Vladimir Putin and his regime. In Latvia, a few former nationalists have become unabashed admirers of Putin, including one of the country's best-known composers, Imants Kalniņš, whose songs were immensely popular during the last decades of the Soviet regime. However, because of Latvia's historical experience and the threat still posed by Russia, no Latvian party can be seen as being a supporter of Putin. VL hews to the anti-Russian line. Nevertheless, they will on occasion allow that they respect Putin as a strong leader, and most of their criticism is reserved for the West.

The refugee crisis gave VL a chance to position themselves as defenders of Latvian society both against the "diktat" of Brussels and its obligatory refugee quotas and against the asylum seekers themselves, whom VL consistently portrays as dangerous criminals, rapists and potential terrorists. In combination with the less vociferous anti-immigrant stand of one of their coalition partners, the Zaļo un Zemnieku savienība (Greens' and Farmers' Union), the active position of VL on the refugee issues has had a significant influence on government policy. Little resistance has been demonstrated by the ostensibly pro-European party Vienotība (Unity), whose main goal has been to arrive at the minimal solution acceptable to the European Commission and the influential Western countries. As a result, Latvia's refugee policies have turned into something of a Potemkin village. The country has not adopted the overtly rejectionist stance of Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic, but once the asylum seekers have gone through the process of being granted refugee status in Latvia, they are provided with such a minimal amount of assistance by the state that many of them leave the country, mostly for Germany.

However, it is not clear to what extent the politics of xenophobia has helped the National Alliance. After a sharp decline in support between the parliamentary elections of 1998 and 2002, when they barely managed to get into the legislature, they have gradually climbed back up to the level they had in the nineties and received 16,6 per cent of the votes in the parliamentary elections in 2015. Nevertheless, they only got 9,25 per cent of the votes in the Riga city elections in 2017, half as many as they had in

2013. Despite many of their leaders' open admiration for the politics of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Poland's leading politician Jaroslav Kaczynski, VL has little chance of replicating their electoral success or of wielding the political power accumulated by these two avatars of Central European national conservatism.

Liberal civil society?

While the government has done only the absolute minimum for refugees, a group of civil society activists has tried to fill the gap. In 2015, a businessman named Egils Grasmanis was so disturbed by the images of people drowning as they tried to cross the sea to reach Europe that he created a Facebook group called *Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem* ("I want to help the refugees"). The group now has over 3 000 members and is the main place where people who want to help asylum seekers exchange information and coordinate the assistance they give to people who are trying to start a new life in Latvia. Members of this community also regularly organize events where people can meet refugees and learn more about their experiences.

This example nicely illustrates a broader trend. While the political landscape in Latvia has shown a marked tilt towards social conservatism, civil society has generally been much more pluralistic, and groups with a liberal political agenda have often been able to stymie the legislative initiatives put forward by the self-declared "protectors of family values".

Their most visible action took place in the summer of 2015, when conservative members of parliament sought to amend the law on education by obliging schools to provide for the "moral education" of their pupils with regard to marriage and the family and to protect them from information that does not conform to this goal. The changes were a fairly transparent attempt to ban, or at least severely limit, sex education in schools, especially as it might touch upon homosexuality. The amendment was proposed by Jūlija Stepaņenko of the *Saskaņa* (Harmony) party, which is the main political organization representing the Russophone population of Latvia. During the last few years, Stepaņenko has become the principle spokesperson of 'family values' in the Latvian parliament. Indeed, one of her chief allies in this regard has been the National Alliance, which usually makes it a point of pride to oppose anything supported by Harmony.

Stepaņenko's morality amendments were opposed by both the Ministry of Education and by a significant number of teachers and principals. Not long after the amendments were passed, there were some reports that seemed to indicate that they were having an effect on the education system. At one high school, a teacher was reprimanded for assigning a poem with explicit language to her students, and at another, a teacher was prohibited from showing the movie *Total Eclipse* about the love affair between the poets Verlaine and Rimbaud.^[10]

However, in the long run, the amendments seem to have only had a limited effect. The Ministry of Education, not least due to civil society pressure, formed a working group to define the meaning of "moral education" and the resulting guidelines were so broad as to be essentially meaningless. Organizations that promote sex education in Latvian schools have not reported any significant change in their ability to work with students.

Another initiative that did not even manage to be adopted as legislation was a proposal by the then Minister of Health Guntis Belēvičs (Green Party) that would have prohibited women from donating eggs

to other women for in vitro fertilization if they themselves had not yet had any children of their own.

From the outside this proposal looks distinctly odd because of its very narrow and irrational focus. It also highlights how unhelpful Latvian political labels can be for understanding politicians' programs. Stepaņenko, an extreme social conservative, was elected from Harmony, a party that is trying as hard as it can to be identified with European Social Democracy. Belēvičs is a socially conservative millionaire and former pharmacy owner whose ideological ties to the kind of left-wing social liberalism represented by Western Green parties is somewhere between tenuous and non-existent.

But be that as it may, Belēvičs' attack on one limited aspect of women's reproductive rights became a rallying point for young, liberally-minded Latvians. When the law came up for a vote in parliament in June 2016, more than 100 people (not an insignificant number by Latvian standards) came out for a protest in front of parliament. This created such consternation in the legislative chamber that the proposal was returned to committee, where it continues to languish to this day.^[11]

More recently, a deputy from the small No Sirds Latvijai (For Latvia With All My Heart) party tried to block a legislative initiative aimed at protecting battered women by allowing the police to launch an investigation even without a formal complaint by the victim. Their attempts to block the law's passage were defeated when women's organizations raised their voices against the party's obstructionism.

At the same time, the Latvian parliament has not been able to ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence, because in the view of many members of parliament the convention somehow undermines traditional gender roles.

Conclusion: hints of a liberal future

Today, Latvian politics are characterized by a kind of unstable stalemate between liberalism and social conservatism. A good deal of symbolic political action takes place at the national level, but neither side has the wherewithal to implement significant legislative changes to further their agenda. Society as a whole seems fairly indifferent to these issues until some politician decides to make something out of them. Even over a quarter of a century after the collapse of Soviet rule, the effects of totalitarianism still linger and are evident in people's widespread alienation from politics and the prevalence of individualistic anomie. This is not an especially hospitable environment for openness and tolerance. At the same time, the population's passivity contributes to the fact that there is little organized or publicly expressed outrage about violations of socially conservative norms.

In this sense, one of the goals of an open society – the creation of a pluralistic public space where various political, social and life-style choices can exist side-by-side – has to a certain extent been achieved in practice in Latvia. As previously noted, the Europride march that took place in Riga in 2015 was a large-scale event attended by thousands of people without any incidents or counter-protests. It was the first time that the pan-European LGBT rights week took place in a state that had once been part of the Soviet Union.

Another element of the open society that has been consistently upheld in Latvia is the freedom of the press and expression. Latvian readers and viewers have access to a full spectrum of opinions, the journalistic community is active in defence of its own rights and freedom of expression in general, and politicians are extremely wary of making any attempts to limit these rights, knowing they will face

significant backlash. The same can be said of academic freedoms: both schools and universities enjoy a high degree of autonomy in setting their curriculums, and scholarly research is carried out without any political limitations.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that this is a negative kind of pluralism. It is more the result of the fact that no one group has the wherewithal to impose its agenda on society as a whole, rather than of a positive commitment to tolerance and openness by the majority.

In view of the general trends in the world and in Central Europe in particular, perhaps that is the best we can hope for right now. This unstable equilibrium also means that relatively small groups of activists can have a significant influence on the decisions made in parliament, because the deputies, who themselves don't feel like they are standing on a particularly stable base of support, are quite sensitive to any publicly visible political activities.

Looking to the future, the security situation will continue to play a key role in Latvian political life, and it has been the determining factor in every significant Latvian political decision with any international ramifications since Latvia regained its independence. The memory of Soviet occupation and the recent experience of seeing Russia invade first Georgia and then Ukraine mean that Latvians are extremely careful not to alienate the large, influential Western countries on which their security, their independence and maybe even their survival depend. Moreover, many Latvians are quite sensitive to the ideological ties between the Putin regime and right-wing movements in other European countries. As long as Russia is perceived as a threat, Putinesque social conservatism will have a harder time putting down roots in Latvia than in the Visegrad countries, which, arguably, do not feel their security situation to be so precarious.

Another big question for the future is how political attitudes will be affected by the coming of age of a younger generation that was born after Latvia regained its independence, has no memory of the Soviet period, lives in the internationalized information space created by the internet, and often has direct experience of life in Western Europe. The events of the last few years may contain some indications that younger people are increasingly open to being mobilized by issues broadly related to social liberalism and the freedom to choose one's own lifestyle. They are certainly less burdened by the legacy of Soviet isolation and prurience.

Will this lead to a revival of avowedly liberal politics in Latvia? It is still too early to say, but it is certainly not impossible.

Footnotes

1. See Daunis Auers, *Comparative Politics and Government in the Baltic States*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 145.
2. For more details on the question of Latvia's early citizenship legislation see Mark Jubelis, *Nationalism and democratic transition: The politics of citizenship and language in post-Soviet Latvia*, Washington: University Press of America, 2001.
3. Hans Slomp, *Europe, A Political Profile: An American Companion to European Politics*, vol. 1, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011, p. 532.
4. The author was one of the founders and worked with *Diena* for 19 years, first as managing editor, then as editorial page editor.
5. Ritums Rozenbergs and Uldis Dreiblats, [Izmeklē Sorosa saistību ar bēgļu kontrabandu uz Eiropu](#), *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze* (30 May 2017), retrieved 27 June 2017.
6. U.S. State Department 2006, [Country Report on Human Rights Practices](#), retrieved 28 June 2017.
7. See the report '[Riga 2015](#)' on the Europride website (26 May 2015), retrieved 28 June 2017; see also '[Gay Pride Riga 2015](#)', YouTube, retrieved 10 July 2017.
8. [Latvia's foreign minister comes out as gay](#), *The Guardian* (7 November 2014), retrieved 1 August 2017.
9. See Christa Pongratz-Lippitt, [Latvian Lutheran Church rules that women cannot be ordained priests](#), *National Catholic Reporter* (10 June 2016), retrieved 20 August 2017.
10. Inga Sprinģe, [Putin's Children](#), *Re:Baltica* (10 January 2016), retrieved 28 June 2017.
11. Madara Fridrihsone, [Saeima atliek lemšanu par jaunu ierobežojumu noteikšņau olšūnu donorēm](#), *Latvijas Radio* (9 June 2016), retrieved 28 June 2017.

