

## Latvia: NATO's November Playground

### Introduction

The small Baltic country of Latvia has had a good year. Its economic growth figures are the highest in the EU. Its president, Vīķe Vaire Freiberga who was hailed as the natural successor to secular saint Vaclav Havel on his retirement came third on the ballot in the race to become the next UN Secretary General. And, on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2006 Mrs. Freiberga welcomed Britain's Queen Elizabeth 11 to Riga on the second stage of her Baltic tour. All that remained to make 2006 an annus mirabilis was the forthcoming NATO summit to be held in Riga from 28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> November.

But, as Queen Elizabeth passed through and thousands of NATO apparatchiks prepared to arrive, many Latvians were going the other way. Emigration from the country is at an all time high and, combined with a low birth rate, threatens the future viability of the state. Despite allegations of renewed imperial ambitions, neighbouring Russia has turned its back on the Baltic States and now exports energy and other goods directly from its own ports thus removing an important component of Latvia's economy and state budget. And, economists both local and from Western countries warn of economic overheating brought on by a uncontrolled, speculative property market.

In this atmosphere, parliamentary elections were held on 7<sup>th</sup> October, the ninth since independence was declared in 1991. Turn out was down on previous elections and polls showed a low level of trust in the country's politicians. Nevertheless, the previous coalition of centre-right parties was re-elected and immediately set about voting themselves substantial bonuses.

BHHRG visited the country during the pre-election period and talked to journalists, MPs, party representatives as well as interviewing the controversial mayor of Ventspils, Aivars Lembergs. The Group returned for the 7<sup>th</sup> October poll and observed voting in Slampe, Talsi and Tukums in the north west of the country. BHHRG has visited Latvia regularly since 1993 when its observers monitored the first post-independence election to the country's parliament (the *Saeima*). Since then, it has investigated the tensions that have flared between local Latvians and the large Russian minority, particularly over a controversial education law passed in 2004 that obliged Russian schools to increase teaching in the Latvian language. In 2003 members of BHHRG also monitored the conduct of the referendum held prior to EU enlargement in 2004.

### Latvia Today

Latvia and its Baltic neighbours Lithuania and Estonia emerged from the former Soviet Union in better shape than most other FSU republics partly due to their later incorporation into the USSR in 1940. For example, infrastructure including roads and public buildings in all three republics was a relatively good condition. In other words, the Baltic States had a head start in the race to catch up with the West. Faith in their future prosperity led the EU to welcome them as new members in 2004.

Latvia - its capital Riga in particular - has been a prominent cultural and industrial centre since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and remained relatively untouched by Soviet planning after World War 11. Although much of Latvia's industry collapsed in the early 1990s as its Soviet market disappeared Riga has re-positioned itself as a hub of the real estate market and as a magnet for low cost airline tourism in the past few years. On the surface, anyway, the city is prosperous full of expensive Western cars and gleaming new shopping centres.

But outside central Riga the picture is very different. Latvia's large agricultural base shrank with the collapse of the collective farms in the early 1990s. Agriculture's share in Latvia's GDP (including fishing) fell from 23.10% (1990) to 4.7% (2001) and suffered further contraction as the New European countries prepared for EU entry. Many small dairy, meat and fish producers could not meet the costs of upgrading and their factories were forced to close. Since 2004 EU agricultural subsidies have been directed by the government to the

mainly Latvian areas in the north west of the country where large farms, many owned by Danish companies, have benefited. Meanwhile rural blight has hit the south and south eastern, more Russian populated regions. Alcoholism is rampant and a rise in drug resistant strains of TB has been recorded by the WHO.

The mayor of Ventspils, Aivars Lembergs, told BHHRG that EU accession had helped the farming sector. If so, it is from a very low base and with yet more pain in store. For example, in 2005 Brussels opened the Union's sugar industry to global competition and prohibited member states from subsidising their sugar producers. Prior to Latvia's accession to the EU Latvia's two largest sugar plants in Jelgava and Liepaja invested 14.7 m. Lats<sup>1</sup> to upgrade their production facilities. By February 2006, they looked set to close. The collapse of the ruble in 1998 had already hit Latvia's exports to Russia. But canned fish (mainly sprats) continued to be exported to the Russian market. However, on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2006 Russia's Agricultural Supervision Service claimed that tinned Latvian fish products contained alarmingly high doses of benzopyrene and imports would stop. Two years ago the Russians built 4 new sprat canning factories in Kaliningrad and have no further need of imports, 62% which come from the Baltics, mainly Latvia.<sup>2</sup> Critics immediately claimed that this was another form of indirect boycott, the same as Russia had imposed already on Moldovan and Georgian wine. Yet, according to *Kommersant* "The Russian agricultural watchdog has launched tests after Latvian authorities themselves [BHHRG italics] withdrew canned fish from stores in Kaliningrad over sanitary reasons in early September".<sup>3</sup> A fortnight later fish canners in Latvia were reporting lay offs.<sup>4</sup>

The most serious blow to Latvia's trade with Moscow came three years ago when, Russia ceased to export oil via the port of Ventspils. The Russians had opened their own oil terminal at Primorsk on the Baltic sea cutting Ventspils out of the equation. In the first half of 2006 Ventspils' annual profits slumped by 45%. The future of the port city controlled by its controversial mayor Aivars Lembergs looked uncertain. In October 2006 Latvia's government sold its 38% share in the Ventspils Nafta oil transporting company to the Vitol Group which has pledged to reinvigorate the port facilities, however there is some suspicion and uncertainty over who controls what in the tangled net of companies attached to the port.

In such an unsettled economic environment and amid widespread poverty, lavish spending on show case events like the NATO summit seemed irresponsible.<sup>5</sup> Local businesses feared that profits would fall dramatically as Riga effectively shut down for two days during the get together. In reply, the government promised that the two day holiday enabled people to follow the summit on their televisions to, no doubt, see how their taxes were being spent.

According to Latvian MP, Jacob Pliners, Estonia turned down the offer to host the summit due to the burden of cost.<sup>6</sup> In fact, membership of NATO itself is viewed by many Latvians as an expensive irrelevance. Couldn't the country have come under a NATO security umbrella for much less than the annual 2% expenditure on defence the benefits from which go into the pockets of Western arms manufacturers? The BBC reported that Latvian peasants were

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<sup>1</sup> 1 LVL = €1.43

<sup>2</sup> "Russia bans Latvian canned fish imports" *Kommersant*  
[http://www.kommersant.com/p715286/Russia\\_Bans\\_Latvian\\_Canned\\_Fish](http://www.kommersant.com/p715286/Russia_Bans_Latvian_Canned_Fish) 21st October, 2006

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> "Ban on imports of Latvian tinned fish into Russia result in mass dismissal in Latvia"  
*Regnum* <http://www.regnum.ru/english/733406.html>

<sup>5</sup> Estimated cost of holding the NATO summit is 15 m. Lats according to the Sampo Bank  
[http://66.102.9.104/search?q=cache:pJvOo2\\_AMicJ:www.sampo.ee/failid/baltikum\\_i\\_majandusylevaade\\_2005\\_4\\_ENG.pdf+repse+knab&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=15&lr=lang\\_en&ie=UTF-8](http://66.102.9.104/search?q=cache:pJvOo2_AMicJ:www.sampo.ee/failid/baltikum_i_majandusylevaade_2005_4_ENG.pdf+repse+knab&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=15&lr=lang_en&ie=UTF-8)

<sup>6</sup> "Leader of Leftist Latvian party discusses goals in advance of election", *Diena*, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2006

being urged to knit mittens as gifts for the prominent statesmen (including President Bush) attending the summit. Sadly, many will not be able to afford the wool.<sup>7</sup>

Distaste for NATO is accompanied by a corresponding lack of enthusiasm for the EU. BHHRG monitored the referendum on EU entry in 2003 and found widespread disillusion about the benefits of joining the bloc. Ordinary passers-by tossed away promotional material handed out by pro-EU campaigners and on 'victory' night, many young Latvians in central Riga burnt the blue and gold starred paper flags provided by the well-funded 'Yes' campaign. In the polling stations visited by BHHRG, few people were voting, but the nationwide absence of electoral registers made it impossible to verify the figures for participation in the poll. In any case, pro-European voters – mainly the young – were voting in favour of EU entry as a way of leaving the country rather than staying the course at home.

### **Emigration – A one way ticket out**

Between 1989 and 2003 the population of Latvia declined by 13%; visitors to the country cannot fail to notice the obvious depopulation of its rural heartlands. Wooden farm houses lie abandoned and shops in many small towns are boarded up. At first, the unemployed migrated to the capital city – a phenomenon repeated in many post Soviet states. But, since 2004 the young and able bodied have taken the opportunity provided by countries like Ireland, the UK and Sweden (which adopted unrestricted entry policies on EU enlargement) to flee altogether. No one knows exactly how many have left but it is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands. Since the low cost airline Ryanair opened services between Latvia and all three countries, a one way ticket can cost as little as €30.

Of the three countries operating open door policies, Ireland has attracted the highest number of Latvian immigrants where they work in the low paid farming, retail and hospitality sectors. Despite an ongoing propaganda campaign that gives an upbeat picture of immigrant-driven economic growth, there are problems as locals see jobs disappearing and their wages undercut. For example, a significant number of young Latvians also work on the ferries that operate between Ireland and the UK. Irish ferry workers demonstrated in 2005 against job losses caused by low wage Latvian workers.<sup>8</sup> Sweden awaits a ruling from the European Court over whether immigrant labourers (mainly New Europeans) can be paid lower wages than Swedish workers.<sup>9</sup> Even Labour Party MPs in the UK once the most enthusiastic promoters of cheap immigrant labour from the New Europe now have their doubts. "The day rate for a 'brickie' [builder] in Southampton has fallen by 50%, which is good news if you are having a kitchen extension built, but if you are a 'brickie' with a family to feed it is not fine at all" according to John Denham, Chairman of the Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee.<sup>10</sup>

But, whatever blessings are enjoyed by the countries of destination for New European immigrants from places like the Baltic States, Slovakia and Poland, the real problems lie at

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Sheeter "No swastikas for Nato mittens" BBC, 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5268950.stm>

<sup>8</sup> Brian Lavery "Dispute Tests Ireland's Tolerance for Globalization", *New York Times*, 27<sup>th</sup> December 2005  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/27/business/worldbusiness/27strike.html?ei=5090&en=f1add312dd220e3f&ex=1293339600&adxnnl=1&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss&adxnnlx=1161263579-NTBANOkCbSpakYAEwxhtGw&pagewanted=print>

<sup>9</sup> "Dispute over pay of Latvian building workers in Sweden"  
<http://www.eurofound.eu.int/2005/01/feature/1v0501101f.html>

<sup>10</sup> "Influx from EU 'slashing wages', *Daily Mail*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006

home. Children can be left behind with elderly grand parents and marriages fall apart as one partner goes abroad seeking work.<sup>11</sup> Statisticians in the New Europe can now point to falling levels of unemployment – due to the flight of the young jobless - but serious problems lie ahead as the future tax base in countries like Latvia is eroded. Aivars Lembergs cynically suggested that some people like George Soros would actually like to see the country emptied of people, presumably so that it becomes a *tabula rasa* for business interests unimpeded by messy human beings .

Ironically, there is now a shortage of qualified labour in Latvia and politicians have proposed importing workers from poorer post-Communist countries, like Ukraine, to make up the shortfall. At the moment local employers are having to pay higher wages to keep up with inflation and hold on to their workers. There are recruitment problems in the public services too – for example, bus drivers have left the Baltic States and Poland to work in the West and Latvia has lost 1000 policemen in the last few years due to low wages. The only growth industry is in the state and local bureaucracies. Another problem is that young Latvians like many of their contemporaries in the former Communist world are less well qualified and, therefore, less employable than they once were. A Soviet education was targeted at a future career and, therefore, laid much emphasis on science and technology as well as rote learning. Now, only 16% of high school graduates study professions that are in demand, the rest chose degrees in humanities and the social sciences. Latvia has the second highest number of undergraduates per capita in the EU (double the number 15 years ago)<sup>12</sup> but professions, like medicine, are in crisis; there are some communities without a doctor and nurses are in short supply as all nursing schools outside Riga were closed in the early 1990s.

Money repatriated from abroad is included in the state's statistics as an 'export' which gives an inaccurate picture of the economic health of the country. BHHRG was also told that many emigrants were contributing to the country's economic well being by buying property back home, which seemed implausible as real estate is expensive and the sums of money earned picking mushrooms in Ireland insufficient to buy more than a very small wooden shack. A more likely scenario is that the money sent home enables parents left behind to pay their mortgage debts. BHHRG was told that once they had saved enough money, emigrants would return to Latvia but, experience from elsewhere - the US in the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. for example - shows that the flow tends to be one way, once.

But the flood of young people leaving the country to work picking fruit and cleaning hotel bedrooms is the more wholesome end of the emigration story. Sex trafficking and straightforward prostitution is a thriving industry in the Baltics with Latvia at the fore. BHHRG always notices a few young ladies with their 'minders' on flights from the Baltic States coming into the UK. In March 2006, several prostitutes, including Latvian girls, were released from a brothel in Southampton by police.<sup>13</sup> Riga itself is awash in poll dancing cafes and sex clubs; numerous young girls (and boys) tout for trade in front of the Freedom Monument, particularly at weekends. BHHRG watched as a young lady (who must have been a very valuable commodity) was led by her pimp through the Friday evening crowd in the old town guarded by a denim-clad security detail.

Riga's Saturnalia has been compounded by Ryanair's customers who come the other way – mainly young British and Irish males on stag parties motivated by the sexual free for all and cheap beer. Latvia's capital city with its charming late Medieval centre and handsome art

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<sup>11</sup> Dan Bilefsky "Migration's flip side: All roads lead out" *International Herald Tribune*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2005, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/12/06/news/latvia.php>

<sup>12</sup> There were 571 students per 1,000 inhabitants in the 2005 academic year

<sup>13</sup> David Harrison "Sex trafficking operation results in 50 arrests" *Daily Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/03/26/wtraffik26.xml>

nouveau buildings should have become a magnet for up market, cultural travellers from the West. Now, its main customers are the most notorious binge drinkers in Europe (the young British male) and Swedish tourists filling their suitcases with cheap vodka. Latvia is an expensive country as its currency (the Lat) is pegged to the Euro but beer, vodka and girls are still cheaper than they are in the West.

Some politicians protested about the sleaze which they (quite rightly) think damages the city's 'image' and a law was passed earlier in 2006 to cut the number of gaming halls (*Speles Zales*) in the capital, and, in the summer as the visits of Queen Elizabeth and NATO drew closer, restrictions limiting sex advertising in Riga's old town were imposed meaning that the neon signs outside the Roxy Club and Dolls Disco were turned off. But, will the restrictions continue once the foreign heads of state have departed ?

### **The Economy: Boom or Bust?**

Impressive statistics for growth – put at the highest in Europe – disguise serious, underlying problems in the Latvian economy. For one thing, figures for growth start from a negative point as, like everywhere else in the former USSR production plunged after 1991. More troubling is the fact that inflation remains stubbornly high (officially, over 7%). Business taxes are low which has attracted Swedish companies to register in Latvia for tax purposes thus further distorting the country's actual revenue from domestic taxation. In fact, the spectacular figures for growth are based not on an increase in production but on a post EU accession credit bonanza. This has not only enabled people to purchase foreign imports of a kind that would otherwise be out of their reach it has also offered them easy access to mortgage loans. This and the absence of taxation on the profits from real estate transactions have fuelled an orgy of property speculation which even Latvia's well wishers doubt can continue. All such booms have collapsed in the past, for example in Japan in the late 1980s, while a property meltdown is underway in the US - countries with a much stronger economic base than Latvia.<sup>14</sup>

The hub of the real estate market is in central Riga where many handsome, late 19<sup>th</sup> c. apartment buildings have been bought by speculators and refurbished as offices. More of them are likely to become available in the near future as Riga City Council abandons rent controls in 2007 making it inevitable that poor and elderly inhabitants unable to pay high commercial rents will be evicted "According to Riga City Council Housing Committee some 20,000 people will lose their homes in the first half of next year. There are fears that the number is a gross underestimate".<sup>15</sup> While art nouveau exteriors have benefited from a good clean and repairs to their masonry, often the interiors are ripped out and replaced by clinical, Scandinavian - style design features. Sometimes the façade of a building is all that remains of the original. When the Hansapank built the Saules Akmens tower for its headquarters next to the Daugava River, UNESCO officials warned of serious threats to the skyline of Riga – the city is a world heritage site (for the moment). But, unsuitable development is also creeping into the old town where a glass and concrete shopping centre, the Galerija Centrs, opened in August 2006. Although designed to 'harmonize' with the local architecture, it is probably marks the beginning of the end for the old town's architectural autonomy.

The ideal client for a newly refurbished office is a foreigner who may be thinking of 'buying to let' - the British are keen investors in overseas property. Often the property will be part of an overall investment package rather than a second home – Latvia's six months of cold weather make it a less attractive destination than other new EU countries like Bulgaria and (prospective member) Croatia. But, analysts have warned that the letting market in Latvia could be saturated already as the rents are too high for local businesses.<sup>16</sup> The problem as many point out is – who is the prospective 'end user' for the glut of offices and new apartment blocks ? High prices rule most ordinary Latvians out of the market so the real

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<sup>14</sup> For a good analysis of the situation, see, Jeff Sommers "Inflation and Baltic property" *Baltic Times*, 12-18 October, 2006

<sup>15</sup> "Thousands Fear Homelessness" *The Baltic Guide*, October 2006

<sup>16</sup> Dorian Ziedonis "Experts: Foreign demand will keep real estate prices afloat" *Baltic Times*, July 6-12, 2006

estate industry depends on foreign investors who, likewise, must hope that the bubble doesn't burst. As 75% of foreign buyers have never visited Latvia they could be in for a shock.

Local politicians often have extensive property interests of their own and many of them don't like art nouveau Riga. The leader of Latvia's First Party, Ainars Slesers, was accused of a conflict of interest for using his resources as a politician to secure the right to rent and build. Later he sold the shares in the company renting the land and admits making 3 m. Lats profit.<sup>17</sup> "We need to put up more buildings" said Slesers and think about "how to tear down old buildings"<sup>18</sup> He added that "it was dangerous to stop the process of housing construction" and strongly opposed any tax increases on real estate transactions.

There are also grandiose plans to build a new arts centre on the banks of the Daugava River next to a state-of-the-art National Library estimated to cost 200 m. Lats. MP Nikolai Kabanovs pointed out to BHHRG that there are only c. 100,000 books and manuscripts in the Latvian state collection presently housed in a building in the old town entirely suitable for the task. However, the scheme for a new library presents numerous spin offs (building contracts etc.) for local politicians while the old town building is valuable real estate.

But, the most rapacious pursuit of real estate engendered wealth isn't in Riga at all but the nearby seaside town of Jurmala. Rich German business men from Riga built their holiday villas there in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and it was a favourite destination for workers during Communist times. In other words, apart from a few Soviet-style concrete eye sores, Jurmala remained unspoilt - a lovely, wistful place with broad avenues and an unspoilt sandy beach surrounded by Scotch pines. A spectacular natural park abuts it with reed beds and lakes, home to many rare birds and wild flowers.

The speculators aided by politicians are now gouging out the place. Some villas were sold in the mid 1990s as Latvia's convoluted property laws unravelled and have been refurbished often crudely with plastic window frames, false Doric pillars and unsightly acrylic paint. Even worse, some have been painted bright yellow and pink. The owners of some of these mansions can only be guessed at - a 'no guns' sign appears outside the restaurant ...ferocious guard dogs outside another. The more successful developer will have managed to destroy an old building altogether in order to construct a new apartment complex on the site.

Locals are horrified by what is happening. They fear that a new construction plan will enable developers to build on the beach front - it was rumoured that the president's husband Imants Freibergs was eyeing up a property deal (the presidential residence is in Jurmala). In May 2006 Ainars Slesers was forced to quit his post as Transport Minister after what was said to be improper telephone calls to members of Jurmala Council to influence their decisions in an upcoming debate on future construction contracts. On 29<sup>th</sup> June, the council passed the plan allocating land for new building which "reduces green areas for construction"<sup>19</sup>. Several political parties were involved including New Era which expelled 3 party members for "corruption" for voting in favour of the development plan, no doubt in an attempt to occupy the high moral ground. As for Latvia's Greens, they have remained strangely silent about the main 'green' issue in the country today.

## **Politics in Latvia**

### **The roots of inertia**

In the late 1980s all three Baltic states were presented as plucky little countries, aching to restore their independence after 50 years of Soviet occupation. By 1991 they were free, yet, within a short time they were all clamouring to enter both the EU and the NATO alliance,

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<sup>17</sup> "Latvian daily questions LPP, TB/LNNK leaders on tax policies, naturalization", *Diena*, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2006

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<sup>19</sup> "Fearing graft, New Era sacks three Jurmala officials" *Baltic Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> July, 2006

organizations that would both limit their sovereignty and impose heavy financial burdens on their societies. And, one by one, they elected presidents who were effectively foreign citizens.

Parliament elects the presidents of Latvia and Estonia. In 1999 it took seven rounds of unsuccessful voting for the *Saeima* to elect Vīķe Vaire Freiberga, a Latvian national who had fled the country with her parents in 1945 and ended up in Quebec as a Canadian citizen. The new president of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, a former US citizen, was born in Sweden (in 1950) where his parents had fled at war's end. He received psychology degrees from Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania and was elected President of Estonia by an electoral college on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2006 as parliament had failed to agree on any of the candidates on 3 occasions. Even though the Supreme Court agreed that there had been irregularities in the conduct of the voting, the National Election Committee rejected their decision and went ahead to endorse Ilves.<sup>20</sup>

Lithuania is the only Baltic country whose president is elected by universal suffrage. The present incumbent, Valdas Adamkus, is another refugee who fled at the end of the war in 1944 and later spent his adult life in Chicago. He was firmly rejected in his bid for re-election in 2003 only to be re-instated in an election held a year later following the contrived impeachment of his successor, Rolandas Paksas.

BHHRG has found that people in all three Baltic States feel a disconnect with their North American heads of state. Although gushing polls regularly state that Mrs. Freiberga is the most 'popular' politician in the country, even Latvian nationalist MPs were less than enthusiastic about her in discussions with the Group. Of course, the presence of large numbers of post WW2 Baltic emigrés in both the US and Canada gives superficial legitimacy to the candidacy of these 'foreigners' still, the impression is clear – that the Baltic States (including even the most craven politicians) cannot be trusted to elect their head of state. Washington chooses who will win as they also did in Iraq where Iraqi emigrés who had lived outside the country for up to 30 years returned to take up leading political posts. This compliance with the US political agenda was best illustrated when the Baltics joined other 'New Europeans' in 2002 to support the American invasion of Iraq. While 'old European' countries, like France and Germany, remained opposed to the war, the Vilnius Ten, as they were dubbed, penned a Brezhnev-era style letter backing the US plan.

Mrs. Freiberga's term in office ends in 2007 and there are already signs that the next candidate has been lined up, only this time she is a 'local', albeit one with excellent NOW credentials. Sandra Kalniete, a New Era MP, "served as Latvia's ambassador to the UN (from 1993 to 1997), France (from 1997 to 2000) and UNESCO (from 2000 to 2002). She became Foreign Minister of Latvia in November 2002 and served in this position until being nominated as Latvia's EU Commissioner in 2004"<sup>21</sup>. Mrs. Kalniete recently published her memoirs which have been translated into English already.<sup>22</sup>

Latvia is even more politically inert than its Baltic neighbours who have occasionally thrown a spanner into the works of the Western imposed agenda. Left wing parties in Lithuania and Estonia have been part of several ruling coalitions since 1991 whereas Latvia has never had a government with a Social Democratic programme; the results of the latest elections held on 7<sup>th</sup> October are just more of the same with the previous coalition of right wing parties being returned to power. This is extremely peculiar as it is generally accepted that Latvia is the poorest nation in the EU.

Some of the reasons go back to the dawn of independence in 1991. At that time Lithuania with a small Russian population granted citizenship to everyone. Estonia had a larger number (250,000) of ethnic Russians leading it to impose restrictions on citizenship although it later agreed to allow its non-citizen Russian population to vote in local elections. The largest number of Russians in the Baltic States live in Latvia most having emigrated from other Soviet

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<sup>20</sup> Joel Alas "Supreme Court challenge fails to unseat Ilves" *The Baltic Times*, October 5-11, 2006

<sup>21</sup> "Sandra Kalniete – a Candidate for President" <http://www.allaboutlatvia.com/article/517/sandra-kalniete-a-candidate-for-president>

<sup>22</sup> Sandra Kalniete "With dancing shoes in Siberian snows" Museum of Occupation, Riga 2006

states in the post-war years to work in the burgeoning industrial sector. Despite the fact that many of them voted for Latvian independence on the understanding that they would be living in an inclusive state, the new country soon changed tack and imposed stiff restrictions which culminated in a Citizen Law (1998) which requires an applicant to have lived in the country continuously for 5 years and also pass examinations in Latvian history and culture (for a fee). Non-citizens cannot vote and there are whole areas in which they are not able to work, including the civil service. Legislation came later (in 2004) the aim of which was to eradicate Russian as a language of instruction in schools and further educational establishments.

Despite the fact that such discriminatory legislation flew in the face of all Council of Europe as well as other international norms, Latvia escaped serious condemnation and continued with its policy of apartheid. The Latvian language lacked a vocabulary of sophisticated scientific and medical terms. Much Latvian folklore was finessed, so to speak, by Germans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; its history, particularly between 1940-45, has been carefully rewritten to apologise for Nazi collaborators, for instance. Nevertheless, the manufacturing of a pure Latvian identity, untainted by foreign influence, was a necessary propaganda tool for the New World Order to keep Moscow at bay.

According to Janis Trubins, former Deputy Director of the Latvian KGB, as the downfall of the Soviet Union approached, the Agency moved to control both the nationalists and their opponents. "One organisation was created, then another one – as a response – an alternative" ... "they evolved as the Popular Front and the Interfront".<sup>23</sup> Later, the PF disintegrated and For the Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK [Latvian National Independence Movement] became the nationalists' political vehicle. The left in Latvia coalesced around the successor parties to the Interfront and has always been anchored in the Russian community. In the 2006 election a broader based leftist coalition, the Harmony Centre, included some Latvian components and fared better than the established 'Human Rights in a United Latvia' Russian party.

There is one ethnic Latvian left-wing political party, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party, which gained 14 seats in the 1998 Saeima elections. Its candidate, Juris Bojars, became mayor of Riga in 2001. However, since then it has failed to reach the 5% threshold for representation in parliament and lost control of Riga council in 2005. Bojars is prevented from standing for parliament due to his KGB past.

Therefore, the main bifurcation between right and left has continued to mirror the ethnic bifurcation between Latvians and Russians. Over the years c. 115,000 Russians have gained Latvian citizenship – by fair means or foul. It is quite common to hear tales of people 'paying' for the citizenship documents. Nevertheless, the country's main institutions are overwhelmingly run by Latvians. The irony is, that deprived of a desk and a pot plant, Latvia's Russian population has had to earn a living in the real world. And, no doubt, with the help of connections in the former USSR many of them have created both small (and large) businesses. It is no secret that many of Latvia's most successful businessmen are of Russian origin. Although there is poverty in the Russian regions of the country, particularly around the southern town of Daugavpils, it is probably safe to say that poverty is more widespread among ethnic Latvians.

On 7<sup>th</sup> October 2006 two women voters in Talsi told BHHRG's observers that it was important to vote because the Russians "still had imperial ambitions". This corroborated the generally accepted view that "any left wing party is automatically perceived as being Russian in Latvia".<sup>24</sup> Aivars Lembergs told BHHRG that 'propaganda' fuelled this attitude and although he supports Latvian independence he claims that discriminatory policies towards the Russian community are counter-productive and unworkable pointing out that minority schools still teach in Russian despite the 2004 law that legislated for Latvian language teaching.

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<sup>23</sup> Janis Trubins "The Popular Front of Latvia and Independence from the Vantage Point of a KGB Leader" The Baltic Way to Freedom, Zelta grauds, Riga, 2005

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## Parties coalitions and black sheep

According to observers the 5<sup>th</sup> (1993) Saeima elections “turned into a redistribution of the financial clout of various political groupings “ ...”the distrust that was born back then, at the beginning of the Awakening, has not disappeared over the years”.<sup>25</sup>

In 1991 Latvia restored its 1922 constitution and readopted the voting system used in the First Republic. However, the original unfettered approach to proportional representation which had led to 32 political parties being represented in parliament and 18 governments between 1922-1934 was abandoned and a 5% threshold for representation in the 100 seat Saeima introduced. Other amendments followed, for example the original provision for two days of voting was dropped – unlike the Czech Republic and Slovakia which still vote on two days as was provided for in the pre-war (Czechoslovak) constitution. Elections are now held under the 1995 Elections to the Saeima law.

Since independence there have been 12 governments in Latvia. Many have collapsed during their tenure as junior parties have left the governing coalition – the last government led by prime minister Aigars Kalvitis of the Peoples Party became a minority administration in April 2006 when a junior partner, New Era, went into opposition. At the same time, MPs have drifted from one party or bloc to the other during their parliamentary tenure. In other words, if people vote for A because he is a member of party B there is nothing to stop him joining party C after taking his seat in the Saeima. This is especially irregular in a country like Latvia where the voting system invites voters to tick the names of candidates they would most like to represent that party in parliament.

19 political parties and coalitions participated in the 7<sup>th</sup> October poll which elected a government for a 4-year tenure. The ones with the highest pre-election ratings according to pollsters were: New Era (Jaunas laiks) ... 12% ; Union of Greens and Farmers (Zalo un Zemnieku Savieniba) ... 11.2%; For Human Rights in a United Latvia (PCTVL) ... 9.3%; People's Party (Tautas Partija) ... 8.9%; Fatherland and Freedom (Tevzemei un brivibai) ... 6%. Other possible contenders for seats were: the Latvian Social Democratic Party, Latvia's First Party and the Harmony Centre.<sup>26</sup>

In the run up to the October 2006 election it was reported that “this was the first time there were no new parties” as though any of the ‘new parties’ that appeared in the past offered anything significantly different in an already crowded field of the ‘centre right’ that analysts already proclaimed would “gain a parliamentary majority – as has happened in every election since Latvia regained independence”.<sup>27</sup> But, in established democracies voters do not wait with baited breath for the appearance of ‘new parties’. In fact, such a notion indicates a failure to establish a proper political system - as in a banana republic. Local analysts feared that the turnout at the election would be low, partly due to the lack of such a ‘new party’ while others claimed that “parties were still hunting for issues to mobilize voters” and that “the campaign was without burning issues”.<sup>28</sup> The more realistic observers claimed that “the big problem is that (the major parties) are not discussing the hard questions”<sup>29</sup> which would seem to be emigration, inflation, property speculation and the need to create jobs.

However, even local political pundits shied away from entering this particular snake pit. The “hard questions” referred to here mean imposing more pain on society in the name of ‘reform’.

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<sup>25</sup> Baiba Petersone “The Geneology of Distrust. Latvia’s Independence Movements – Collaboration and Controversy” The Baltic Way to Freedom, *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> Polling data from the SKDS agency, Riga. Others provided slightly different variations on this theme.

<sup>27</sup> Ben Nimmo “Latvian parties hunt of issues as election looms” Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2006

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

These analysts even explained away a likely low turnout as a reflection of Latvia's return to Europe where the numbers voting have also declined in the past 10 years.

Perhaps the most unsatisfactory element is the less than opaque way Latvia's political parties recruit members. They often have vestigial local organizations some of which, according to Freedom House, "only appear before an election". Membership of political parties stands at 15,000 (0.9%) of the population. According to ZSS's Bruno Treimanis, the party's membership has actually fallen from 4000 to 1,500. It seems that members are 'invited' to join a party - there doesn't seem to be any system for ordinary citizens to apply for membership.<sup>30</sup> With this in mind BHHRG asked voters on 7<sup>th</sup> October what influenced their choice when voting. People admitted that there was little difference between many parties contesting the election and that they based their choice on 'personalities'.

In the pre-election period the leading 'personalities' pitched their campaigns at their rivals' purported corrupt activities. Former leader of the New Era Party and the first head of the National Bank at Latvia's independence, Einars Repse, was loathed by many leaders of the other centre right parties who, no doubt, were jealous of the relatively easy ride the party got from the media; Mr. Lembergs made no secret of his dislike for Repse. No doubt, underlying business rivalries fuel distrust: in a small country like Latvia the pie to be divided between politicians has contracted many of whom have turned to feeding at the trough of the real estate market to feather their nests.

As BHHRG has pointed out on numerous occasions, voters in post-Communist societies are regularly regaled with allegations of corruption by their politicians. The truth is irrelevant – often it is discovered at a later date that the allegations are false. For example, in 1997 the President of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus, was accused of, among other things, having illegally purchased a villa in Switzerland an allegation which later proved totally false. For the past few years stirring up dirt on politicians has resonated with people reduced to poverty by post-Communist reforms but impotent to change anything other than kick out the previous government. Recent falls in voter turnout show that this strategy, based on an appeal to universal sentiments of envy entwined with disgust, is failing to hit the target. However, there are those who claim that low turnouts are a sign of 'voter satisfaction' pointing to affluent Western countries (like the U.K. and U.S.) where a similar phenomenon has taken place.

Foreign oversight of political corruption is far more intense in Latvia than in the neighbouring Baltic states, suggesting that the West does not trust the Latvian political elite, despite the fact that, superficially, it offers unconditional support to the Euro-Atlantic policy agenda. Russia's growing economic clout and its leverage in the energy sector leads to suspicions that deals could still be done behind the backs of Washington and Brussels. After all, Russia has business interests in Latvia. Is it possible to be entirely confident that old, pre-1991 connections won't be re-ignited for a price? On 3<sup>rd</sup> November, Latvia's Economy Minister Aigars Stokenbergs returned from Moscow and reported that he "had talks with Russian companies about building an oil refinery in Latvia. But I am not authorized to reveal names and volumes".<sup>31</sup> When Hungary's prime minister Ferenc Gurszczany claimed to have reached a deal with Russia for a new pipeline – Bluestream 2 – that would transit Hungary, embarrassing tape recordings emerged which resulted in a crisis that could still claim Gurszczany's political scalp.

Such concerns make it important to keep Latvia's leading political players firmly stuck, like frightened rabbits, in the headlights. So, the two influential NGOs, Providus and the Latvian branch of Transparency International (Delna), both partially funded by Soros foundations, Western embassies and USAID mercilessly expose their dubious activities. In 2002,

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<sup>30</sup>Freedom House "Nations in Transit", 2004, <http://66.102.9.104/search?q=cache:Mr6kr6S11-EJ:unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/NISPAcee/UNPAN016580.pdf+repse+jurmala+property&hl=en&ct=clnk&ccd=11&ie=UTF-8>

<sup>31</sup>"Latvian Economy Minister analyses options for energy partnership with Russia" *Diena* 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2006

another anti-corruption organization was launched - the Bureau to Prevent and Combat Corruption (KNAB). Some observers have alleged that KNAB is partisan and too closely associated with the New Era party which set it up in the first place. However, KNAB has also looked into Mr. Repse's business dealings. Although the results of their investigation promised in July 2006 have not yet appeared it shows that no one is exempt from the corruption inquisitors.

Another lever used to compromise politicians is the proposal to open Latvia's KGB files. Although the president has opposed such a move and the original date for publication (November 2006) has been moved forward, the Saeima finally voted to publish them in March 2007. Opponents say the files are incomplete and only contain information from the 1980s. They allege that the move is aimed at taking peoples' minds off social issues and will result in an unhealthy witch hunt.<sup>32</sup>

Critics have pointed out the interconnections between journalists and the Soros NGOs. For example, the editor-in-chief of *Diena*, Sarmita Elerte is chair of the Soros Fund Latvia. During the election campaign, *Diena* conducted long, probing interviews with party leaders that were harder hitting than similar undertakings by Western journalists. But, however admirable it is to put politicians on the spot, there was often a menacing undertone to these interviews and the subject often gave the impression of being interrogated by the police rather than a journalist.

For example, there was something shamelessly partisan in the way *Diena's* journalists laid into Aivars Lembergs and Alfreds Rubiks, Latvia's former Communist boss and leader of the Latvian Socialist Party. And, while Ainars Slesers was interrogated pitilessly about his business dealings, *Diena's* journalists were quick to defend Einars Repse who had actually killed a passer by during the election campaign.

The disparate nature of the parties making up several of the coalitions competing in the elections led to confusion and criticism, something exploited by *Diena's* journalists. The Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS) was in coalition with Lembergs' party, For Latvia and Ventspils. According to one analyst: "It doesn't have a clear line of campaign since often the parties leaders disagree with one another". *Diena* managed to expose a level of discomfort with the party's unexpected choice of Lembergs, to be its candidate for prime minister if it formed a government. Mr. Lembergs is supposed to be the second most popular person in the country after the president and therefore had 'voter recognition' and a reputation for getting things done by transforming Ventspils into something of a showcase. As if by magic, allegations of bribery and money laundering were conjured up relating to events that took place ten years ago, between 1993 and 1995. He was charged and bail of 1 million Lats (€1.43 m.) was demanded, although Lembergs insists he didn't and couldn't pay such a sum.

BHHRG interviewed Aivars Lembergs in the pre election period. He claimed that there was a seamless connection between the "Soros people", *Diena* and TV channels 1 and 2. Soros-sponsored Providus and Transparency International have concentrated their fire on him for some time, according to Lembergs, because "Mr. Soros is interested in buying Ventspils Nafta and the Latvian natural gas company, Latvijasgaz". He also claimed that Einars Repse's New Era party controlled many of the organs of state - he named the constitutional tribunal - and also the anti-corruption bureau KNAB.

Another target of *Diena's* probing was Ainars Slesers, the leader of Latvia's First Party and the Transport Minister in the previous government who was forced to resign after being accused of telephoning councillors to influence the outcome of local elections in the resort town of Jurmala. The former leader of the Peoples Party (the previous and now re-elected governing party) Andris Skele was also implicated in what became known as Jurmalagate. Skele had previously resigned as PM on corruption charges. In May 2006 allegations and counter-allegations flowed. "In an attempt to further discredit the party, MP Maris Gulbis told

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<sup>32</sup> "KGB files set for publication in March" *The Baltic Times*, November 2-8, 2006

Parliament that Slesers has offered him money to join the party” ..”. “Slesers responded ...that Gulbis had ordered a raid on a night club under his influence”.<sup>33</sup>

Latvia's First Party fought the election together with the previous party-of-power Latvia's Way. Latvia's First is sometimes called the "Priests Party" for its reputed closeness to the clergy. Although Latvia is, officially Lutheran there are Roman Catholics in the south west of the country while the Russian population is overwhelmingly Orthodox. And, like the other Baltic States, Latvia has also promoted what it claims are its ancient pagan traditions which sit somewhat uncomfortably with mainstream Christianity. Ultimately, like many other modern societies, both east and west, Latvia is a largely secular state and the electoral benefits attached to something that calls itself the 'Priests Party' must be negligible – for the voters anyway

Slesers and Latvia's First Party were also put under the microscope for their response to the shenanigans that surrounded the holding of a Gay Pride march in July 2006. Local authorities in Warsaw and Moscow have banned similar marches and although it was permitted in 2005, the Riga City Council banned the Pride in 2006. Nevertheless, a group of gays and lesbians organised a series of events on 22<sup>nd</sup> July which led to scuffles between the participants and anti-gay protestors who were, allegedly, organised by the evangelical New Generation church, whose headquarters are in Massachusetts and whose leader Alexei Ledyayev, has 'prayer breakfasted' with George Bush.

The anti-Pride protestors allegedly stalked the Gays as they held various events, including a church service led by a defrocked gay priest Maris Sants throwing eggs and excrement at the participants. Later, they tried to stop them holding a gathering at the Latvija Hotel. Neither side in this minor conflict was blameless. Despite their profile as outraged Christians, the anti-Gay protestors wore suggestive T shirts while the pro-Pride contingent seemed to consist largely of foreigners, including members of the European parliament from Denmark and Sweden as well as the British ambassador. One Pride organiser was proud to announce that "Throughout all of this, I was also regularly on the phone with our friend from the American Embassy, informing him of all the news I was receiving"<sup>34</sup>

People in Russia and the former Communist bloc are less tolerant of public manifestations of homosexuality than they are in the West. However, in a city like Riga awash in sex clubs and prostitution it is hard to see how the small Pride march could add anything to the already high level of offensiveness. It is debatable as to whether the occasion demanded the presence of European politicians and diplomats. Would they take to the streets to attract attention to the issues that seriously affect the lives of ordinary Latvians, like the poverty and the property scams? In truth, this was a bogus issue far removed from people's every day concerns. In the pre-election period some nationalist MPs had introduced amendments to a new employment law which seemed to curtail homosexual rights, but they were overturned. In fact, there seem to be no problems for Gay people in the Latvian work place.

The Harmony Centre also attracted searing criticism from *Diena's* journalists. It is a Russian leaning coalition which included the People's Harmony Party, New Centre, Daugavpils City Party and the Latvian Socialist Party, led by former Communist Party boss, Arnolds Rubiks. ZSS's Bruno Treimanis told BHHRG that HC was a party of "Jews". Although Rubiks cannot sit in parliament (he was convicted of treason in 1991 and spent 6 years in jail) the party had 5 members in the previous *Saeima*. HC was attacked bitterly for including Rubiks party in its coalition even though BHHRG has found that many Latvians still admire the former Communist boss and mayor of Riga.

Even though *Diena* itself was softer in its approach to New Era, Einars Repse had been accused of property scams during the course of the previous government. Between 2002- 4

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<sup>33</sup> "MPs show dark side of legislative work" *Baltic Times*, 18-24 May, 2006

<sup>34</sup> See, Gaston Lacombe, Chairman of the Board of Mozaika, <http://www.mozaika.lv/index.php?part=2&part2=17&us=10628549&lng=en>

he took on millions of euros in loans for investments and in December 2005 resigned as Defence Minister after the anti-corruption bureau said they would investigate his property portfolio. During 2006 Repse was sidelined by his own party members even though he remained the darling of the media elite. On 20<sup>th</sup> September, in the run up to the election, he ran over and killed a pedestrian on the Riga - Daugavpils highway. In most Western democracies the killing of a, no doubt, poor and disadvantaged member of society by a wealthy politician driving an SUV would provoke outrage. Not in Latvia. The media blamed the pedestrian for getting in the way. *Diena* was outraged when the ZSS leader, Indulis Emsis, dared to compare Mr. Lembergs' problems with the law (he has not yet been convicted of anything) with the undisputed fact that Repse had killed someone.<sup>35</sup>

A cap on campaign funding meant that there were few election posters around the country. Latvia's First/Latvia's Way had some in prominent positions in Riga – including a rocket blasting off on behalf of Mr. Slesers which caused understandable mirth. But, critics charged that bogus NGOs had been set up as fronts for the Peoples' Party (something called the "Society for Freedom of Speech") and Latvia's First Party which received money and paid for expensive campaign ads on local TV.<sup>36</sup> Voters and commission chairmen told BHHRG that there had been little campaigning by either candidates or parties – anyway, the practice of meeting voters is almost unknown in the former Communist world. The PR system means that politicians and parties have little, if any, connections with their constituencies.

Russian language papers (*Chas*, *Telegraf* and *Vesti Segodnya*) supported Russian parties while Latvian newspapers like *Latvijas Avize* supported the 'centre right' parties. *Neatkariga* reputedly owned by Lembergs supported the ZZS while the leading broadsheet *Diena* backed New Era, the main party of the elites.

## Polling Day

The Latvian voting system is deeply flawed and more open to fraud than any other EU member state in this Group's experience.

The absence of voters registers (criticized by BHHRG in 1993 and noted again at the EU referendum ten years later) makes it difficult to judge the overall conduct of elections in Latvia. A Latvian citizen can vote anywhere in the country. He/she goes to a polling station, shows a valid passport which is stamped to confirm that this person has voted. Meanwhile, the voter's name is added to a hand written list compiled by a member of the electoral commission (there are several commission members compiling the lists). The thinking behind this unsatisfactory arrangement was to make it easier for people travelling or away from home to vote. But, ordinary Latvians, particularly the rural poor, do not "travel around" and, in October, few were likely to be away in the country or at the coast. There were fewer polling stations anyway in rural areas.

BHHRG noted that there was little public transport in the countryside – for example, there were none of the ubiquitous bus stops on main roads visible, for example, in neighbouring Belarus. So, it was no surprise to find a large coach parked outside the polling station in Tukums. But, who had laid on the transport? A group of people from the coach later enjoyed a three course lunch in a restaurant next to this polling station. It was the only time BHHRG encountered ordinary Latvians eating out apart from in Riga. During the campaign it was noted that a "bus bringing people from Daugavpils to lunch at the Lido restaurant [in Riga] was paid for by the LPP/LC".<sup>37</sup> In May 2006 the mayor of Rezekne in the Latgale region was fined for vote buying before local elections.

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<sup>35</sup> "Leader of Latvian Green, Farmer Party discusses campaign goals, national issues", *Diena*, 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2006

<sup>36</sup> See, Delna Latvia [http://www.transparency.org/press\\_releases\\_2006\\_08\\_03](http://www.transparency.org/press_releases_2006_08_03)

<sup>37</sup> "Latvian report: Rightist parties do not know how to speak to Russian voters", *Riga Neatkariga*, 29<sup>th</sup> September 2006

The system of voting has remained largely unchanged since 1922. Latvia is divided up into five electoral districts each with their own party lists printed on a separate piece of paper. The voter takes the ballot paper of his/her party of choice and puts it into the envelope provided - the number of envelopes in the ballot box equals the number of voters. Precinct chairwomen (few were men) gave a figure for the number of people eligible to vote in their region which must have been a nominal figure, at best, as they estimated that 1000 (in Talsi), 100 (in Slampe), for example, had left to work abroad. In places the number of envelopes (and ballot papers) ordered by a particular polling station bore no relation to the likely number of voters. For example, 800 people had voted in Slampe in 2002 yet this polling station received 1500 envelopes in 2006.

The voter could also tick (or cross out) 3 names on their preferred list, adding to the complication. Large numbers of extra ballot papers were left lying around, often out of the commission's sight. Presumably, they were for people who changed their minds but it would have been easy for someone to help themselves and vote twice or take them and vote elsewhere.

Passports were stamped although, in Talsi, BHHRG noted that this started in earnest when their observers arrived. It would not have been difficult for a commission member to either ignore or forget this rule, thus enabling someone to vote twice or vote on someone else's behalf – perhaps for one of the thousands who had gone West.

Figures given for turnout reflected the lower level of participation for this election although 62% still voted – as one commentator wryly remarked, people “still believe in miracles”. There was also a low turnout by Latvians working abroad illustrating, perhaps, their lack of interest in what happened back home. Only 542 Latvians voted in Ireland. Even the enthusiasm of emigré Latvians in the US, Canada and Australia (who have dual citizenship) seems to have diminished – half as many voted than they did in 1998. Australia: 1791 (1998) ... 610 (2006); Canada 1579 (1998) ... 698 (2006); USA 2928 (1998) ... 1479 (2006).<sup>38</sup>

BHHRG monitored the first multi-party election in independent Latvia in 1993. Apart from the turnout which in the early, rosy days of 'freedom' was a healthy 87%, nothing has been done to correct the inherent problems in the country's weird election system.

In 1993 BHHRG wrote:

*“There was no voter register and a system of stamping passports was used to verify the voter's identity. As long as people are able to vote anywhere in the country an electoral roll will be impossible to compile. We suggest that this should change, i.e., in future elections there should be a properly compiled electoral roll for each region so people can vote where they are registered.*

*Voter mobility on a large scale can distort the size of the electoral districts. If one district ultimately has many fewer voters than expected it could effectively be over-represented in the Saeima. This situation can arise where a candidate buses supporters from one district to another as happened in this election with Joachim Siegerist (LNNK). (Mr Siegerist was also accused of "treating" the voters since apparently passengers on his buses received bananas as a gift.)*

*Busing was just one form of possible distortion of the vote in individual electoral districts. The decision to permit Latvian citizens living abroad, including the large post-1940 émigré community, to vote in effect in the Riga electoral district must have affected the outcome there. (Incidentally, it also might suggest to the unwary observer that the proportion of citizens in the Latvian capital is higher than is in fact the case. The population of Riga is predominantly Russophone.)*

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<sup>38</sup> “Latvian voters worldwide head to ballot box”  
<http://latviansonline.com/index.php/features/article/2104/>

*Because of the unpredictability surrounding how many voters were likely to attend at each polling station it was difficult for the electoral commission to have on hand the appropriate number of pre-stamped envelopes and ballot papers. Some places had been over-supplied, but we visited others (Jurmala 82, Riga 204) where extra numbers had to be sent out for. It is possible to imagine circumstances when unscrupulous officials could take advantage of this situation “.*

Why has nothing been done to rectify these flaws in the last 13 years?

### **Results:**

Despite the fact that a pre-election poll showed that only ¼ citizens trusted parliament and 1.2% fully trusted the government, the previous governing coalition was re-elected on 7<sup>th</sup> October. According to the CEC 907,822 voted, c. 90,000 fewer than in 2002. 420,000 Russians (18%) who still don't have citizenship were not able to vote.

Composition of the next Saeima: The People's Party (TP) ...23 seats; Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS) and New Era (JL) .... 18 seats each; Harmony Centre (SC) – 17; Latvia's First Party/Latvia's Way (LPP/LC) – 10; For Fatherland And Freedom/LNNK (TB/LNNK) – 8; and For Human Rights In A United Latvia (PCTVL) – 6 seats.

Only 10 days are allowed for complaints to be lodged against the conduct of the poll and 10 days later ballot papers are destroyed altogether. So, any allegations of fraud or improper conduct are almost impossible to investigate after that. On 25<sup>th</sup> October, the police in the Kubuli region in Latgale found “that 12 voters were included on the list of those who had cast their votes at the 328th polling station” in fact “the 12 had not been to the station and had not participated in the elections at all. Their passports do not have the official seal, confirming participation”.<sup>39</sup> Juris Boldans a LNNK MP is suspected of involvement in the fraud. Interestingly, these events took place near Rezekne a previous hot bed of election malpractice. Then, the small New Democrats Party, announced it had written to the CEC to lodge formal complaints about the illegal funding practices carried out by some parties during the campaign – the party cited research carried out by the Providus NGO.<sup>40</sup>

Whatever the outcome, these developments only serve to compromise Latvian politicians in the eyes of the electorate, leading to yet more disillusion. They also show that leading politicians are more susceptible to the agenda set by well-funded, non-governmental organizations than they are to the wishes of the voters themselves who are more interested in finding a job and paying for their utilities than the arguing about campaign funding and the rights or wrongs of holding Gay Pride marches. And, even if Mr. Lembergs has shadowy business dealings (which is still unproven) he has made life better for the people of Ventspils. Alfreds Rubiks is also remembered as an effective mayor of Riga.

### **Conclusion**

BHHRG concluded that Latvia is a tightly controlled society where the citizens' needs are ignored by most political parties whose connections with the electorate are non-existent. Those who do vote are probably influenced by officials with local power bases who control the meagre benefits that they enjoy. Vote buying, busing people in to meetings and to vote and treating voters are regular occurrences at election time.

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<sup>39</sup> “Boldans a suspect in falsification of Saeima election results”, <http://www.leta2000.lv/eng/fnews.php?id=C3980752-8473-42A2-A25C-3446A0B6EA6B>, 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2006

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Celms “New Democrats protest results of general elections” Baltic Times, November 2-8, 2006

There are those who say, quite rightly, that the constitutional arrangements that have provided for such an unsatisfactory electoral system should be overhauled. They demand a closer connect between voters and political parties, including a proper system of party membership and financing. But, there is no sign that there will be a change any time soon. Despite joining the EU and NATO, Latvia's electoral system and political order seem alien to classic Western values. However, as long as the governments of Latvia do what the West wants in the international arena, there is unlikely to be any pressure for change to the country's domestic political arrangements from that quarter.

People will just have to like it or lump it. Or go to Ireland.