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The far right in Latvia: Should we be worried?

This is the seventh article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click here.

by Matthew Kott

While one cannot say that the far right movements and ideologies in Latvia are in a state of flux, the current situation in Europe has prompted some developments that could turn into significant trends in the medium to longer term.[1] In turn, these could have an effect on broader European politics, if left unchecked.

The ethnic divide in Latvia's far right

For much of the past 25 years since Latvia regained independence from the USSR, the main dividing line on the far right has been ethnic, i.e. the tensions between Latvian radical nationalism and its post-Soviet Russian counterpart. The main vehicle of ethnic Latvian political nationalism has been the party *TB/LNNK*,[2] which has its roots in the *Perestroika*-era struggle for independence. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, this party both absorbed radical start-ups and survived radical schisms, eventually becoming a party of social and fiscal conservatism that mainly engaged in symbolic nationalist politics and populistic, anti-Russian sloganeering during election campaigns. This normalisation and deradicalisation took as TB/LNNK was increasingly included in government coalitions – even providing the Prime Minister in 1997–98. At the same time, a semi-legal, semi-clandestine radical milieu of far right groupuscules, including anti-Semitic, neo-Nazi, and fascistic clusters, existed in a symbiosis with TB/LNNK, particularly via nationalist youth organisations. One of the most notorious was the terroristic underground reincarnation of the interwar *Pērkonkrusts* (Thunder Cross) party, whose members unsuccessfully tried to blow up the Soviet victory monument in central Riga.

On the other side of the ethnic divide, Latvia's sizeable Russian-speaking community, feeling marginalised and discriminated by the nationalising Latvian state, have had a complex relation to far right ideologies due to the post-imperial legacy of the Soviet Union. For much of the post-Soviet period, "Russian" parties (i.e. those rooted in the Russian-speaking community) generally have self-identified as being on the political Left, adopting names such as *For Human Rights in a United Latvia* and *Harmony Centre*. Their discourse of portraying Latvian nationalism as glorifying interwar authoritarianism and collaboration with the Nazis contrasted their rhetoric of the Soviet period as positive. In the strongly pro-Soviet Baltic Russian identity, the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II is a key element. Despite this, there have been rare instances of violent neo-Nazi skinheads amongst Russian speakers in Latvia.

More serious were the local branches of the main fascistic movements in Russia, the national socialist *Russian National Unity* (RNE), based around Liepāja; and the syncretic, Eurasianist *National Bolshevik Party*, in Riga and

Daugavpils. The first of these trained paramilitary cadres and gained a legal legitimacy through a clever coup of entryism, whereby they took over the registered Latvian ultranationalist *Latvian National Democratic Party* from within, and made it into a legal RNE front. Their main rivals were the National Bolsheviks, whose ideology mixes elements of Stalinism and fascism, and who succeeded in attracting non-ethnic Russians as activists. National Bolsheviks engaged in highly visible provocations (such as the assault on Prince Charles with a carnation) and terrorism (a group of National Bolsheviks occupied and threatened to blow up the steeple of St Peter's Church in central Riga). After the latter act, the group was forced underground, and many fled to Russia. In time, the clandestine National Bolshevik network was rebuilt in Latvia, and following social unrest in the late 2000s, relaunched itself under a front organisation as a socialist protest movement the wake of the economic downturn.

New ideologies and strategies in the 21st century

In the early 2000s, a new far right ideology – political homophobia – appeared. Based originally in a charismatic revivalist Christian congregation that was mainly Russophone, it grew to include socially conservative clergy from the larger, predominantly Latvian-speaking Lutheran and Catholic Churches. This resulted in the creation of new party, *Latvia's First Party*, also known colloquially as the "Preachers' Party", as a political vehicle for socially conservative and homophobic politics. From 2002 to 2007, this party achieved a degree of political influence at the municipal level, and in the national parliament. During this period, the party had a number of ministers, including Nils Muižnieks as minister for societal integration for 2002 to 2004. Parliamentarians and local politicians from the *First Party* have continued to promote homophobic political agendas – often inspired by similar policies from illiberal neighbouring countries – even after their party disappeared in an amalgamation process in 2007.[3]

Another political manifestation arising around the time of Latvia's EU accession was the anti-globalisation movement, with a steadily growing far right ideological bent. With the financial crisis of 2008–9, the movement gained new momentum, with loose networks coalescing around the website *antiglobalisti.lv*. These activists, both ethnic Latvians and Russophones with conspiracy theory tendencies, arranged protests against government bailouts of failed banks, where the visual language mixed populist anti-elitism, Euroscepticism, and anti-Semitic iconography. Together with various far right organisations in the neighbouring Baltic states, they have participated in marches against the EU's alleged policies of zombification and genocide against the people. Nevertheless, their influence in the broader public sphere – beyond the comments sections of internet news portals – was generally minimal.

Far right restructuration in times of crisis

Regarding the monoethnic far right, the early 2010s saw some significant reinvigoration and consolidation. Most significantly, the ultranationalist *All for Latvia!* movement became a major political player. Founded as a radical youth splinter group in the early 2000s, it grew into a political party by 2006. A number of high profile publicity stunts, such as a protest against the ratification of the border treaty with Russia, gained the group popularity and legitimacy from across the nationalist right. In 2010, they entered an electoral alliance with TB/LNNK. This combination reinvigorated Latvian nationalism by not only bringing in new faces that differed from the tired old ones in TB/LNNK, but injecting ideological tendencies that reversed the deradicalisation of the mainstream TB/LNNK. Within the framework of this cooperation, activists from *All for Latvia!* gained influence over much of the

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existing TB/LNNK party apparatus, particularly at the local, grassroots level. When the two parties were formally merged as the *National Alliance*, it looked like a textbook case of successful far right entryism. For almost the entire 2010s, the *National Alliance* has been in the government coalition, and radical politicians from *All for Latvia!* gained key roles in the state.

A similar consolidation also initially took place on the Russian far right. Burying their long-standing differences, the overwintered elements of the RNE and National Bolsheviks joined forces to form the lobby movement, then political party *For the Mother Tongue!* (ZaRYA). Mobilising all their latent political capital, ZaRYA forced a constitutional referendum in 2012 to make Russian the co-official language. During the campaign, the establishment "Russian" parties were forced to take a position, lest they lose legitimacy to the radicals in the eyes of their voters. This led to an overall radicalisation of the political discourse on ethnic relations in Latvia. Even though the referendum failed, it opened the way for new political initiatives: the leaders of ZaRYA were also elected to prominent posts in the newly created Congress of Non-Citizens, whose aim was to pressure for greater political rights for significant number of Russophones without Latvian citizenship.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the *National Alliance*, the vested interests of the main "Russian" party, *Harmony Centre*, proved resilient to the lure of radicalisation. In elections, ZaRYA failed miserably to transform its newfound prominence into seats at the local, national, or EU level. A rift developed in ZaRYA when the National Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Linderman, opted to spearhead an initiative for a new referendum, this time to ban "homosexual propaganda", by joining forces with Latvian radical nationalists and political homophobes. The RNE faction in ZaRYA saw this as a betrayal of the Russian cause, and formed a new organisation, *Russian Dawn* (Russkaya Zarya) with a radical Russian ethnonationalist position.

The events in Ukraine in 2014 caused further problems for the Russian far right in Latvia. While both groups came to support the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas separatists, they reacted differently. National Bolsheviks from Latvia, most prominently "Black Lenin", Benes Aijo, actively participated in the political and military campaigns there. A handful of other National Bolsheviks have also fought with the separatists in the Donbas. By contrast, the RNE faction in Latvia seems to have limited participation in the Donbas conflict to engaging in pro-Russian propaganda activities.

At the same time, the Ukraine conflict exposed a radicalisation of the other major "Russian" party, *For Human Rights in a United Latvia*. The party's long-time MEP, Tatyana Zhdanok, took part in the delegation of generally far right organisations that acted as international observers to the Crimean Referendum in 2014. Just prior to this, the party had changed its leftist-sounding name to the more ethnonationalist *Latvian Russian Union*.

The Ukraine conflict also led marginal Latvian extremist groups to attempt recruitment drives for volunteers to join far right militias like the *Azov Battalion*. These actions, however, enjoyed minimal success. More worrying was the role in which the *National Alliance*, in the context of the Latvian government's general support for the post-Maidan government, was able to lend credibility to far right elements in Ukraine, particularly as friends of *Svoboda* the new government coalition. On 16 March 2016, at the annual commemoration of Latvians who fought in the *Waffen-SS* Latvian Legion during World War II, a representative of the *Azov Battalion* was present.

The refugee crisis in 2015 has changed some rules of the game. The very idea of non-European refugees coming to Latvia has mobilised the far right.

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Racist, xenophobic attitudes towards Middle Easterners and Africans being common in Latvia, ethnic Latvian and Russian radicals have found a common ground in the discourse of endangered whiteness. Political entrepreneurs jockey for position, such as the *Guards of the Fatherland*, an anti-immigration organisation with a paramilitary profile, modelled on the interwar front organisation of *Pērkonkrusts* with the same name. On social media, this group portrays itself in much of the same terms as the *Soldiers of Odin* vigilante movement in the Nordic countries, which has recently also spread to Estonia. Other parts of the far right in Latvia seem to be suffering from the shifting political topography, with Linderman recently announcing that ZaRYA will deregister as a political party and go underground – whether this will lead to dissolution or to radicalisation of Latvia's National Bolsheviks remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Latvia is perhaps the only EU member state where the far right has been included in the government coalition for years without significant condemnation from its European partners. As such, Latvia can serve to help far right ideas seem more respectable in European politics, for example, political homophobia. At the same time, Latvia's geopolitical position and cultural makeup makes it an ideal entry point for ideological conflicts imported from further East: the Ukraine crisis has mobilised both Latvian and Russian ultranationalists, and may still destabilise the societal balance. At the same time, the advent of the "white genocide" thesis and Islamophobia is a reminder that, just as in the 1990s, Latvia could be a "growth market" for far right positions from western and northern Europe, increasing their overall clout in the EU.

Latvia is also not immune to jihadism, as recent events have shown. Thus, despite its relatively small size, Latvia and its various far right groups may have a disproportionate role in the transmission of radical ideologies from East to West, and vice versa, particularly if disruptive regional actors like the Kremlin pump (more?) money into some of these movements.

Matthew Kott is a historian at the Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, in Sweden. Among his research interests are historical and contemporary manifestations of fascism and extremism, as well as racism and xenophobia, in Northern Europe. Latvia is his particular country of expertise.

1. This article builds on some ideas presented in an overview published in 2012: Matthew Kott, "Rumsrena extremister", Expo 2012/4.
2. TB/LNNK was an amalgamation of the parties *For Fatherland and Freedom* (TB) and *Latvian National Independence Movement* (LNNK).
3. For examples, see: *Homophobic Speech in Latvia: Monitoring the Politicians* (Riga: Mozaika, 2007).

Tags: far right, Far-right politics, latvia, russia, Ukraine

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