

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LATVIA 1987- 2001

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**ABSTRACT.** Political participation is crucial to democracy; we discuss its main features during three stages. The years 1988-91 are marked by anti-regime mobilization and extensive mass activism in support for restoring independence. After a "normalizing" phase between 1992-98 we note contradictory trends in more recent years. Next to conventional political participation one notes increasing protests, referendum initiatives, and corrupt ways of gaining influence.

Democracy revolves around the idea of political participation. In democracies, citizens elect their representatives and exert accountability through the re-election process. What's more, career administrators are to serve the public interest, and all public officials are supposed to respond to the will of the people. All these activities are expected to express the real rather than just formal power of the citizenry. As noted by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, "political participation is activity that is intended to or has the consequence of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action" (Verba 9). To what extent has this been the case in Latvia during the last twelve years?

This paper argues that participation has differed greatly during three distinct phases. During the first phase (1987-1991), grassroots social movements and unprecedented mass mobilization were instrumental in triggering the collapse of the Soviet regime and restoring Latvia as an independent state; starting with 1992 one observes a "normalization" of political participation that has slowly been turning into a third and more complex phase in the late 1990s. This contemporary phase is marked by different and partly contradictory types of participation occurring parallel to each other. Next to continuing "normal" participation, subgroups of disenchanted citizens have increasingly begun to engage in referenda and other forms of direct democracy, while others have withdrawn from participation or engage in illicit ways to influence politics.

As we discuss each of the three stages of political participation, we focus both on behaviours and attitudes aimed at influencing — and in fact influencing - government action. For each phase, we first examine the role of various types of behavioural participation such as voting, attending meetings and involvement in group activities, and protesting. In doing so, we try to draw some qualitative distinctions between more formal participation and active citizen self-involvement. We then move on to a discussion of the

attitudinal bases of political participation such as changing patterns among citizens in regard to their perceptions of efficacy and political trust. Participatory behaviours and attitudes are interrelated and need to be evaluated together.

### Phase 1

Popular mobilization in Latvia during 1987-91 illustrates democratic self-organization from below. Citizen initiatives are important in any polity, but they were crucial for the gradual transition from the old communist system, which forbade any self-organized political expression as a criminal offense.<sup>1</sup> In 1987 a cascade of mass demonstrations and rallies started which has few parallels in comparative political history. At first hundreds, and then thousands of people participated month after month in numerous oppositional activities. While this popular activism was unprecedented in its intensity and scope, it was also innovative in its repertoire. Hundreds of grassroots movements organized themselves in various parts of the country. There were pickets and petition-drives, mass manifestations and demonstrations, congresses and roundtables, high turnout in elections and plebiscites, organized draft avoidance, and civil resistance to armed attacks.<sup>2</sup> Each event in the chain of mass activism weakened the old regime and at the same time strengthened the confidence of people that they could have a political effect.

Some examples illustrate the scope of participation during this phase: an early rally on 23 August 1988 marking the anniversary of the notorious Hitler-Stalin Pact had 30,000 to 50,000 participants, and several demonstrations in 1989 and 1990 involved from a quarter to a half million people (Olgerts 14). By spring 1989 the Popular Front of Latvia registered 230,000 members (*Padomju Jaunatne 1*) out of a total population of 2.7 million. In late 1990, the Popular Front collected one million signatures opposing the new Union Treaty formulated by central Soviet authorities (*Atmoda*). Clearly, a large segment of the populace participated in such manifestations of popular will against subordination to the Moscow-led communist regime. There was also a counter-mobilization of people preferring to hold on to the old system. In Latvia the "Interfront" organized various activities in response to those of the Popular Front; yet their turnout typically was low in comparison. One such meeting occurred on 8 May 1990 after a Soviet military parade in Riga marking the forty-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. About 20,000 people, mostly Russians, met at the Soviet Victory Monument and listened to speakers berating the parliament for its declaration of independence (*Agence France-Presse 73*).

Elections provided another means for both selecting legislative

representatives and staging new mass events. On the eve of the 18 March 1990 election in Latvia about a quarter million people came to a rally in Riga with flags, flowers, and self-made placards.<sup>3</sup> This decisive election to the republic's Supreme Soviet was marked by a voter turnout of 81.3%,<sup>4</sup> and was won by the Popular Front coalition. Voter turnout was even higher (87.6%) in an advisory poll on 3 March 1991 when voters were asked "Are you for a democratic and independent Republic of Latvia?" The outcome was strongly affirmative. Of the ballots cast 73.6% said "yes," 24.7% said "no" and the rest (1.7%) were invalid.<sup>5</sup> In addition to strengthening the legitimacy of independent statehood, this non-binding plebiscite served as another mobilizing exercise. Voter turnout and support for Latvia's independence reached an all-time high, in part due to revulsion against the hard-line crackdown by Soviet forces in Riga and Vilnius just a few weeks earlier. This backlash phenomenon illustrates how new politics and power can emerge from interaction between the populace and the regime. Thus intense popular activism in this phase cannot be seen as being only self-motivated; it also resulted from interactive processes with elite strategies and calculations about the possible use of repression (Karklins 588-614).

While impressive and historically decisive, active political participation among a large majority of the population during this phase cannot be analyzed within the context of "normal" political participation. Involvement in large part was revolutionary in nature and the collective goals of restoring independence and democracy were supported by high emotions of euphoric hopes for the future and willingness to sacrifice. This was an unusual phase where popular masses were mobilized — and mobilized themselves — for a political struggle where the fate of the country and people were truly at stake. In retrospect, analysts wonder why this high level of political involvement did not continue after the battle seemed to be won in 1991, but actually there isn't that much to wonder about if this initial phase is interpreted as a focal revolutionary period. Once its main goals of regime change and restored independence had been attained, everyday concerns of life and politics began to dominate.

## **Phase 2**

The normalization of political participation in Latvia began shortly after the restoration of independence in August 1991. Behaviourally, this phase has been marked by a decrease of political activism, comparatively normal rates of electoral participation, and a gradual learning of the purpose and ways of a pluralistic democracy. Attitudinally, this second phase is characterized by disappointment in the performance of elected officials, low political trust and efficacy, and an immature popular understanding of how

best to defend public interests or the interests of specific groups.

**Elections:** While the March 1990 elections presented a bipolar choice between pro- and anti-Soviet candidates, the May 1993 elections were held under a normal democratic constitution and electoral law. Nevertheless, because these were the first free elections after restored independence, they still triggered unusual enthusiasm. Participation was much higher than it would be in future years: twenty-three parties presented slates of candidates and 89% of eligible voters cast their ballots. Remarkably the Popular Front of Latvia - the font of most political activism in the previous years - did not pass the 4% vote barrier, thus illustrating the end of the era of mass movements. One year later, sixteen lists of candidates ran in municipal elections (Plakans 265), and voter participation was 63%.<sup>6</sup> A stable 72 to 73% of eligible voters participated in the parliamentary elections of 1995 and 1998, suggesting that this is the normal benchmark for national elections in Latvia. Electoral campaigns continue to galvanize citizen participation as was evident in the March 2001 municipal elections marked by a 62% voter turnout and significant gains by the Social-Democrats and parties representing ethnic minorities.

**Civic groups:** Among other dimensions of participation it is crucial to ask about the role of non-governmental organizations. Voluntary associations undergird democracy as they provide arenas for civic engagement (Putnam). Political theorists place great emphasis on civic associations working independently of government: "It is the existence of such associations which is the social foundation of democracy and the state control and direction of such associations is a key element in the pluralist concept of 'totalitarianism'" (Hirst 3). In other words, democracy differs from a communist regime precisely because it is built on the cooperation of autonomous institutions, in particular, civic ones. By now most of the party controlled associations of the Soviet era have disintegrated, but some sports clubs, choirs, and other cultural groups have transformed themselves and have become more self-governing. New groups have been forming as well. There has been an undramatic, but consistent rise in the number of voluntary organizations from a total of 1,676 in March 1995 to 3,922 in January 1999. Surveys show a slow rise of individual membership as well: in 1994, just 19% of respondents were members of any NGO (non-governmental organization) compared to 22% in 1999. While this suggests some increased participation, a survey of members of NGO's undertaken in 1997 reveals that like other people, members of NGO's only vaguely understand the potential of communal cooperation and know too little about how collective decisions should be passed. Many also say that they lack time and that the purpose of community activities often remains unclear (Zepa, 1999: 13).

Participation differs if one compares citizens and non-citizens. Survey

data from 1998 show that 75% of citizens and 90% of non-citizens do not belong to any organization, again illustrating that participation in public life generally is weak. Most people interact only with their family members, friends, and colleagues and do not engage in any communal or social networks. Trade unions remain the most often cited membership organization (12% for citizens, 5% for non-citizens), followed by religious organizations (6% for citizens, 2% for non-citizens), and sports and entertainment groups (4% for citizens, 1% for non-citizens) (Zepa, 1998: 8-9). The most significant motives for social activism cited are an opportunity to be among people, a sense of duty, gaining new experiences, sympathy for those who live in poverty, and a desire to help solve problems in the neighbourhood.

Other surveys exploring the attitudinal bases of political participation suggest that most people in Latvia feel alienated from local and state institutions and do not believe that they can affect political decisions. Thus surveys taken in 1994/95 and again in 1998 show that two-thirds of respondents think that nothing can be done if local authorities make a decision going counter to people's interests (Rose). A similar two-thirds reject cooperating with people around them in pursuit of a common goal, thus indicating little appreciation for the need of horizontal networks for problem solving. Clearly, this outlook undermines the development of a civil society. Some of these attitudes may be specific to transitional societies and may change in the future. So far the vast majority of people in Latvia and other post-communist states are more concerned with economic issues and economic injustice than with politics (Mason 398).

One also finds a low self-assessment of political competence that is especially striking in comparison to citizen attitudes in other countries. Thus, in a survey undertaken in Norway in 1996 only one-fifth of respondents said that "most people are better informed about politics and government than I am," whereas two thirds said so in a survey undertaken in Latvia (Zepa 1999). Such low self-confidence weakens the inclination toward political participation and at the same time strengthens distrust of political institutions. The latter is especially ominous, even more so since studies of trust in a number of political and civic institutions of Latvia have shown that the parliament and political parties are trusted least of all.

Clearly, the democratic political system is seen to not perform as it should. What's more, attempts to change politics through elections do not bring about the expected improvements and often lead to disappointment. Surveys conducted by the Baltic Data House two months after the 1995 parliamentary elections showed that a full 42% of voters were dissatisfied with their choice. Similarly, a 1996 survey conducted by the International Social Survey Programme showed that while 28% of respondents in Norway

said that "the people we elect as deputies try to keep the promises they make during the election," only 8% said so in Latvia. This too can be related to the specifics of transitional politics in that the political elite in Latvia has been deeply involved in economic decisions and political office holders have difficulty separating their own private interests from those of the public, especially in the case of privatization.<sup>7</sup> One probably can show a link between participation and real as well as perceived political corruption.<sup>8</sup> Political trust is lowest in the least active group of respondents. But intriguingly, the politically most active respondents typically express lower political trust than the medium active group. This could be explained with arguments made by Inglehart (Inglehart) that the most informed people tend to have more critical attitudes toward political institutions.

Support for political parties: involvement in the life of political parties is another aspect of participation in Latvia that presents an ambivalent picture. On the one hand political parties are not trusted and the leading parties have a narrow membership base (typically between 200 and 1,000 registered members),<sup>9</sup> and few people donate money for election campaigns or other activities. On the other hand, surprisingly many people have gotten involved in founding new political parties and in running for office — despite slim chances of success. In 1999 Latvia had forty-seven officially registered political parties (Ikstens 3), and by 2000 the number had grown to forty-nine. While some analysts view this as a negative sign, we interpret it as a sign that people are willing to be active in organizations that they themselves can influence and that established parties lack credibility.

In fact surveys show that political parties are held in low esteem and more than 75% of respondents to a 1999 survey said that parties do not work in the interests of society<sup>10</sup> Both due to this as well as a generally low income level, representatives of the major parties believe that it is pointless to try to get donations from average citizens (Ikstens 7). This may point to a vicious circle of distrust and non-cooperation between the larger parties and the citizenry.

In their influential study of participation in American politics, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady analyze citizen motivation and capacity to participate as well as networks of recruitment for participation (Verba 3). Capacity to participate involves civic skills such as knowing how to write a letter to the editor or to formulate a resolution at a political meeting, or how to chair a meeting. This is where involvement in civic organizations is so important: it provides both an arena for learning these skills and bridges to the broader political process. As to why some people participate more than others, Verba et al. mention traditional arguments such as limits on time, interest and civic skills, but they also emphasize that "it is well known that social institutions play a major role in stimulating citizens to take part in politics" (Verba 17).

Deliberate mobilization occurs as well and it is crucial to understand that the relationship between institutions and citizens is reciprocal. Thus, if institutions disappoint, citizens disappoint, and vice versa. In the case of Latvia there is the danger of a spiral of disappointment increasingly undermining trust in the efficacy of conventional political participation.

### **Phase 3**

We propose that political participation after the regime change in the post-communist region goes through several different stages. During the third phase currently underway in Latvia, we note the parallel processes of continuing normalizing participation in regard to elections and group memberships, and increasing disenchantment with conventional political participation. The latter is most evident in attitudinal surveys and in new activist participation among subgroups of the citizenry.

Since about 1998 there has been increasing evidence in Latvia of both political disenchantment, apathy, and alternative modes of participation. One increasingly notes subgroups of the populace who act in different ways. Next to a still sizable subgroup focusing on conventional modes of political participation such as voting, there are three other influential subgroups that one could classify as the critics, the cynics, and the corrupt. They differ substantially in approach and influence. Some of the "critical citizens" (Norris) continue to participate in elections, but increasingly vote for candidates who support their concrete socioeconomic or ethnic interests, as became clear in the March 2001 municipal elections where social-democrats and minority parties made major gains. Others among the critical citizens opt out of flawed conventional participation and become active in other ways: they initiate referenda, form new parties and run for office, write letters, discuss, and engage in protests and demonstrations.

A third population subgroup is cynical and apathetic and no longer believes in democratic participation (or never believed in it to begin with). A fourth subgroup engages primarily in corrupt modes of political participation through bribes and similar means. While the types of participation overlap at times, it is important to assess the borderline between the critical and cynical citizen. Critical citizens are crucial for improving the workings of democracy and to fight corruption, whereas cynical citizens willingly or unwillingly promote the weakness of democracy even more. In addition, corruption and the perception of pervasive corruption undermine democracy and citizen efficacy.

Referenda as alternative law-making: Since more and more citizens distrust their elected representatives and the parliament, they have begun exploring alternative ways to influence government action. Latvia's political

system has an element of direct democracy in that it allows for referenda to be held and in fact several referenda have been initiated in recent years. So far, no referendum issue has won a majority, but they have affected policy-making and indicate significant and increasing citizen activism.

Procedurally, the initiators of a referendum first need to collect the signatures of at least 10% of eligible voters. During the most recent initiative in June 2000 about 2% of urban voters signed a referendum initiative against the privatization of the state owned electrical monopoly Latvenergo within two weeks (*Diena*, 16 June 2000). By early July a total of 22.4% of voters had signed (*Diena*, 5 July 2000). Next to increasing grassroots activism this initiative also reflects a growing frustration with the outcome of previous privatization deals. Other socioeconomic grievances focus on pensions. A total of 134,195 voters signed a referendum initiative asking for changes in the pension law that the parliament had passed in August 1999 (*Neatkarīga Rita Avīze*, 6 October 1999). Both these and other referenda initiatives emerged in direct reaction to laws passed or under consideration by parliament. Thus citizens in fact become alternative legislators and even unsuccessful referendum initiatives are significant as they have influenced overall political discourse and the calculus of the legislature.

Until the most recent initiative last July, the most active participation had occurred during the 1998 referendum on citizenship when 226,530 signatures were collected (ca. 17% of voters) during the initiation phase. This initiative to reverse the parliament's vote to soften citizenship laws was narrowly defeated (53% vs. 45%, 2% undecided). The vote may have been swung by intense international pressure to keep the more liberal citizenship laws passed by the legislature in June 1998. Overall voter participation in the referendum was under 70%, slightly less than the 73% turnout for the simultaneous parliamentary election (*Neatkarīga Rita Avīze*, 28 August and 23 October 1998).

Protest Activism: since 1998 one can note an increase in mostly spontaneous and vocal protests of dissatisfied social groups, in particular farmers, medical personnel, pensioners, students, and ethnic minorities.

Farmers: after a decade of irresponsible policies toward them, Latvian farmers have staged several tractor blockades and other civil disobedience protests in recent years. Most recently farmers organized pickets in Riga during an international meeting of the European Bank for Reconstruction in May 2000 (*Diena*, 31 May 2000), and blockaded two border stations for several days in early July. During this last protest the farmers raised a number of demands, most importantly that the government observe previously passed laws (sic!) about subsidies and other matters. The protest led to talks with officials in charge of agricultural policy and was partly successful (*Diena*, 4-7 July 2000).

**Medical Personnel:** so far the protests of doctors and nurses have been less dramatic and less successful, but this may be changing. Medical personnel have been accelerating protests during spring 2001, one of the culminations being nationwide picketing activity engaged in by hundreds of nurses in Riga and other cities on 8 March 2001. The protesting nurses also threatened to start long-term strikes unless their poverty-level salaries are raised in the near future.

**Pensioners:** as early as 1992/93 groups of pensioners started to stage loud and at times unruly demonstrations in front of ministerial offices decrying their scandalously low pensions and benefits. In March 1998 mostly Russian pensioners staged a major confrontation with police where ethnic issues were raised as well. College students staged a major spontaneous protest against the planned elimination of all remaining no-cost slots in colleges and universities in Spring 2000. High school students staged protests in May 2000 when a number of high school graduation exams were re-scheduled due to a breach of exam secrecy. Such events tend to elicit significant media attention and thus may be copied by other groups in the future.

**Ethnic Minorities:** overall, non-Latvians have participated less in Latvia's political life than Latvians, and this cannot solely be attributed to many non-Latvians not being citizens and thus not being able to vote. As noted above, participation in various associations is lower as well, and there has been relatively little picketing or other protest activity. But this too may be changing as Russian language newspapers and organizations have increasingly begun to organize petition drives on various issues, most recently in the summer of 2000 in regard to a demand that Latvia ratify the European minority convention.

**Corrupt Participation:**<sup>11</sup> traditionally, political scientists have differentiated between conventional and unconventional participation, with the latter typically focusing on protest and dissent. We argue that in the case of post-communist polities one also needs to pay attention to covert and even corrupt political participation. If one defines participation as we have, e.g. as activity that affects government action, illicit forms of influence clearly need to be examined as well. While it is important in itself, corrupt participation also undermines legitimate forms of participation, as people see their own influence being subverted by illicit deals.

There is significant evidence that corrupt participation in post-communist states occurs both on an elite level as well as in the citizenry's day to day bureaucratic encounters. What's more, there is a tendency for businessmen to enter politics mainly due to their own narrow economic interests. Economic groupings also are the main flinders of political parties and electoral slates (Ikstens), and there are many suggestions that they ask

for corrupt favours. Yet there is also evidence of significant corrupt participation on the petty level. William L. Miller et al. have presented an excellent analysis of the role of corruption in the everyday interactions between citizens and the state in the entire post-communist region. They talk of a climate of petty corruption in which most people (between 76 and 90%) believe that whenever someone needs something from a public official, they probably need a personal contact or need to pay in order to get a successful outcome. Interestingly, while this is a widespread notion, fewer people report their own individual experiences of needing to give a present or bribe (Miller 5).

The corrupt tinge of bureaucratic encounters between citizens and public servants was evident in the USSR (DiFranceisco 604) and is evident in Latvia today. During Fall 1999 the Latvian branch of Transparency International sponsored a large research project on corruption, one part of which involved a survey of 2001 respondents. The many interesting results include a cluster of questions about bureaucratic encounters showing that 31% of respondents personally have had interactions where they had to give an unofficial payment (Sabiedriba par atklātību Delna 19).

It remains to be examined how much of conventional participation — or possibly even protests — have illicit overtones. As noted by Robert Putnam, in traditional hierarchical and corrupt societies, "political participation is triggered by personal dependency or private greed, not by collective purpose" (Putnam 115).

### Conclusion

Political participation in Latvia has been "normalizing" in part after the 1988-91 phase of anti-regime mobilization and has recently entered a complex phase of parallel and partly contradictory trends. Conventional participation in elections remains around 72%, yet a similar two-thirds of citizens are skeptical about political parties, the parliament, and the role of civic organizations. Thus, while going through some of the motions of participation such as voting, all too many people feel that participation is pointless. There is a widespread sense that the system serves only a narrow elite and that corruption is rampant. While this seems to have some basis in fact and reflects the views of well-informed conventional and activist participants, this also reflects the outlook of a subgroup of cynical citizens. Future research needs to focus on links between forms of political participation and corruption and how change might be brought about.

Surveys show that political trust and self-assessed efficacy in Latvia are much lower than in developed democracies such as Norway. Such subjective low self-evaluation affects participation and seems to be a result both of the

country-specific context as well as the general transition phase. As elsewhere in the world, those citizens of Latvia who have a higher sense of subjective political competency are both more active and more satisfied political participants. The results of focus group discussions have shown that people who are active in NGO's gain new experiences, knowledge, and skills, and that this raises their faith that they can influence social and political developments in a positive way. This finding confirms similar findings from other societies that involvement in voluntary associations strengthens civic engagement and activism.

We also find that new subgroups of unconventional activists have recently begun to use protests and the initiation of referenda to draw attention to their causes, with some success. This suggests that Latvia has entered a new phase of political participation where the citizenry explores new ways to make itself heard.

#### Notes

1. Compare Articles 90 and 170 of the Criminal Code of the USSR; for examples of activities prosecuted under these articles, compare S. P. de Boer, E. J. Driessen, and H. L. Verhaar, eds. *Biographical Dictionary of the Dissidents in the Soviet Union, 1956-1975* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), and Ludmilla Alexeyeva. *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1985).
2. Compare Rasma Karklins, *Ethnopolitics and Transition to Democracy: The Collapse of the USSR and Latvia* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.) One of the most impressive success stories of grassroots activism and civil disobedience involves the League of Women's struggle against abuses committed by the Soviet military forces against draftees.
3. On-site observation by Rasma Karklins.
4. Statistics of the Election Center of the Popular Front of Latvia.
5. When comparing 1991 election data to those of later elections it is important to keep in mind that the pool of eligible voters changed in the meantime, e.g. after 1991 Soviet military personnel and most Soviet era settlers were no longer eligible to vote. One may estimate that 1991 voter participation among long-term citizens was close to 95%. Compare Karklins, op.cit, especially 97-104.
6. Voter participation in municipal elections was down to 54% in 1997. *Diena*, 25 March 1997.
7. See also Brigita Zepa, "Confidence in Institutions: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania." in *Political Representation and Participation in Transitory Democracies: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania*.

8. Ongoing research by Rasma Karklins.
9. By 2000 the Social Democrats had the largest membership base with ca. 3,000 members, followed by the People's Party with 2,500, the Fatherland party with 2,000, and Latvia's Way with about 1,000.
10. Survey by Baltic Data House, March 1999. The credibility of electoral slates is even lower in local elections where they often blatantly reflect the dominant economic interests.
11. We believe that we are the first to use this concept.

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