




Weekly Briefing

**Latvia political briefing:
Latvian major political events in 2020:
Covid-19, extraordinary elections and regional reform**
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Introduction

The main focus of Latvian internal politics in 2020 was put on the mitigation of the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis. Emergency measures were amended, strengthened or supplemented all the time, which required constant work of Parliament and Government. The “Law on the Management of the Spread of Covid-19 Infection” has been adopted by Latvian Cabinet of Ministers during 2020 to establish a general legal order after the end of the emergency by providing appropriate precautionary measures. The rapid decision-making process and consultations of politicians with healthcare experts led to the fact that during the first wave of coronavirus Latvia has been relatively successful in terms of dealing with Covid-19 crisis. Nevertheless, the mitigation of the consequences of the second wave of Covid-19 requires more political will and teamwork from the current government. "This crisis is possibly the biggest crisis we have faced since the restoration of independence... I am confident that with government and society working together we will overcome this virus," Prime Minister of Latvia, Krišjānis Kariņš concluded. Along this, several important political events like extraordinary elections to the Riga City Council and administrative-territorial reform made their way to the political agenda of 2020.

Parliament and Cabinet of Ministers has been working on Covid-19 mitigation measures and implementation of emergency situation

Latvian parliament and government of Latvia worked on mitigating the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis and has developed certain restrictions since Latvia faced the first wave of coronavirus outbreak in March: leading to declared state of emergency until June 10. For more than three months the citizens of Latvia have been living under the emergency situation. Undoubtedly the economic impact on the daily lives of the Latvian citizens has been massive as the unemployment levels have been increasing. However, the precaution activities taken has proved them to be successful as the number of active cases of Coronavirus have been decreasing. Although the limitations proposed in March were relatively small in comparison to

other European countries, Latvia was able to sustain one of the lowest death rates per 100 000 citizens in the European countries during the first wave.

In May, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the “Law on the Management of the Spread of Covid-19 Infection” jointly developed by the Ministry of Justice and other responsible institutions, which aims to establish a general legal order after the end of the emergency by providing appropriate precautionary measures. The responsible authorities have compiled and consolidated the necessary aspects in one law, which will help to comply with epidemiological safety measures and prevent the spread of Covid-19, as well as provide the public administration and citizens with clear rules during Covid-19. The law determines the basic principles of the activities of state institutions, including the provision of services by courts and local governments after the end of an emergency situation. Appropriate precautions and restrictions for individuals, including special conditions for the provision of educational, sports, social and health services during the Covid-19 deployment period.

The summer has brought lifting of different restrictions and return to active daily life of citizens. However, despite of the success of political decisions (regarding health system and the provided support tools) during the first emergency situation, the second half of the year brought new political challenges. The second wave of coronavirus has come in October, when the number of Covid-19 cases and the number of hospitalized patients were rapidly increasing. It has led to the state of emergency being declared for the second time in 2020. Prime Minister and his team repeatedly referred to recent consultations with the World Health Organization, stressing that in their opinion the use of facemasks, physical and social distancing and even more widespread mass-testing are essential components of a counter-COVID strategy. One of the government's plans of 2020 to cut COVID-19 is to increase testing capacity, reaching 10,000 tests a day. According to Latvian officials, restrictions have to be tightened at national level, as well as requires control. “Restrictions without control unfortunately do not hit the target”, the Health Minister Ilze Viņķele said.¹ In the end of 2020, politicians are seeking for more effective measures how to stop the spread of the infection while Latvia is facing an urgent need to improve the welfare of Latvian citizens during these challenging times. The opportunity approved by the European Commission to restructure and reorganize the European Union funding to fields which currently need the most support has a great influence since Latvia will be able to save the State budget funds.

¹ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/health/health-minister-says-emergency-will-be-at-least-two-weeks-longer.a383522/>

Extraordinary Elections to the Riga City Council took place after Riga Council dismissal

The one of the central political events of 2020 has definitely been the extraordinary elections of the Riga City Council. Those elections were scheduled after the Riga City Council dissolution law passed by the Parliament on 13 February. The Parliament legally dismissed Riga City Council because of its inability to make decisions, following three successive council meetings at which a quorum was not obtained. As well as for the justification for the dismissal of the City Council, it is mentioned that the Riga Municipality has not fulfilled the autonomous functions of a municipality established in the Waste Management Law.

Due to pandemic, the extraordinary elections of Riga City Council were rescheduled and took place in Riga in August. This year was the lowest voter turnout in the municipal elections in Riga since 1997. Covid-19 may be one of the reasons why the activity was so low, however, there definitely are other aspects that parties should analyze regarding the voting activity in the elections.

The outcome of the elections is a completely new coalition formed in the Latvian capital city after a decade-long rule of the left-wing Harmony and their coalition partner “Honor to Serve Riga” (GKR). The leading Latvian Russian-speakers party which has run the city since 2009, lost its top position to the alliance of the social liberal “Development/For!” party and social-democrat environmentalists, the “Progressives”². As a result, the new Riga mayor was elected – Martins Stakis, the leader of the winning list “Development / For!” – “Progressive” party.

According to experts, these elections provide a hope that in the coming years Riga, and Latvia in general, will move away from ethnic division in politics, rallying voters around ideas — instead of ethnic identities.³

Parliament finally approves major administrative-territorial reform

At a virtual sitting on June 10, 2020, the Latvian parliament approved the government's major overhaul of local government and the regional map of Latvia in a third and final reading⁴. Important note that legislation had not been put on hold despite the COVID-19 crisis thanks to

² http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/30/c_139329599.htm

³ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/09/riga-a-new-beginning/>

⁴ <https://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/29027-saeima-adopts-administrative-territorial-reform>

the Parliament's rapid introduction of virtual debate and online voting. 58 deputies voted in favor of the law on administrative territorial reform, 12 were against and 20 deputies abstained. According to the new reform, in the future Latvia will be decreased the number of administrative territories till 42 instead of the current 119, they will be divided into so-called 7 "state cities" and 35 local governments. The status of a state city has been determined for 10 cities Daugavpils, Jelgava, Jēkabpils, Jūrmala, Liepāja, Ogre, Rēzekne, Rīga, Valmiera and Ventspils. Five administrative regions of Kurzeme, Zemgale, Riga, Vidzeme and Latgale are being established for the implementation of joint state and local government functions.

"The administrative-territorial reform can be compared to a long-running ultramarathon. In total, the Commission has processed more than 800 proposals during more than 120 working hours," said Artūrs Toms Plešs, Chairman of the Administrative Territorial Reform Commission. Regional reform was made one of the flagship policies of the current government, however, it is whether or not the reforms really do bring improvements that will likely determine future of the government.⁵

Summary

Covid-19 crisis dominated political agenda in Latvia in 2020. A lot of political efforts were spent to come to the consensus about necessary restrictions and state of emergency, as a result declared twice during 2020. The output of political debates is the "Law on the Management of the Spread of Covid-19 Infection". Given the changing and unpredictable nature of the spread of Covid-19, the law provides for the possibility for the Cabinet of Ministers to decide on practical implementation measures to control Covid-19 in case of spread or threat of Covid-19 infection in order to respond in time to changes in the country and abroad.

This year in political life of Latvia was marked by the extraordinary elections of the Riga City Council which took place in the capital city, after the Parliament legally dismissed previous City Council because of its inability to make decisions. Also, year 2020 brought the solution to long debates on upcoming regional reform, and the Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas has been adopted in the final reading by the Parliament of Latvia.

⁵ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/saeima/saeima-finally-approves-major-regional-reforms.a363362/>

References:

- [1] <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/health/health-minister-says-emergency-will-be-at-least-two-weeks-longer.a383522/>
- [2] http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/30/c_139329599.htm
- [3] <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/09/riga-a-new-beginning/>
- [4] <https://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/29027-saeima-adopts-administrative-territorial-reform>
- [5] <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/saeima/saeima-finally-approves-major-regional-reforms.a363362/>