



Weekly Briefing

Latvia political briefing:

Main Priorities of Latvian Policy: Vaccination, Participation in the 9th China-CEEC Summit and shortcomings in Regional Reform Law

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Main Priorities of Latvian Policy: Vaccination, Participation in the 9th China-CEEC Summit and shortcomings in Regional Reform Law

Introduction

Latvian internal politics has several challenges in February according to development. First of all, an urgent priority for government is to stop the spread of Covid-19 in the country and diminish consequences of pandemic. In February Latvia has started wide vaccination process with online vaccination sign-up website launched to make registration process easier for inhabitants. Health Minister admitted that many are already applying for vaccination on the website "Manavakcina.lv", and this is useful and valuable information for organizing the vaccination process. Currently, vaccine is provided for priority groups like healthcare practitioners and staff of social care centers; general public is invited to register in advance and wait their turn. February was also marked by Latvian participation in online China-CEEC summit, which also influences domestic politics of Latvia, and issues of observance of the principles of democracy in the organization of administrative territorial reform in the country.

Vaccination process starts in February: Prime Minister and President get their first dose of vaccine

One of priority domestic politics issues is Covid-19 vaccination. In the beginning of February Latvia has introduced a digital tool which will help responsible authorities to organize vaccination process. The voluntary vaccination signup website manavakcina.lv¹ ("My vaccine") opened on February 5 to allow residents to apply for vaccination against Covid-19 and receive invitation when their turn comes.

The application website will make it easier to compile contact information of those who wish to be vaccinated, to identify the priority group and the desired vaccination location. On the basis of these data, vaccine orders and deliveries will be automatically planned; the system will also maintain information on vaccine stocks. But this is just one of the ways in which people can apply for vaccination. In total, there will be four ways:

1. on manavakcina.lv website;

¹ <https://manavakcina.lv/>

2. through a telephone hotline;
3. through a general practitioner;
4. through an employer.

The Disease Prevention and Control Center (DPCC) said people should not rush to sign up for vaccination in the very first days, as they will be sorted in accordance with priority groups anyway. Those applications not in priority groups will be processed randomly.

The Latvian government on February 9 sketched its thinking with regard to the groups that will be given priority for Covid-19 vaccination.

The following eight priority groups have been identified in an attempt to get available vaccines to those at most risk of illness, and those whose jobs are deemed the most essential to keep the country functioning: 1) doctors and special patient groups as identified by medics; 2) employees and clients of social care centers; key government officials; 3) seniors over 70 years; those living with chronically ill children and carers for the sick; 4) seniors aged 60-70; 5) kindergarten and general school staff, emergency services and armed force members, National Guard, critical utility supply companies; 6) clients of special institutions, including homeless shelters, persons in prisons; 7) sectoral priority workers, clergy and church workers; 8) employees who come into contact with many people who cannot distance themselves at work.

First two priority groups are currently very actively involved in the vaccination process. According to official figures by February 4, a total of 17,486 people has received the first dose of the vaccine in Latvia, while 10,827 have already received the second dose². At the same time around 93 000 people have applied for Covid-19 vaccination voluntarily. Latvian President Egils Levits and Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš have received their first doses of Covid-19 vaccine Thursday, February 11.³

In total, it is planned to vaccinate about 70% of the population by the end of the summer, and in the third to fourth quarters of this year it should be possible to vaccinate all other members of society, according to the government's own projections from the Health Ministry.

² <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/health/vaccination-signup-website-starts-working-friday.a391694/>

³ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/president/latvias-president-and-prime-minister-roll-up-their-sleeves-for-vaccination.a392481/>

Latvia participates in China-CEEC summit

Another important political event happened on 9 February 2021 - Latvia took part in the 9th Summit between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) which was held online via video-conferencing.⁴ The event was hosted by China and chaired by the President of China himself, Xi Jinping, and 17+1 countries participants were present in front of their webcams. Latvia was represented by Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs. According to a ministerial press release, "the Latvian Foreign Minister pointed out that for Latvia, as an EU Member State, it is essential to develop economic cooperation with China while upholding principles of fair competition, reciprocity, and human rights."

The format for meetings between Central and Eastern European countries and China is meant to activate cooperation between China and 12 EU Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Greece) and 5 countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) in various fields including investment, transport, finance, science, education, and culture. Five years ago in 2016 the China-CEEC summit was held in Riga, Latvia.

According to Latvian officials, within the CEEC-China cooperation format, Latvia expects to see trade and investment relations with China developing in a balanced manner and based on the principles of market economy. Latvia is interested in achieving sustainable solutions in transport and logistics linking Europe and Asia so that a steady flow of goods and services is ensured. Minister Rinkēvičs emphasized that during the time of a pandemic, it is quite important to maintain the cultural contacts already established while utilising innovative and digital means to further those contacts.

Not only Latvian politicians, but also Latvian businessman expect closer China-CEEC cooperation via summit. It was reported⁵, that one of Latvian companies, "ABC Timber", which has been shipping timber, logs and boards to China since 2017, expects significant improvement in trade.

⁴ <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/67468-latvian-foreign-minister-participates-in-9th-summit-between-china-and-the-central-and-eastern-european-countries>

⁵ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/09/c_139732843.htm

President Egils Levits finds shortcomings in regional reform law

On February 1, the President of Latvia Egils Levits sent a letter to Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš pointing out shortcomings in the long-debated administrative-territorial reform. The President stated that the draft municipal law “has a fundamental and principal loophole, not granting the right of residents of local communities (municipalities and cities) to directly elect members of the community council”.

President expressed opinion, that administrative territorial reform should not make local communities feel that their ability to influence local government decisions after reform is reduced and that the local government is distancing itself from them. In his view, it is the task of the State to create the necessary pre-conditions for the voice and interests of local communities to be heard and taken-into-account within the municipality, even after the territorial reform.

According to the letter of the President, "from the perspective of democracy and democratic participation, the community council and the competence given to it is meaningful only when the relevant council is entitled to be directly selected by the people of the local community themselves. The approval of the community councils in the municipal council is not a sufficient mechanism for that purpose. Direct democratic legitimization and the democratic representation of local communities in the work of the municipality cannot only be replaced by consultation and public hearing mechanisms”⁶.

As a result, the President of Latvia said in his letter that the current transitional rule of the Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas provides for the Cabinet's obligation to submit to the Parliament a draft law providing for the right of local communities to directly elect their community councils.

Summary

Three significant political events took place in the beginning of February: 9th China-CEEC Summit, launch of vaccination sign-up website and Latvian President letter to Prime Minister, regarding administrative territorial reform to be implemented this year.

First of all, Latvia was taking part in the China - Central Eastern European countries Summit to stimulate trade and investment relationships between Latvia and China. Latvia is

⁶ https://www.president.lv/storage/kcfinder/files/VP_01022021_27.pdf

particularly interested in achieving sustainable solutions in transport and logistics linking Europe and Asia so that a steady flow of goods and services is ensured.

Second, Latvia launched wide Covid-19 vaccination process for its inhabitants. The Latvian government has identified eight priority groups to receive the vaccine in the order of importance or at high risk zone. Latvian Prime Minister and State President have already received their first dose of Covid-19 vaccine. Also, the vaccination self-registering portal manavakcina.lv started to work and accept applications from citizens.

Third, the debates around regional reform law continues in February. Latvian President also got involved and sent letter to Prime Minister with request to review the reform to include the right of residents of local communities to directly elect members of local communities instead of appointment of local councils by municipal council.

References:

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- [2] http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/09/c_139732843.htm
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- [4] <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/health/vaccination-signup-website-starts-working-friday.a391694/>
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- [6] https://www.president.lv/storage/kcfinder/files/VP_01022021_27.pdf