



# Weekly Briefing

## **Latvia political briefing:**

### **Latvia prepares for local elections in new conditions**

**Institute of Economics of the Latvian Academy of Sciences**


#### **China-CEE Institute**

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)

 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

# **Latvia prepares for local elections in new conditions**

## **Summary**

*One of the most anticipated political events in Latvia in 2021 is local government elections, scheduled for June 5. For the first time, local elections will take place in 41 newly-formed constituency: 35 districts and 6 state-level cities the new district within new borders after the recent administrative-territorial reform which officially will come to force in July. There are also few more changes in the election process: no more voters' associations can participate in the elections, the fact which allows only previously registered political parties to candidate; voters now can vote in any polling station within their home municipality without being attached to the specific station in their district to increase voter turnout. The last, but not least, the whole elections and voting procedure will be affected by Covid-19 pandemic and will take place under some restrictions following Recommendations for the Prevention of Infection Covid-19 at Polling Stations in the Elections of Local Government Councils in 2021.*

## **Introduction**

Together with the management of pandemic and vaccination process, one of the central events in Latvia's political life this year will be local elections to be held in June 2021. The submission of lists of candidates for the local elections of 2021 took place from March 17 and has just completed on April 6, and pre-election campaign has started to run 120 days till Election day.

Why the local government elections are so important? The pandemic currently poses different challenges for political elite at national and local level as crises reveal things about governments that we might not have noticed otherwise. Municipalities also play an essential role in figuring out how to keep their communities safe now during coronavirus crisis. Recently the emergency situation in Latvia was lifted, and municipalities were allowed to decide on the restrictions depending on the number of cases in their region. It definitely will be a challenge for newly elected local governments.

Therefore, local elections will be in the focus of this briefing which will analyse what are main changes in the elections introduced this year, the impact of pandemic and administrative-territorial reform on elections and analyse the political competition.

## **Administrative-territorial reform and new borders**

New administrative-territorial reform envisages that there will be 42 local governments in Latvia instead of the current 119 since 1 July 2021. The local elections in June therefore will already be held according to new borders of municipalities.

Because of reform number of constituencies in these elections is 41, including 6 state level cities and 35 districts.<sup>1</sup> Worth to note, that this year elections in the capital – Riga municipality, will not take place because the City Council was elected in the extraordinary elections in 2020 and will continue to work until the next elections of 2025.

New order will impact also the overall number of deputies – the less municipalities, the less there are city councils and therefore seats for candidates. The reform will also affect existing political order. For example, some municipalities have historically been led by one or another political force. After merge of several municipalities into one district, parties need again to compete for mayor seat.

However, there is still no complete certainty on new borders. Introduced administrative-territorial reform has raised disputes in local communities and municipalities applied to Latvian Constitutional Court with the request to revise the new order of borders. So, the organization of the elections may also be affected by the forthcoming judgments of the Constitutional Court on the map of new counties. "If after the elections have taken place, the Constitutional Court has decided that the borders will not be changed, then new elections will be held," explained Kristīne Bērziņa, the Chairperson of the Central Election Commission. According to her, if, for example, the Constitutional Court has determined that Ikšķile district, which is currently merged with bigger Ogre district, is separate, then new elections will have to be held both in Ikšķile and in Ogre<sup>2</sup>.

## **Competition for council seats is strong**

Central Election Commission has declared that in 35 districts and 6 state-level cities 683 deputies will be elected as a result of local elections. For comparison, in 2017 municipal

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.cvk.lv/uploads/files/Bildes\\_2021/Infografika\\_apgabalu%20maina.pdf](https://www.cvk.lv/uploads/files/Bildes_2021/Infografika_apgabalu%20maina.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/centrala-velesanu-komisija-izsludina-pasvaldibu-velesanas-5-junija.a389781/>

elections there were 1554 local deputies elected at 118 municipalities (not counting Riga). Therefore, in 2021 number of local deputies in Latvia will fall by 56%<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, even though there are less electoral districts and less, number of candidates applied for local elections is quite impressive – 5590 from 323 candidate lists. In average, this is 136 candidates per 1 municipality. Obviously, after the reform, there will be fewer seats in municipal councils - mostly 15 seats in county councils, 19 seats in several larger counties and 23 seats in large city councils. Consequently, an average of 8 candidates for one council seat apply in this election. It leads to conclusion that political competition is quite fierce.

The statistics also shows, that despite opinion that municipal elections are not that important as parliament national elections, in reality local elections still matter to political parties and candidates.

### **Changes in the voting process are meant to increase voter turnout**

Covid-19 can be a certain reason why people will not be willing to go to polling stations, so the change to the voting process was introduced. For the first time in municipal elections, voters will have the opportunity to vote in any polling station in their municipality. Previously in Latvia each citizen was attached to specific polling station within their municipality according to their declared home address. It is one of the factors which influenced voter turnout even before, as voters could be away from their declared places of living and they didn't vote at all.

At the polling station, an employee of the election commission will scan the voter's passport or identity card and make sure that the voter is included in the voter list of the respective municipality and there is no note in the register about his or her participation in the elections. If the voter has the right to vote, the polling station commission will register the voter in the electronic voter register and enter additional information about the voter in the voter list, where the voter will sign for the receipt of election materials.

This measure is expected to stimulate voter turnout, especially in the situation of pandemic when mobility of citizens across their region can be limited.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cvk.lv/en/elections/local-elections/local-elections-2021>

## **Elections under Covid-19**

In March Central Election Commission prepared the Recommendations for the Prevention of Infection Covid-19 at Polling Stations in the Elections of Local Government Councils in 2021<sup>4</sup>.

Latvia already has experience to organize election process in pandemic times, as extraordinary municipal elections in Riga took place last year. Recommendations and new measures include ventilation of premises, stronger disinfection and hygiene measures at polling stations, 2-metre social distancing during the voting process. There is a defined limit for number of visitors allowed at the same time at the polling station depending on premises area. Recommendations also affect location of the polling stations, as they cannot be sited in buildings where the most vulnerable groups of Covid-19 infections reside – in medical institutions and social care institutions. There are also specific measures designed for members of polling stations commissions and employees, who should wear personal protective equipment on site, including masks or respirators and rubber gloves.

### **Changes in candidate system**

This year has one more difference from all the previous municipal elections - only officially registered political parties can take part in elections, although before voters' associations were allowed to run for elections too. In the past voters' associations had been characterized by engagement of more local residents who understood the problems in their municipality in the election process.

According to the political scientist Iveta Reinholde<sup>5</sup>, before there were concerns that if voters' associations could not start in the local elections, people would be cautious to join a political party and there will be fewer local residents who will candidate in the elections. Therefore, it could pose a threat that newly elected councils will be less attentive to local needs.

However, these concerns have not been confirmed. Reinholde pointed out that there are municipalities where even 10 lists have been submitted. It is especially pleased that the lists have been submitted not only by national political parties but also by local parties.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cvk.lv/en/elections/local-elections/local-elections-2021/recommendations-for-the-prevention-of-infection-covid-19-at-polling-stations-in-the-elections-of-local-government-councils-in-2021>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/politologe-pasvaldibu-velesanas-arvien-kandidatiem-ir-popularas.a399544/>

## Conclusion

Local elections are expected to be tough this year. Local elections will be held in new conditions, in a changed territorial format with significantly reduced number of local governments, and in increased political competition. The official period of the pre-election campaign has already started. According to Latvian political scientists, municipal elections can also affect the situation in the current coalition, and lead to changes in the government. There is a possibility that there can be changes in the coalition even before the elections; and high probability that after the elections the government can face changes in the outline of the coalition or the ministers' seats.<sup>6</sup>

As since last year it has been a difficult time for Latvia, the pandemic has shown the importance of electing leaders at every level who put the health and safety of everyday people first.

## References:

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2. "The Central Election Commission announces local elections on June 5." Public Broadcasting from Latvia. Available: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/centrala-velesanu-komisija-izsludina-pasvaldibu-velesanas-5-junija.a389781/>
3. Central Election Committee website: <https://www.cvk.lv/en/elections/local-elections/local-elections-2021>
4. Recommendations for the Prevention of Infection Covid-19 at Polling Stations in the Elections of Local Government Councils in 2021. Available: <https://www.cvk.lv/en/elections/local-elections/local-elections-2021/recommendations-for-the-prevention-of-infection-covid-19-at-polling-stations-in-the-elections-of-local-government-councils-in-2021>
5. "Political scientist: Municipal elections are increasingly popular with candidates." Public Broadcasting from Latvia. Available: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/politologe-pasvaldibu-velesanas-arvien-kandidatiem-ir-popularas.a399544/>
6. 2021 will be the year of local elections, but changes in the government are not ruled out. <https://skaties.lv/zinas/latvija/politika/2021-bus-pasvaldibu-velesanu-gads-tacu-netiek-izslegtas-ari-izmainas-valdiba/>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://skaties.lv/zinas/latvija/politika/2021-bus-pasvaldibu-velesanu-gads-tacu-netiek-izslegtas-ari-izmainas-valdiba/>