



Weekly Briefing

Latvia political briefing:
Overview of the First Months of the New 42nd Government of Latvia
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Summary

Following the resignation of Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins due to intra-coalition tensions, Latvia entered a new political phase with Evika Silina at the helm. President Edgars Rinkevics appointed Silina, a member of the centre-right New Unity party and former Welfare Minister, to assemble the subsequent government. Despite her party's limited representation in parliament (26 out of 100 seats), Silina successfully garnered a broader coalition to secure a governing mandate. Under her leadership, the government faced myriad challenges, including revoking educational content, crucial infrastructure readiness, combating disinformation, and upholding human rights. These endeavours underline a government that is both responsive and deeply committed to the well-being and democratic principles of its citizens. In conclusion, the document underscores that while the majority of the ministers appear well-suited for their roles, the government's journey is not devoid of challenges. These challenges manifest in the form of a divided parliament and incidents such as the confidence vote. As Latvia progresses, the long-term implications of these governmental decisions and their impact on the country's trajectory in the exacerbating geopolitical climate remain to be seen.

Introduction

In the wake of Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins' resignation, which was attributed to a strained relationship with segments of his multi-party coalition following their failure to field a unified candidate in a key election of the President of the country, Latvia saw the emergence of a new political era under Evika Silina. Tasked by President Edgars Rinkevics to form the succeeding government, Silina, a centre-right figure from the New Unity party, and a former Welfare Minister, faced the challenge of securing confidence amidst a fractured parliament. Her party, though the largest, controlled only 26 of the 100 parliamentary seats, necessitating a broader coalition to achieve a governing mandate. The parliament's subsequent approval marked the inception of Silina's tenure, ushering in a government with a wider coalition base.

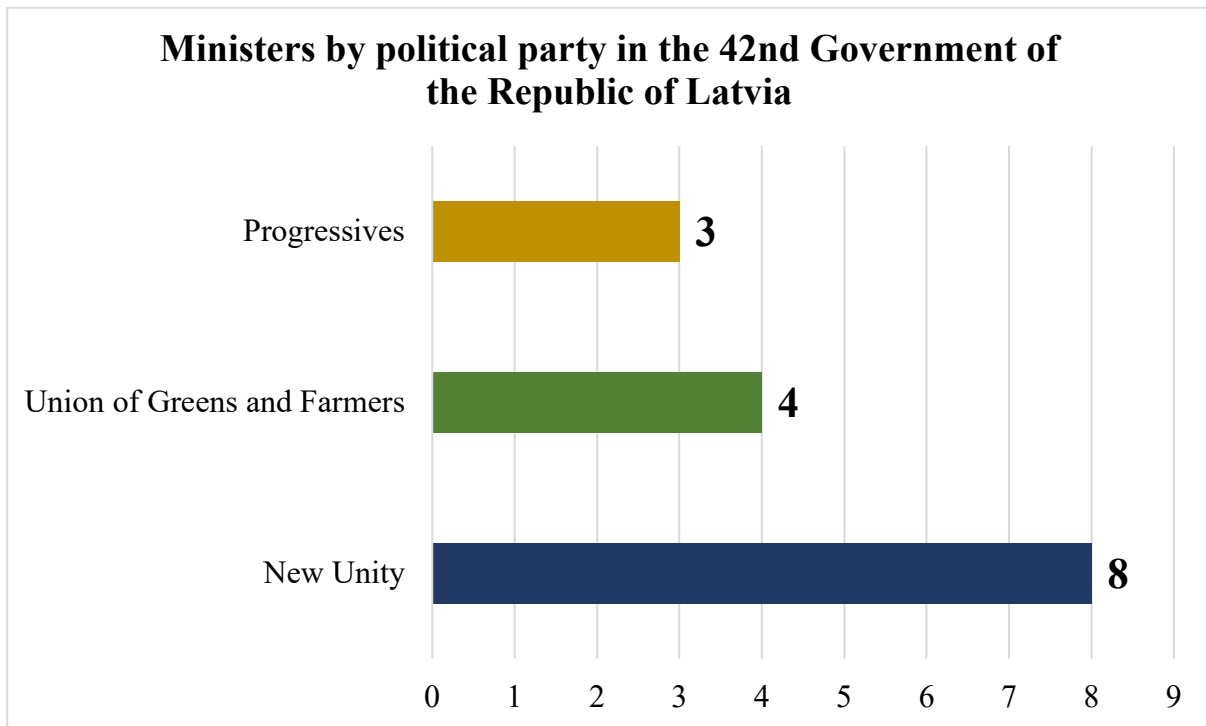
This article delves into the bios of the ministers shaping this new political landscape, scrutinizes the declaration of the current Cabinet of Ministers, and recounts notable occurrences in the initial months of Silina's administration. The unfolding dynamics post Karins' demission provide a contextual lens through which to analyse the strides and tribulations of Latvia's present government.

I Overview of the Current Cabinet of Ministers

The current cabinet of ministers in Latvia, as of 2023, is headed by Prime Minister Evika Silina, leading the 42nd government of the country. The cabinet was sworn in on 15 September 2023, following Silina's proposal as Prime Minister by President Edgars Rinkevics and subsequent election by the Parliament, the Latvian Parliament. The government is a coalition between the New Unity party, Union of Greens and Farmers, and The Progressives. This coalition represents a broad political spectrum, with Silina herself being a member of the centre-right New Unity party.

The cabinet held its first meeting on the day it was sworn in, signifying the commencement of its official duties. The cabinet comprises Prime Minister and 14 sectoral ministers responsible for various domains including Defence, Justice, Agriculture, Culture, Economics, Education and Science, Environmental Protection and Regional Development, Finance, Foreign Affairs, Health, Interior, Transport, Welfare, and Climate and Energy.

Figure 1.



The formation of the Silina cabinet came in the wake of the resignation of the previous Prime Minister, marking a phase of political transition. The broad coalition under Silina's leadership aims at addressing various issues facing Latvia, ensuring a balanced representation from the different political factions within the coalition.

This cabinet configuration offers a blend of political ideologies aimed at fostering unity and addressing the diverse needs and aspirations of the Latvian populace. Through this coalition, there is a potential for enhanced policy formulation and implementation across different sectors, owing to the varied political and ideological inputs from the coalition partners.

The success and effectiveness of this cabinet would be determined by its ability to harmonize the different ideological standpoints, address key national issues and the tense geopolitical situation, while fostering sustainable development in Latvia.

II Current Ministers

Evika Silina, Latvia's Prime Minister since 15 September 2023, is associated with the centre-right New Unity party, which led her to premiership following their 2022 election victory. With a solid legal background, Silina specialized in international and domestic business

law from 2003 to 2012, later transitioning into politics. Initially a legal adviser to the Ministry of the Interior, she moved on to serve as its Parliamentary Secretary from 2013 to 2019, where she was noted for her efforts against synthetic cannabinoids. Silina's political standing rose when elected to the 14th Parliament in 2022 as a New Unity candidate, leading to her appointment as Minister for Welfare. In this role, she aimed to uplift the minimum income and was instrumental in presenting the ratification of the Istanbul Convention to the Parliament in July 2023, marking notable steps in her political journey.

Andris Spruds, the current Minister for Defence of Latvia, has a rich background in academia and politics. He has been associated with Riga Stradins University since 1999, teaching international relations and spearheading the master's program in International Governance and Diplomacy at the Faculty of European Studies. His academic tenure also saw him leading the faculty as its dean and later becoming the director of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs from 2011, garnering recognition as an international policy expert. In the political arena, Spruds marked his entry as a member of the 14th Parliament from the Progressives party list in 2022, eventually joining the party in 2023. He was appointed the Chairman of the European Affairs Committee during his Parliament tenure, showcasing his commitment to engaging in European affairs. His affiliation with the Progressives party and his dual expertise in academia and politics reflect a blend of scholarly insight and practical political engagement, contributing significantly to Latvia's domestic and European policy frameworks.

Krisjanis Karins, having a multifaceted career in academia, business, and politics, transitioned from earning a PhD in linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania to a prominent political career in Latvia. His political voyage commenced with the co-founding of the New Era Party in 2002, which later evolved into the New Unity party. Under this banner, Karins served as a deputy in Latvia's parliament, and as the Minister for Economics, broadening his political horizon as a Member of the European Parliament thereafter. His allegiance to the New Unity party catapulted him to the forefront of Latvian politics as their prime ministerial candidate in 2018, eventually leading to his tenure as the Prime Minister for Latvia till 2023. Notably, the 40th Government lead by him was the longest standing government in Latvian history. Karins's journey culminated in his current role as the Minister for Foreign Affairs, continuing his service to Latvia's governance and international representation.

Viktors Valainis, the current Minister for Economics of Latvia, is affiliated with the "Latvian Farmers' Union" as Chairman and is also a board member of the "Greens and Farmers

Union." His educational background is rooted in real estate and construction entrepreneurship, with degrees from Riga Technical University. Valainis has served as a member in the 14th, 13th, and 12th Parliament, marking a substantial political journey. Besides politics, he held the position of Executive Director at the Association of Large Cities of Latvia from 2016 to 2023 and had stints as the Parliamentary Secretary at both the Ministry of Economics and the Ministry of Transport. His candidacy in the Parliament elections saw a notable shift in political dynamics within his party. This blend of political and professional experience showcases Valainis as a significant player in Latvia's economic and political spheres, now continuing his service as the Minister for Economics.

Rihards Kozlovskis, the incumbent Minister for the Interior of Latvia, has a notable career in public administration, especially in internal security domains. Initially affiliated with the Reform Party (2011-2014), he later joined Unity (2014-present), marking his political evolution. Starting as a junior inspector at the Ministry of the Interior, his expertise in internal security grew over the years, earning him the trust of the Parliament for the Interior Minister role. Internationally, Kozlovskis emphasized Latvia's crucial role in guarding the EU's external borders, showcasing Baltic States' collective efforts. His exemplary work during the 2006 Riga Summit was recognized with the Order of Viesturs award. Kozlovskis' journey, from early security roles to advocating for Latvia's position in the EU, alongside his political affiliations, illustrates a career dedicated to enhancing Latvia's internal security and its collaborative engagement within the European framework.

Arvils Aseradens, Latvia's Finance Minister since December 2022, is affiliated with the "Unity" political party. With a master's degree in Economic Geography from the University of Latvia, his career blends political and financial expertise. Prior to his current role, he was the Minister for Economics and Deputy Prime Minister in the Kucinskis cabinet. His political journey also saw him as a Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Finance and a Member of the 11th Parliament. Besides politics, Aseradens is engaged in international financial institutions, holding positions on the boards of the Nordic Investment Bank and the World Bank since 2022. As Finance Minister, he has emphasized strengthening Latvia's financial sector.

Anda Caksa, affiliated with the New Unity political party, has a substantial background in the medical field, transitioning into a noteworthy political career. Holding a medical degree from the Medical Academy of Latvia and a residency in paediatrics from Riga Stradins University, she also pursued an MBA in Health Care Management. Professionally, Caksa

served as a paediatrician before venturing into managerial roles within the pharmaceutical sector. Her political journey commenced as the Minister for Health of Latvia (2016-2019), later becoming a member of the 13th and 14th Parliament. Since 14 December 2022, she has been the Minister for Education and Science, actively engaging in educational policy discussions, including teacher remuneration and school safety measures. Additionally, she has contributed to various projects such as lecturing at the Latvian School of Cosmetologists and developing the Acute Coronary Syndrome Registry, displaying a blend of medical expertise and political engagement in her career trajectory.

Kaspars Melnis, affiliated with the Union of Greens and Farmers, currently serves as Latvia's Minister for Climate and Energy since 15 September 2023. Prior, he was a member of the 14th Parliament, demonstrating his political engagement. His professional trajectory also embraces agricultural leadership roles, reflecting his diverse expertise. Before national politics, he held a deputy position in the Rezekne Municipality Council. Melnis met with President Edgars Rinkevics to discuss energy security and potential solutions for energy price surges, showcasing his proactive approach in addressing energy concerns. One of his primary objectives as Minister is reducing electricity distribution tariffs, emphasizing his commitment to energy affordability. His multi-dimensional career, encompassing politics, agriculture, and now energy and climate, demonstrates a well-rounded approach to his current ministerial role, aiming to tackle Latvia's climate and energy challenges by harmonizing sustainability with affordability.

Agnese Logina, a member of The Progressives party since 2017, holds the position of Latvia's Minister for Culture as of 15 September 2023. With a strong foundation in cultural studies, film curation, and policy expertise, Logina has been a prominent figure in Latvia's cultural sector. Prior to her ministerial role, she served as a Deputy at the Riga City Council, Head of Riga Film Museum, and a guest lecturer at the Latvian Academy of Culture, enriching her expertise in cultural theory. Her stint as a film curator and critic further showcases her extensive cultural knowledge. Notably, her co-chairing the Riga City Council's Culture Commission underpins her significant role in shaping cultural policies. Logina's multifaceted career blends her cultural and political endeavours, portraying her as a capable minister dedicated to intertwining Latvia's cultural vibrancy with political frameworks, thereby aiming to foster a rich cultural environment within the country.

Uldis Augulis, affiliated with the Union of Greens and Farmers, has held significant roles in Latvia's government. He's served thrice as Minister for Welfare, notably from 2009 to 2010, 2014 to 2016, and since 15 September 2023, and twice as Minister for Transport between 2010 to 2011 and 2016 to 2019. Augulis has also been an active parliamentarian, recently as a member of the 14th Parliament until 2023, and headed the Greens and Farmers Union faction during the 13th Parliament. His leadership extends to local governance, having chaired the Bērze Municipality Council, and agricultural sectors, notably as Chairman of the Dobele Division for the "Latvian Farmers' Union." Augulis also spearheaded a pilot project under the Ministry of Welfare to foster an active ageing strategy for longer and better working lives in Latvia. His multifaceted career illustrates a dedicated service across different governmental levels, significantly impacting Latvia's welfare, transport, and agricultural sectors.

Kaspars Briskens is the Minister for Transport of Latvia, having taken office in September 2023. Affiliated with "The Progressives" since 2021, he previously was a member of "Movement For!" from 2017 to 2021. Briskens boasts an impressive academic background, graduating from the Riga State Gymnasium No.1 and the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga, later earning a master's in economics from Stockholm University. His career trajectory encompasses roles in diplomacy and transport. Starting in 2005, he served the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then the Embassy of Latvia in Sweden. In 2011, he transitioned to the Ministry of Transport, later representing the Ministry in NATO logistics cooperation and leading the Latvian Logistics Association. From 2012-2020, he played a key role in AirBaltic's growth. His involvement with the Rail Baltica project spans from diplomatic to strategic roles. Additionally, since 2019, Briskens has been an annual lecturer at the Baltic Institute of Corporate Governance, underlining his commitment to good governance and progressive ideologies.

Inese Libina-Egnere, the Minister for Justice of Latvia since December 14, 2022, boasts a formidable blend of academic and professional experiences aligning with her current role. Affiliated with "New Unity," her political journey spans from the "Zatlers' Reform Party" to "Unity." Academically, she holds a PhD in Law from the University of Latvia and an LL.M. degree (Summa Cum Laude) from Albert-Ludwig-University, Germany. Professionally, her initial roles at the "Liepa, Skopiņa/BORENIUS" law firm and as an Assistant Professor at the University of Latvia grounded her in the legal domain. Additionally, her tenure as a legal advisor to the President, Valdis Zatlers, enriched her understanding of state affairs. Politically, her trajectory in the Parliament (Latvian Parliament) saw her in pivotal roles, notably as Deputy

Speaker and Chairperson of several committees. Internationally, she led the Latvian delegation to the Council of Europe and focused on human rights and Moldova's situation. Given her extensive legal, academic, and political background, Libina-Egnere is well-suited for her role as Minister for Justice.

Hosams Abu Meri, born in Lebanon in 1974, is the current Minister for Health of Latvia. A seasoned gastroenterologist, he boasts memberships in esteemed medical associations like the American Gastroenterological Association and the Latvian Association of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy. He has also been actively practicing medicine as a gastroenterologist at VC4 since 2006. His transition from Lebanon to Latvia began with his medical studies, which he later complemented by fostering cultural exchanges through roles in the Lebanese–Latvian Cultural Society and the Arab Culture Centre in Riga. Politically, he became the Unity party's faction head in 2017 and served as a Member of Parliament from 2022 to 2023. His dual expertise in both medicine and politics culminated in his historical appointment as the first cabinet member from the Middle East in Latvia. Given his medical credentials, coupled with his political engagements, Abu Meri is aptly equipped for his role as Minister for Health in Latvia.

Inga Berzina, the current Minister for Environmental Protection and Regional Development of Latvia, possesses an extensive background in governance and regional development. Elected to the 14th Parliament, she chaired the Social and Employment Matters Committee, further showcasing her leadership abilities. Her tenure as the Mayor of Kuldīga demonstrates first-hand experience with local governance and regional concerns. Internationally, Berzina has been at the forefront, representing Latvia at the Congress of Local and Regional Municipalities of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Furthermore, her involvement with the European Committee of the Regions' NAT Commission suggests a profound understanding of various facets of regional development and environmental concerns. Her dialogue with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, emphasizing human rights and environmental protection, resonates with her ministerial objectives. Given her comprehensive experience in both national and international spheres, Berzina is well-equipped to lead as the Minister for Environmental Protection and Regional Development.

Armands Krauze, the Minister for Agriculture since September 15, 2023, is uniquely positioned for this role, given his vast experience in both agriculture and politics. Born in 1970, Krauze's educational foundation lies in agriculture and horticulture from the Latvian University of Agriculture and apiculture studies from Vecbeļri Technical School. Politically, he's been deeply

affiliated with the Union of Greens and Farmers, holding leadership roles such as Chairman and Deputy Chairman. His political acumen extends to parliamentary roles, serving in the 12th, 13th, and 14th Parliament, and holding positions like the Parliamentary Secretary in both the Prime Minister's office and the Ministry of Agriculture. Professionally, Krauze's two-decade tenure as an organic beekeeping expert at the Latvian National Accreditation Bureau, combined with his educational role at the Latvian University of Agriculture, solidifies his agricultural credentials. Internationally, representing Latvian farmers and leading beekeeping councils further accentuates his suitability as Minister for Agriculture.

III Contents of the Declaration of the Government

The Cabinet of Ministers, under the leadership of PM Evika Silina, envisions Latvia as a country that is Latvian in essence, prosperous, safe, and inclusive. Positioned within Europe, this vision aims to navigate Latvia sustainably through demographic, climatic, technological, and digital changes. The declaration posits the people of Latvia as the nation's most significant asset, underscoring the intrinsic value of its citizens in the country's narrative.

In times of geopolitical tumult, the declaration emphasizes the unity of the Latvian people, working collectively towards enhancing national security and ensuring holistic growth for the society. The welfare of both present and future generations is highlighted as a paramount concern.

At the heart of this vision lie foundational values: freedom, democracy, rule of law, and the Latvian cultural heritage. These values are portrayed as the guiding principles underpinning every decision made by the Cabinet. By engaging the public and promoting lifelong learning, the government aims to ensure equal and fair opportunities for every Latvian citizen, allowing them to live with dignity and realize their aspirations.

The declaration also underscores a commitment to Latvia's future competitiveness. It outlines an ambition to create a sustainable nation that improves the quality of life for families and strikes a balance between social, environmental, and economic policy dimensions. This holistic approach signifies a move towards comprehensive development, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various sectors.

The initial sections of the declaration underscore Latvia's commitment to maintaining its Euro-Atlantic foreign policy trajectory, reinforcing national security amidst the rapid changes

in the global political landscape. This commitment reaffirms Latvia's position within the international community and its alliances.

IV Work in the First Month of the Government

Since 15 September 2023, the Latvian government, led by Prime Minister Evika Silina from the "New Unity" party, has been involved in a series of crucial events, each marking a distinctive aspect of governance.

The government faced a stern test when the Parliament, in an emergency session, rejected a no-confidence vote against the Minister for Education and Science, Anda Caksa. This was over the controversial educational materials on sexual education produced by the State Education Content Centre. Notably, these materials were introduced into schools without informing parents, which led to public outrage. The main contention here is the balance between modernizing education and ensuring parental involvement in sensitive areas of children's education. This event underscores the challenges that come with educational reforms, especially when they intersect with societal values and parental rights. It's evident that the government aims for a modern approach to education, but the methods of implementation need refinement to avoid such controversies.

The damage to the "Balticconnector" gas pipeline has raised concerns about the readiness of the nation's critical infrastructure. In response, PM Silina has directed institutions to assess the nation's infrastructure for potential risks. Her emphasis on awaiting investigation results and ensuring energy sufficiency for the winter demonstrates a pragmatic approach to crisis management. This showcases the government's commitment to energy security and infrastructure resilience. The reconsideration of the Skulte liquefied natural gas terminal law further highlights a proactive approach to future energy needs.

The State Security Service initiated a criminal investigation over potential defamation targeting PM Silina, disseminated by a Russian propaganda television channel. This move is not just about protecting an individual but about safeguarding Latvia's democratic fabric against external disinformation campaigns. By addressing the issue head-on, the government is sending a strong message against foreign interference and disinformation campaigns, emphasizing its commitment to protecting the democratic integrity of the nation.

The decision to reduce the VAT rate on fresh fruits and vegetables to 12% from the speculated 21% is a significant economic measure. While this rate is higher than the previous 5%, it is a compromise that might reflect the government's broader economic strategies. The government is making efforts to balance welfare concerns with economic realities. By ensuring a reduced VAT rate, it's supporting healthier consumption habits while possibly accounting for fiscal needs.

The support for the "Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence" or the Istanbul Convention is a landmark decision. With recent high-profile cases of violence against women, the ratification of this convention signals the government's commitment to addressing this grave issue. By emphasizing alignment with Latvia's Constitution, the government is also ensuring that international agreements resonate with national values.

Conclusions

In just over a month, the Latvian government, under PM Silina, has navigated through a diverse array of challenges, from educational reforms and infrastructure readiness to tackling disinformation and upholding human rights. These events highlight a government that is responsive, adaptive, and committed to the welfare and democratic values of its people. As Latvia moves forward, it will be essential to see how these decisions play out in the long run and what they mean for the nation's future trajectory. The majority of the ministers have significant experience and qualifications that align with their respective roles. For instance, the Minister for Defence has a rich background in foreign policy research and policy analysis, and the Minister for Agriculture, Armands Krauze, has vast experience in the agriculture field and politics. In conclusion, while many of the ministers seem aptly qualified for their roles, there are potential points of contention and challenges, as evidenced by the fractured parliament and specific incidents like the confidence vote.

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