

LATVIA



The Russia-Ukraine War and Right-Wing Populism in Latvia

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has profoundly impacted Latvia's politics, economy and society. It also moved Latvia's political centre to the right and mainstreamed many of the core policy positions of the dominant Radical Right National Alliance (NA), such as squeezing the Russian language from the public sphere, dismantling the publicly-funded Russian-language school system, and demolishing Soviet-era monuments. This policy shift has been made possible by the NA's gradual political mainstreaming over the last decade (it has been in a governing coalition since 2011) and long-standing opposition to Putin's regime, as well as existing contacts and support for Ukrainian nationalist groups. As a result, there is a public perception that the NA was "right" about Russia. As the NA has mainstreamed and abandoned its populist rhetoric, new populist parties have emerged in Latvia. Parliamentary elections in October 2022 saw new "Latvian" (the Latvia First Party, LPV) and "Russian" (Stability! or S!) populist parties elected to parliament. The LPV largely refused to engage with the war, focusing on domestic economic issues, while S! has capitalized on the "we are for peace" niche left open by other parties' denunciation of Russia's invasion.

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Introduction

Right-wing populism, and populism more broadly, has long been a feature of Latvia's political landscape. Indeed, in December 2021, a few months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Latvia's president, Egils Levits, a former judge at the European Union Court of Justice, warned that populism was a threat to Latvia's democracy:

We see what happens when populists are elected to parliament in Latvia and elsewhere. They collapse. They are not capable of meaningful politics, simply wasting your vote and creating difficulties for the parliament and the state. ("President urges voters to be on guard", 2021)

This article begins by reflecting on the scope and nature of populism in Latvia since the regaining of sovereign independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It then moves to consider the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine on the current crop of Latvia's populist parties and politicians (the supply side) and the impact on public perceptions and voters (the demand side). The final section considers the short- and long-term impacts of the war on Latvia's populist landscape.

Background

The concept of populism is famously contested. More than fifty years ago, Peter Wiles (1969, p. 166) wrote, "to each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axe he grinds." Although there has been more academic consensus in recent decades, there remain three major contemporary approaches to populism that conceptualize it as either a style of politics, a political strategy, or a thin ideology.

Latvian media, the public and politicians alike tend to use the term as a "catch-all" used to criticize anything they dislike or cannot explain, the "mystery ingredient that explains why a rival political leader has inexplicably large support" (Deegan-Krause, 2007, p. 141). A search of headlines on the influential "Delfi" news portal reveals that issues ranging from speeding fines and religious education in schools

1. From a search of the term "populism" in the *Delfi* archive:
<https://www.delfi.lv/meklet/?q=populisms>, retrieved January 27, 2023.

through to a new bottle deposit scheme have been described as “populist.”² Vague and sweeping accusations of populism have long been a feature of Latvian politics, particularly among the parties that appeal to the ethnic Latvian, rather than Russian-speaking, electorate.

The late Joachim Siegerist, a shadowy far-right German–Latvian politician who never spoke Latvian, is generally regarded as Latvia’s first major post-communist populist. Having been kicked out of the radical right-wing Latvian National Independence Movement (Latvijas Nacionālās Neatkarības Kustība, LNNK) in 1994, Siegerist founded the People’s Movement for Latvia (Tautas Kustība Latvija, TKL). During the 1995 parliamentary election, he campaigned on both a nationalist and anti-corruption platform of “Russians to Russia and Latvia for Latvians,” handing out free medicine to emphasize the perceived failure of government economic policies and promising to weed out corrupt bureaucrats and politicians who were supposedly holding Latvia back.³ This combination of Russophobe nationalism and criticism of a corrupt and out-of-touch elite set the template for right-wing populism in Latvia for the next three decades. Twenty-first-century additions to this winning formula have included criticism of liberal ideas spreading to Latvia via European elites and, of course, anti-Soros conspiracy theories.

The most recent incarnation of the right-wing populist mantle has been the National Alliance (Nacionālā Apvienība, NA), a merger of first-wave Latvian nationalist parties that traced their roots to the late 1980s independence movement and a second wave of younger nationalist activists that came out of the various nationalist organizations set up in the 1990s and early 2000s. The NA first entered parliament as a party union rather than a single party in 2010 and has been a part of every governing coalition since 2011. Participating in government has led to a mainstreaming of the party and an attendant decline in its populist appeals, with anti-elite and anti-corruption rhetoric clearly having less traction now the party has become an established part of the governing elite.

The mainstreaming of NA has opened a space for new populist political forces to emerge. However, these populists are “pure” rather than right-wing populists. First, in 2014, Artuss Kaimiņš, a moderately successful Latvian actor, leveraged a “shock jock” radio show called “the Dog Kennel” (*Suņu Būda*), where he regularly humiliated politicians by accusing them of graft or incompetence into a political

2. For more details, see Auers (2017).



career.⁴ He was elected to parliament in 2014 when recruited as a vote-catching “locomotive” on the party’s list of the mainstream Latvian Regional Alliance (Latvijas Reģionālā Apvienība, LRA). Kaimiņš was swift to position himself as a political outsider, refusing to join LRA and then leaving the party’s parliamentary fraction altogether. He roamed parliament equipped with a pocket-sized camera, filming parliament’s plenary hall as he addressed MPs, discussions in parliamentary committees and indiscrete encounters on the streets. In advance of the 2018 election, he founded a new party—Who Owns the State? (Kam Pieder Valsts? or KPV)—which adopted a ferocious anti-elite rhetoric and fuzzy policy programme. However, KPV was not Russophobic. KPV won the second-largest share of the vote, took 16 out of the 100 seats in Latvia’s parliament and joined the governing coalition formed after a record-breaking three and a half months of negotiations. KPV collapsed just a few years after the election, torn apart by the fact that its MPs had almost nothing in common except an anti-elite attitude that had little significance after the decision to join the government and become part of the political elite.

Aldis Gobzems, KPV’s candidate for prime minister in 2018, followed in Kaimiņš’s footsteps and swiftly left KPV to form his own populist party, initially called Law and Order (Likums un Kārtība, LuK) and then renamed For Each and Every One (Katram un Katrai, KuK). Similarly to KPV, KuK was ideologically ambiguous while fielding relentless anti-elite rhetoric that tapped into the anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown movements that had spread across Latvia during the Covid-19 pandemic. In December 2021, Gobzems organized a “Rhododendron tour” of Latvia, culminating in an unlicensed, bawdy evening demonstration outside the Latvian president’s office in Riga Castle.

Another new party was also formed in advance of the 2018 election and similarly tapped into the anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown movements. Like KuK, Latvia First (Latvija Pirmā Vietā, LPV) was deeply critical of the government and the political elite. However, it was led and bankrolled by one of Latvia’s three “oligarchs,” Ainārs Šlesers, who entered politics in 1998 and served as a deputy prime minister as well as stints as economics and transport minister. Šlesers had been forced out of mainstream politics in 2011 after then-president Valdis Zatlers had called an early election with the explicit aim of forcing Latvia’s “oligarchs” out of politics. Public

3. See the “Suņu Būda” channel on YouTube for archived shows:
<https://www.youtube.com/@sunubudatv805>.

dissatisfaction with the pandemic offered him a route back to parliament. The major difference between LPV and KuK was the former's focus on the economy and advocacy for tighter commercial ties with Russia. At its founding in August 2021, Šlesers stated that “the current government has no economic development plan [...] people are no longer prepared to accept this elite which has been in power for the last 20 years” (Klūga, 2021).

The line-up of populists was joined by Aivars Lembergs, one of the dominant figures of the political scene in the post-Soviet era, who was released from prison in 2022, having served part of a sentence for convictions of money laundering and abuse of office. Despite being an influential political figure through the Green-Farmers Union (Zaļo Zemnieku Savienība, ZZS) and mayor of the wealthy transit port city of Ventspils, Lembergs has long denounced European and national elites and lamented the influence of George Soros. He had even called the increased NATO troop presence in Latvia following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea an “occupation” (“Lembergs iespējamo NATO spēku”, 2014).

The year 2022 also bought a new addition to the populist landscape in Latvia. About one-quarter of Latvia's voters are Russian speakers, and Latvian political parties have long drawn a “red line” around parties representing this minority, arguing that they pose a threat to Latvia's Western-oriented political trajectory. For the last decade, the Harmony Social Democracy party (Sakaņa Sociāl Demokrātija, SSD) has monopolized the representation of the interests of Russian speakers. However, in 2022, this dominance was challenged by an upstart political party led by Aleksejs Rošļikovs, a member of SSD, before he was kicked out of the party in 2019. This new outfit—For Stability! (Stabilitātei! or S!)—was founded in February 2021 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia and used the same anti-vaccination tropes as LPV and KuK but targeted the Russian-speaking audience.

The supply side of populism in Latvia

Latvia was well stocked with populist parties and politicians in early 2022, ahead of that year's scheduled parliamentary election in October. Latvian laws on parties and elections help to explain this steady supply of populists. First, the threshold for creating a new party is low, with just 200 members needed to register a party and 500 to compete in a parliamentary election. Parties must be registered at least twelve months before an election. This allows both charismatic figures (such as Gobzems and KuK as well as Rošļikovs and S!) and well-resourced figures (Šlesers



and LPV) to swiftly set up political vehicles.

The initial core issue for all three new populist parties had been the incumbent government's Covid pandemic policies, particularly vaccination and lockdown, both of which had mobilized small but vociferous groups in 2020 and 2021. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 quickly made these issues largely irrelevant. Latvia shares a 214-kilometre border with Russia and a living memory of Soviet (often equated with Russian) occupation. The war was considered an existential threat to Latvia.

Attitudes towards Russia swiftly hardened. Policies that had long been promoted by the NA—phasing out Russian-language schooling, marginalizing the use of Russian in both public and private sectors and removing Soviet-era monuments—became mainstream. The NA became still more radical, discussing the forced emigration of pro-Kremlin Russian speakers from Latvia (Spalvēns, 2023). As an NA parliamentary deputy reflected during parliamentary debates on Latvia's foreign policy in January 2023, “we will come to this matter sooner or later, colleagues, like all of us have come together on other issues that until recently were considered taboo” (Ventasballs, 2014).

This shift in attitudes to Russia impacted LPV, KuK and Lembergs, who had been nominated as the ZZS candidate for prime minister. LPV, which had advocated closer economic ties with Russia, was forced to backtrack (instead advocating closer ties with other post-Soviet states). As a result, criticism of the EU and the United States, now critical to Latvia's future security, was muted. However, by the time of the election in October, the war's impact on the economy through high inflation and rapidly rising energy prices allowed LPV to return to the theme of the economic incompetence of what they termed the “Kariņš and Levits regime” and, referring to the émigré backgrounds of both the prime minister, Krišjānis Kariņš and President Levits and urged them to “return home” (Kariņš was born in the United States and Levits is of Baltic German heritage and fled with his family to West Germany in 1972 where he lived until 1990). With only the pandemic and an anti-elite message to draw on, KuK's founder, Aldis Gobzems, simply left the country and resettled his family in Spain. Although he returned to campaign in the summer, he was diminished, and his party polled just 3.7% in the election.

S! seized on the opportunity offered by SSD's swift condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In contrast to SSD, S! did not condemn Russia (although it

stayed away from directly supporting the invasion; there was not one word of the Ukraine war in the party's electoral programme) (Central Election Commission, 2022). Avoiding the war (and focusing on peace) was interpreted as a “dog whistle”, essentially the same as siding with Russia, especially as S! described the EU as a “strangling union” in its electoral programme.

The demand side of populism in Latvia

Russia's invasion of Ukraine dampened the appeal of Latvia's populists and boosted the appeal of the mainstream parties as well as the Radical Right. A July 2022 poll showed that 66% (compared to 37% a year earlier) of Latvians had a negative view of Russia, with just 20% (48% in 2021) having a positive outlook (“Aptauja”, 2022). This clearly strengthened the position of Latvia's most prominent Russia hawks, the NA, as well as Prime Minister Kariņš's New Unity party (Jaunā Vienotība, JV), whose experienced foreign minister Edgars Rinkēvičs (he has held the post since 2011) had emerged as a vocal and active critic of Russia on the European and global stage. There was broad support for the government's backing of Ukraine (second only to Estonia as a percentage of GDP) and the 30,000+ Ukrainian refugees who settled in Latvia (and whose willingness to learn Latvian and integrate into Latvian society was often juxtaposed with those Russian speakers who still do not speak Latvian 30 years after independence and the 10% who remain non-citizens). Actions to limit Russian visas to Europe as well as the government's declaration that it would not accept Russians fleeing the draft, were also supported by Latvians.

Nevertheless, some muted support for populist parties remained.⁵ While Russia's actions pushed many Latvian voters towards the status quo, the long-term trends of comparative economic decline and voter disillusionment with the political elite endured. Russia's invasion did little to shift public attitudes toward the state of democracy. A June 2022 survey by the Latvian pollster SKDS found that just 36% of Latvians are satisfied with the state of domestic democracy while 53% are dissatisfied, which is roughly in line with data from 2021 (37% and 51%, respectively) and 2020 (39% and 49%) (“Iedzīvotāju domas”, 2022). Moreover, the harsh “valley of tears” of the economic and social crisis of the 1990s as well as the deep recession of 2008–09, left scars. Eurostat (2022) data shows that Latvia's poor economic performance since the 2008–09 crisis has left it far behind neighbouring Estonia and Lithuania (in 2021, Latvia's GDP per capita was just 72% of the EU



average, while both Estonia and Lithuania were at 89%). This disenchantment remained, with about 10% of voters supporting the LPV and KuK. The LPV's more refined communication, focusing on economic issues, proved effective as the true cost of the war began to bite.

The SSD finished below the 5% threshold as Russian speakers switched over to S! A poll taken just a few days after Russia's invasion revealed that just 22% of Latvia's Russians supported Ukraine, and roughly the same number supported Russia (21%). The majority claimed to be neutral, although there was undoubtedly an element of self-censorship at play (Domburs, 2022). S! was more appealing to this "neutral" group of Russian speakers.

Discussion and perspectives

Russia's war on Ukraine has shifted Latvia's political centre to the right and mainstreamed many of the National Alliance's long-standing policy positions, such as squeezing the Russian language from the public sphere, dismantling the publicly-funded Russian-language school system, dismantling Soviet-era monuments and renaming Russian streets with Latvian names. There is a public perception, also frequently repeated by party leaders, that the NA was "right" about Russia. However, while the NA remains a party of the Radical Right, its gradual political mainstreaming over the last decade has made it far less populist.

Parties attempting to seize the populist political space left by the mainstreaming of the NA have proven to be less enduring because they are pure populists, with nothing to bind members together beyond anti-elite rhetoric. When the populists join the government, as KPV did in 2018, they lose their *raison d'être* with no "thick" ideology to attach to. However, LPV and S! have been in parliamentary opposition after a new government was formed in December 2022. With little prospect of joining the government, they will likely maintain their populist appeal in the coming years. However, it will likely be targeted less at foreign elites such as the United States, the EU and NATO, who are now so critical to Latvian security and instead focused more on domestic economic issues. S! will also remain in opposition and will draw on the rich seam of resentment of the Russian-speaking population towards the "de-russification" policies that have now become mainstream in Latvia.

4. Latvia First won 6.2% of the vote and 9 seats in Latvia's 100-member parliament, while ZZS won 12.4% (16 seats) and S! 6.8% (11 seats).

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