

LATVIA



# Populism and the 2024 European Parliament Election in Latvia

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## Abstract

Populism has been a feature of Latvia's political landscape since the 1990s. New insurgent parties have utilized increasingly anti-establishment rhetoric, often through intensive and innovative use of social media, to win seats in the Latvian parliament and even join government coalitions. However, European Parliament elections in Latvia have been comparatively free of populism. There are two main reasons for this. First, and most importantly, there is a broad pro-European consensus in Latvia. Membership in the European Union and NATO is central to all three Baltic nations' security strategy in light of growing threats from Russia. As a result, there is no serious Eurosceptic party in Latvia and no explicitly Eurosceptic politicians have ever been elected to the European Parliament from Latvia. Second, Latvia's voters tend to support serious, experienced politicians in European elections, believing that they are better placed to support Latvia's national interests in the European system. Party politics take second place in campaigning, with the focus being on the experience of candidates (after all, Latvia elected just nine MEPs in 2024) rather than policy differences. As a result, populist anti-elite rhetoric has less salience. This chapter will explore the extent to which the 2024 European Parliament election in Latvia has continued these trends.

**Keywords:** *Latvia; populism; European Parliament; Russia–Ukraine War; election campaign*

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## Introduction

Populism – understood here as a thin ideology magnifying a binary divide between the ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt elite’ (see Mudde 2004 and Stanley 2008) – has been a feature of Latvia’s political landscape since the 1990s. Both national parliamentary elections and local government elections have seen a broad bouillabaisse of populist parties campaigning, winning seats and even taking up local and national office. In contrast, European Parliament (EP) elections have been largely free from populist campaigning and few populists have won seats in the EP.

This analysis is divided into four main parts. The first section identifies the key contemporary populist parties in Latvia. The second part drills down on the supply side of the campaign, briefly outlining the nature of EP elections in Latvia, explaining why populists are more marginalized in this vote than in other elections in Latvia, and outlining key policy debates over the course of the campaign. The third section drills down on the electoral results (the demand side) and political manoeuvring following the 8 June poll. The final section reflects on the broader impact of the election on Latvian and European populist politics.

## Background

A broad variety of populist actors has populated Latvia’s political stage over the last few decades. Institutional weaknesses, internal feuding as well as a failure to deliver on (often outlandish) populist promises, have contributed to a steady rhythm of party collapse and construction. KPV LV (a Latvian abbreviation for ‘Who Owns the State’?) was formed in the run-up to the 2018 election, ran a fiercely populist anti-establishment campaign, and finished second with a vote share of 14.25% and 16 of 100 parliamentary seats. However, following the established Latvian populist pattern, the party imploded and collapsed within a few months of the election.

By the following parliamentary election in 2022, the populist vacuum had been filled by two new parties that won seats in the legislature. The For Stability! (Stabilitātei, S!) party, founded in 2021, appealed to Latvia’s significant Russian-speaking minority, which makes up around one-quarter of the electorate, while Latvia First (Latvija Pirmā Vietā, LPV) campaigned on a Trumpist national-populist platform that aimed to win both Latvian and Russian-speaking voters.<sup>1</sup> S! finished fifth, with a 6.8% share of the vote and 11 of the Latvian parliament’s 100 seats. LPV also polled above Latvia’s 5% threshold for parliamentary representation with 6.2% of votes and received nine seats.



S! benefitted from the collapse of support for the Harmony Social Democracy (Saskaņa Sociāldemokrātija, SSD) party, which had previously monopolized the Russian-speaking vote in Latvia. However, SSD was quick to speak out against Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which went against the general sentiment of Latvia's Russian speakers, who were either more uncertain of placing blame for the war on Russia or those having been exposed to Russian state propaganda, were supportive of Russia's actions. S! was quick to fill the void, walking a rhetorical tightrope of refusing to blame Russia and instead arguing for 'peace', as well as focusing on antivaccine and anti-establishment rhetoric.

LPV was founded in 2021 as a platform for Ainārs Šlesers, a serial political entrepreneur who has previously founded and led the New Party (Jaunā Partija, JP), Latvia's First Party (Latvijas Pirmā Partija, LPP), For a Good Latvia (Par Labu Latviju, PLL), the Šlesera Reform Party (Šlesera Reforma Partija, ŠRP) and United for Latvia (Vienoti Latvijai, VL), and previously served as a former deputy prime minister, economics minister and deputy mayor of the capital city of Rīga. LPV's 2022 electoral campaign focused on a sharp critique of the incumbent prime minister, Krišjānis Kariņš, and sitting president, Egils Levits (which they referred to as the 'Kariņš–Levits regime'), particularly focusing on their COVID-19-era policies and Latvia's stagnant economy. The party initially denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even expelling the party's candidate for president, Jūlija Stepaņenko, from the party ranks after she refused to denounce the war. However, in subsequent years, the party has softened its stance, increasingly talking about the need for negotiations, peace and the renewal of economic relations with Russia.

Both S! and LPV have languished in parliamentary opposition since the 2022 parliamentary election. Latvia has never had a party representing Russian-speaking interests in a government coalition and Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has made it even more unlikely that the pro-Kremlin S! could break this pattern. While LPV is more mainstream and critical of Russia on the Ukraine war issue, the party's founder and leader, Ainārs Šlesers, has long been identified as one of Latvia's three 'oligarchs'. Centrist parties have erected a cordon sanitaire around LPV. LPV's aggressive anti-establishment discourse has made it relatively easy for other parties to keep it out of coalition negotiations. The two parties' status in opposition gave their anti-establishment populist discourse greater authenticity. They dominated

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1. During one pre-election interview with LPV's leaders, Vilis Krištopāns (who did win a seat in the European Parliament) stated that he would always vote the same as Donald Trump on any issue.



the populist part of the EP election campaign. Latvia's mainstream public and private media focused their debates, interviews and media stories on those parties polling above 2% in public opinion surveys. Thus, S! and LPV were invited to participate in various broadcast debates and interviews, while the five other populist parties in the campaign were largely ignored.

Briefly, these other five populist parties were, first, the Sovereign Power (Suverēnā Vara, SV) party, which also primarily appealed to Russian speakers and was dominated by politicians that had previously been in the more centrist pro-Russian speaker SSD, as well as Jūlija Stepaņenko, who had been expelled from LPV for her refusal to denounce Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The New Latvian Union (Apvienība Jaunlatvieši, AJ) was a curious combination of experienced populists (such as Aldis Gobzems, who was KPV LV's prime ministerial candidate in the 2018 election) and failed Russian-speaking populists (such as Glorija Grevcova, who had been elected to parliament on the S! ticket in 2022 but was stripped of her seat in parliament having been found guilty of lying about her education and professional experience). Power and Strength of the Nation (Tautas Varas Spēks, TVS) was a political vehicle for Valentīns Jeremejevs, a Russian-speaking businessman who has long been seeking a place in Latvian politics. The populist Nation, Land, Stateness (Tauta, Zeme, Valstiskums, TZV) party was a minor nationalist outfit that recruited Aleksandrs Kiršteins, a prominent nationalist politician who had been expelled from the National Alliance party after an unsanctioned trip to China. Finally, the Centre Party (Centra Partija, CP) made clear that it was a political vehicle for politicians from more radical pro-Russia parties that had been barred from competing in the election. Despite its name, CP was the only authentically Eurosceptic party in the election, largely down to it featuring a long-running and unsuccessful Eurosceptic Latvian politician – Normunds Grostiņš – on its slate of candidates.

## The supply side

Populists have fared badly in Latvia's EP elections since 2004. There are two major reasons for this. First, Latvia has few seats in the EP – just nine (up from eight, after a reallocation of seats following Brexit) in 2024 – and Latvia's MEPs have a resultingly high profile in domestic politics.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Latvia's voters have tended to vote for sober, politically experienced personalities to represent Latvia's national (rather than party) interests in the EP. This pattern of voter behaviour is a structural weakness for populist parties that might have well-known personalities in their ranks but typically lack the gravitas of government experience that Latvia's voters

seek. Second, Euroscepticism is weak in Latvia. Kārlis Bukovskis (2018) has explained that this was down to the crucial role of the EU (and NATO) in guaranteeing Latvia's security as well as the visible role of EU funds in Latvia's economic development since 2004.

LPV was the only populist party participating in this election that was able to mitigate the political personality challenge. It did this by deploying two tactics. First, although the party's charismatic chairman, Ainārs Šlesers, did not stand for the EP, he appeared in most interviews alongside the lead candidates. Moreover, his surname was on the ballot as his son, Ričards Šlesers, was the third candidate on LPV's candidate list (although the younger Šlesers refused to take part in interviews or debates in the election campaign). Indeed, the party's official manifesto opened with the words 'vote for Šlesers' team' (Central Election Commission of Latvia, 2024a). Second, the party's lead candidate on the electoral list was Vilis Krištopāns, a former prime minister from the 1990s who moved to the US state of Florida in the early 2000s, having labelled Latvia a 'country of fools!' (*muļķu zeme!*).<sup>3</sup>

Populist parties campaigned around three key issues.<sup>4</sup> First, the war in Ukraine, both in military and economic terms, was the dominant theme in the election. A second dimension was mainstream politicians' supposed incompetence (or 'selling out') in defending Latvia's economic interests in Brussels. This perfidy was typically linked to domestic corruption and incompetence and was frequently accompanied by a criticism of the European Green Deal (particularly its potentially negative impact on Latvia's economy). A third theme concerned the defence of traditional family / Christian values versus progressive, liberal ideals in Brussels.

Latvia shares a 284-kilometre-long border with Russia and a 173-kilometre-long border with Belarus. As a result, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 inevitably had a significant impact on Latvia's domestic and international politics. While Latvia's mainstream parties were united in denouncing Russia's actions,

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2. For example, Latvia's two longest serving prime ministers, Valdis Dombrovskis (prime minister from 2009–2014) and Krišjānis Kariņš (prime minister from 2019–2023), went straight from the European Parliament to the prime minister's office.
  3. Indeed, LPV has doubled-down on Krištopāns' famous (in Latvia) comment, with party leader Šlesers tweeting in June 2024 that 'Vilis was right! Latvia is a country of fools, because politicians and civil servants consider the people to be fools' (Šlesers, 2024).
  4. This discussion of party programs and policies draws from three key sources. First, the official programs each campaigning party submitted to Latvia's Central Election Commission (which have a 4,000-character limit to ensure equal treatment for all parties). Second, official political party home pages. Third, candidate debates and interviews drawn from television, radio, newspapers and news portals.



supporting international sanctions as well as military, humanitarian and financial support for Ukraine and increasing domestic military spending, re-introducing conscription and developing domestic military readiness, populist parties tended to adopt more ambivalent positions.

While LPV's leaders consistently denounced Russia's actions in Ukraine, they pushed for a more nuanced approach to Russia, arguing that the sanctions imposed by the EU were too harsh (particularly in their impact on Latvia) and that both Europe and the United States continued to have dealings with Russia – so why shouldn't Latvia? As to the issue of Ukraine joining the EU, LPV insisted that the high level of corruption in Ukraine meant that membership should be off the table (for the moment). S! insisted that Ukraine needs to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria for eligibility before it can be considered a member of the EU. S! also refused to identify Russia as the aggressor in the war, preferring to say both sides were at fault and that if elected to the EP, it would seek to create a new party group based on 'peace and diplomacy'. Indeed, S! argued that the war was irrelevant to the European Union (stating that it was a NATO issue), that the EU should limit assistance to Ukraine to the humanitarian sphere and generally sought to avoid entering into deeper discussions on the theme. S! even pushed for renewing energy imports from Russia, and its leaders similarly argued that the EU should compensate Latvia for the adverse economic impacts of the war. The smaller populist parties agreed with LPV and S! that the EU should share the costs of policing and securing Latvia's eastern border with Russia and Belarus. CP went further in stating that it would push for peace in Ukraine and continue the work of former MEP Tatjana Ždanoka (who has been charged with spying for Russia's FSB security service and was banned from competing in the 2024 elections).

The second major populist theme was a sharp denunciation of Latvia's MEPs and governing elite for their previous domestic and European economic policies. S! was typically harsh in its criticism, writing in its program that:

As part of the European Union, we have lost our self-esteem, our ability to protect our sovereign rights and our country's development opportunities. Today's European Union policy, which directly affects Latvia, is virtually incompatible with our country's development and prosperous future. The total economic poverty, bankruptcy of entrepreneurs, immigration policy, absence of a children's program, artificially inflated taxes and prices on energy resources are a direct signal that Latvia's future is at risk. (Central Election Commission of Latvia, 2024b)

LPV similarly argued that mainstream politicians have not defended Latvia's interests in Europe. AJ's program argued that the previous generation of Latvia's politicians was incompetent and corrupt, making 'boring' speeches in Brussels and allowing Latvia to join the EU on unfavourable terms, leading to the destruction of domestic industry and the economy. Indeed, AJ went so far as to argue that Latvia's underdevelopment was deliberately planned by EU politicians and civil servants alongside colluding national politicians. It stated that it would push for compensation from the EU for the damage done to Latvia, for example, by closing domestic sugar factories.<sup>5</sup> LPV particularly focused on the travails of the Rail Baltica project (a major infrastructure project constructing a north-south European gauge railway axis linking Latvia and the other two Baltic states to Poland). The European Green Deal was similarly criticized as being unrealistic and against Latvia's economic interests, as the country was already among the greenest and most environmentally clean in Europe.

Finally, the populist block of parties was sharply critical of Europe's progressive politics, arguing that the EU had been hijacked by pro-LGBTQ+ and Green groups and that they would correct this policy direction by focusing on traditional families (those with a mother and a father) and supporting core Christian values. SV argued that policies should favour traditional families over other forms of family. This issue was also connected to immigration – TZV argued that the EU should not be enlarged with people coming from alien non-Christian cultures. Antivaxxer tropes also appeared, for example, with AJ warning of a planned secret treaty between the EU and the World Health Organization (WHO) that would allow for pandemics to be declared at any time, as well as uncovering an alleged EU plan to destroy printed books in Latvian libraries.

S!'s criticism of the EU ultimately hinted at being open to the idea of Latvia leaving the EU if the conditions of membership were not favourable. When asked during the final pre-election debate on Latvian public television if Latvia should leave the EU and forge a closer relationship with Russia or Belarus, S!'s lead candidate Nikita Piņins answered, 'Only time will tell' (Latvian Public Media, 2024) while in an interview with Delfi TV, party leader Rošļikovs stated that 'if the EU continues to strangle Latvia – what's the point [of membership]?' (DelfiTV, 2024).

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5. Latvia's two sugar mills (in Jelgava and Liepāja) were closed in 2007 as part of a generously financed European Commission program aiming to cut unprofitable sugar production in Europe. It remains a cause célèbre for those arguing that membership of the EU has harmed the Latvian economy.





Populist politicians generally adopted a far more aggressive and belligerent tone than their mainstream counterparts. In the Delfi TV interview with LPV leaders, the female moderator repeatedly asked the male politicians to stop shouting and be less aggressive in their speaking style. This approach can be seen as part of the populist performance in Latvia – populists echo ‘the people’s’ anger at the state of politics and the economy, frequently arguing that the mainstream media are in cahoots with the governing parties and are thus institutionally opposed to opposition (populist) parties.

## The demand side

The final election results came with few surprises. As surveys had predicted, the mainstream parties won the largest share of votes, and of the populist forces, only LPV won a single seat in the EP (and this was won by a former Latvian prime minister, Vilis Krištopāns, continuing the Latvian trend of electing experienced, proven former political office-holders in European elections) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the 2024 European Parliament election in Latvia<sup>6</sup>

Party (European Parliament group)	Number of seats in EP	Share of vote	Name of elected MEPs
<b>New Unity, JV</b> (European People's Party, EPP)	2	25.1%	Valdis Dombrovskis Sandra Kalniete
<b>National Alliance</b> (European Conservatives and Reformists, ECR)	2	22.1%	Roberts Zīle Rihards Kols
<b>Latvia's Development, LA</b> (Renew Europe)	1	9.4%	Ivars Ījabs
<b>United List, AS</b> (European Conservatives and Reformists, ECR)	1	8.2%	Reinis Pozņaks
<b>Progressives, PRO</b> (The Greens / European Free Alliance)	1	7.5%	Mārtiņš Staķis
<b>Harmony Social Democracy, SSD</b> (Socialists and Democrats, S&D)	1	7.1%	Nils Ušakovs
<b>Latvia First, LPV</b> (Patriots For Europe, PŃE)	1	6.2%	Vilis Krištopāns

Source: Central Election Commission of Latvia (2024c).

However, after being elected to the European Parliament, LPV's Vilis Krištopāns found himself without a political home. He was blocked from joining the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group by the National Alliance's Roberts Zīle (a vice president of the European Parliament and senior figure in the ECR), who

stated that LPV's pro-peace rhetoric on the Russia–Ukraine War made it an unsuitable partner for ECR. Krištopāns eventually joined the new Patriots for Europe (Pfe) group.

The populist parties' weak performance in the election was unsurprising. Their position on the Russia–Ukraine War was out of kilter with most ethnic Latvians (who make up three-quarters of the electorate) – a 2023 poll found that 78% of respondents who speak Latvian in their family sympathized with Ukraine, while only 27% of those that speak Russian in their family did so (Krumm, Šukevičs & Zariņš, 2023: 10). A 2024 report found that 58% of respondents who speak Latvian in their family believed that membership of the EU was an advantage in the fulfilment of their dreams, while only 24% of those who speak Russian in their family did so (Ločmele, Zatlers & Krumm, 2024). The core populist 'peace' rhetoric and criticism of the EU only had traction with a minority of the population and these votes went to the candidate with the most experienced political CV.

## Future perspective

Latvia will now have a major politician in the Pfe group, the largest far-right political group in the European Parliament. As a result, LPV will further integrate into the Pfe's network of far-right parties and the party is likely to emerge as the first vocal Euroskeptic force in contemporary Latvia. After all, in a press conference held after returning from Brussels, Krištopāns stated that 'having got know the European Parliament, the situation is even worse than I thought. The European Parliament has been taken over by left-wingers, pride supporters, climate fanatics and [illegal migrant] Welcomists'! (LPV, 2024).

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6. The share of the vote for the other populist parties reviewed in this report was below the 5% electoral threshold: SV 2.6%, AJ 2.1%, S! 2%, CP 1.7%, TZV 0.6%, TVS 0.3%.



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