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Latvia – President Berzins and the difficulties of forming a new government

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On 27 November, Latvian Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis resigned from office taking the political responsibility for the collapse of a supermarket roof which killed 54 people. Since then, president Andris Bērziņš has played a surprisingly active role in forming a new government, yet until now with little success.

The resignation of Valdis Dombrovskis, who has headed three different cabinets since March 2009 (his most recent coalition of three-party centre-right parties had been in office since October 2011) [1], came as a surprise to many observers and was met with criticism from commentators and fellow members of government. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the tragedy some had blamed his government for loosening building regulations and thus being indirectly responsible for the tragedy. Dombrovskis' justification for his resignation ("Latvia needs to have a government that will supported by the Saeima majority and deal with the current situation in the nation"), however, highlights another, likely more important factor for his resignation. Only two weeks earlier and following a number of conflicts within the coalition, Dombrovskis refused to dismiss a disgraced party member of his coalition partner VL-TB/LNNK (National Alliance) from the position as Justice Minister. While the the National Alliance's other representative remained in cabinet, the coalition was effectively terminated and the government has been without a clear majority since.



Latvian president Andris Bērziņš | photo via wikimedia commons

President Bērziņš put pressure on parties to quickly form a new government, yet until now he appears to be a hindrance to the process himself. The Latvian Constitution leaves the president much leeway in appointing a prime minister, yet the established practice has been that the president plays a purely formal role in confirming the outcome of party negotiations. President Bērziņš has taken a different approach by becoming actively involved in the search of a new prime minister (and it is even rumored that it was him who put pressure on Dombrovskis to resign). All four centre-right parties in parliament (i.e. the three coalition parties + Bērziņš' own 'Union of Greens and Farmers' which together command 63% of seats) have vowed to work together in a new coalition government but have not started negotiations yet. Despite being the largest party in parliament, the left-wing 'Harmony Centre' is unlikely to be included in any coalition (both due to the policy distance and its identification with the country's Russian minority) and the four centre-right parties thus present the only viable option for a majority government.

Dombrovskis' 'Unity' Party has proposed three possible candidates who were all rejected by president Bērziņš on the basis that they were not the 'strongest possible candidates'. He has also turned down the candidates of his own party and of the National Alliance, although no specific reasons were made public. On the other hand, both candidates suggested by the president – EU Commissioner Andris Piebalgs and speaker of parliament Solvita Aboltina – declined to take on the role.

Bērziņš' activism is not only interesting in so far as it deviates from established political practice, but also because his predecessor, Valdis Zatlers, failed to be re-elected after confronting the government about its refusal to lift the immunity of an MP accused of corruption (thus illustrating that indirectly elected presidents are very much agents of the assembly rather than independent actors). It is possible – but in no way confirmed – that Bērziņš is trying to forge a stronger cooperation between his 'Union of Greens and Farmers' (which was part of Dombrovskis' second cabinet from November 2010 to October 2011) and the other parties in order to ensure his own re-election in 2015.

The parties' patience with the president is likewise noteworthy, yet the reasons seem to be more straightforward. First and foremost, the 2014 budget has already been passed meaning that the current government can still fulfill its duties. As Bērziņš appears to prefer a political rather than technocratic cabinet (although he has not outright rejected 'Harmony Centre's suggestion to form one), coalition parties also do not have to fear to be excluded from the spoils of office any time soon. Furthermore, elections to the European Parliament will take place in May and the next parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 2014. As all centre-right parties can be expected to fare worse than in previous elections and because amendments to the budget are not possible for the time being (meaning that there is no potential for pork barrels), parties are naturally not too eager to join a new government whose duty it would be to merely continue the increasingly unpopular policies of its predecessor.

In the short term, this situation plays in favour of the president and parties might eventually even be quite content to be able to leave the choice of successor for Dombrovskis to the president. Should the 2014 parliamentary elections produce an unclear majority situation, Bērziņš might again play a crucial role in assembling a new (centre-right) government. However, he still runs the risk of becoming too involved and being replaced with a candidate promising to be less active come re-election.

[1] Sikk, Allan (2011) Baltic Governments 1990-2011. <http://www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~tjmsasi/baltgov.pdf>

For further background on the Latvian political landscape in the wake of the supermarket tragedy see: Cianetti, Licia. 2013. 'The Latvian government after the Riga supermarket tragedy has exposed deep divisions in the country's political system'. *LSE EUROPP Blog* 10/12/2013.