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Latvia – Party conflict and presidential initiative in government formation

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ON 11 February 2016, the Latvian parliament voted in a new government under the leadership of Maris Kučinskis. Over the last years, I have written about Latvian president Andris Berzins' activism in government formation on several occasions (see my [previous posts on Latvia](#)). Today's blog post discusses the process of formation of the most recent government as well as the president's role. While it differs from previous posts in so far as with Raimonds Vējonis there is a new president, there are some interesting similarities in the president's response to party tactics and the preference for a prominent position of his (former) party, the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZSS).



President Raimonds Vējonis (right) announces nomination of Maris Kučinskis (left) as candidate for Prime Minister | image via president.lv

After heading two Latvian governments since the beginning of 2014, Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma (Unity) resigned from office on 7 December 2015 after. A decrease of support for her leadership among parties and potential government reshuffle had been rumoured since late October following her dismissal of non-partisan transport minister Anrijs Matīss (and failure to quickly reappoint a successor), but intensified in the week preceding her resignation in conjunction with discussions about the 2016 budget and the upcoming congress of her Unity party. President Raimonds Vējonis was clearly dismayed by the developments and openly criticised government parties for failing to work to together better and avoid a collapse of the government.

Immediately after Straujuma's resignation, parties and media began to speculate about potential successors. Although president Vējonis met with all parties to discuss proposals for the new government, it was universally acknowledged that Unity as the largest coalition party would lead the next government (the social-democratic Harmony Centre party holds the largest share of seats parliament, yet it is routinely shunned by other parties due to its affiliation with the sizeable ethnic Russian minority in the country). Even though Unity chairwoman Solvita Āboltiņa was part of her party's delegation to the talks with the president and had even suggest herself as the new prime minister weeks before Straujuma's eventual resignation, it soon became clear that she lacked sufficient support among Unity's previous coalition partners. Both the National Alliance and – more significantly – the 'Greens and Farmers Union' (ZSS), which is not only the second largest coalition party but also the former party of president Vējonis, signalled that they would not be happy with Āboltiņa as prime minister. Thus, her party colleague, interior Minister Rihards Kozlovskis – who had also been endorsed by Straujuma as a potential successor – emerged as Unity's new potential candidate. However, as divisions within Unity widened, Kozlovskis announced only two days later that he would not be available for the role. Tensions between coalition parties increased when Unity refrained from offering any other candidates for prime minister except Āboltiņa (albeit only unofficially) and National Alliance and ZSS repeated their opposition to a government led by the Unity chairwoman.

Towards the end of December, particularly the ZSS was able to manoeuvre itself into an advantageous position as it announced that it would not be in a coalition with either of the two smaller opposition parties, 'Latvia from the heart' and 'Latvian Association of Region'. Either one could have replaced the National Alliance in the coalition and increased the ZSS share of portfolios. However, the support of both would have been needed to form a coalition of Unity and National Alliance without the ZSS. Furthermore, the fact that the ZSS had a former co-partisan in the presidential office meant that they could be relatively sure to be included in the new government. Although Vējonis refrained from openly taking sides, he publicly criticised Unity for failing to propose a(n agreeable) candidate for PM. Eventually, ZSS even announced to present its own candidate by late December to put pressure on Unity which responded by formally proposing Āboltiņa. After the ZSS eventually away off from formally proposing a candidate and merely flouted two names and Unity once again failed to agree on a potential candidate in addition to Āboltiņa, president Vējonis eventually announced that he would approach potential candidates himself in the new year.

The first candidates – finance minister Janis Reirs from Unity and Mayor of Valmiera, Janis Baiks (affiliated with Unity via a local party) – both declined to be nominated and other potential Unity candidates were unequivocally opposed by both ZSS and the National Alliance. Although Vējonis met with another potential Unity candidate, he eventually nominated ZSS's nominee Maris Kučinskis on 13 January 2016, disregarding any potential opposition from Unity regarding this candidacy. The remainder of the government formation process can be described as relatively 'uneventful' with regard to negotiations between parties and the president's involvement. However, the latter was largely predated by the fact that Vējonis was hospitalised with a heart condition and operated on shortly after announcing Kučinskis' nomination. The government then passed its vote of investiture in parliament on 11 February 2016.

The pattern of involvement by president Vējonis is quite similar to cabinet formation under his predecessor. Here, too, parties disagreed on the candidates for prime minister and/or the choice of potential (additional) coalition partners until the president took the initiative and rejected all candidates formally proposed by parties (which also tended to lack support among other potential coalition parties) and then approaching candidates on his own initiative. Overall, however, Vējonis appears to have been less active, leaving parties more leeway (yet not necessarily more time) in proposing candidates and sorting out their internal differences before taking the initiative himself. Furthermore, although Vējonis would have been in a position to force a cabinet under the leadership by his own ZSS (aided by the party's generally advantageous position; see above), he gave Unity a second chance after the nomination of Āboltiņa failed to garner any support from the ZSS and the National Alliance. This leads to the question of whether the president is actually necessary/desirable in situations like these and if these were not better solved by parties alone. In this instance, a strongly

partisan president (irrespective of party affiliation) might well have significantly delayed the formation of a government by nominating candidates without support from other parties. Vējonis tactics of waiting for the field of candidates to thin out naturally, gauge parties' support for the various nominees and only take the initiative when deadlock likely saved Latvia a further month of fruitless negotiations. Furthermore, by maintaining the current coalition which elected him last year, his activism will likely not result in a significant decrease of support come the next presidential elections.

The composition of new Latvian government is available at: whogoverns.eu