

Center-Right Seeks to Block Pro-Russian Party in Latvia

September 18, 2011



Latvians voting in Bauska in parliamentary elections Saturday. Harmony Center won 28.5 percent of the vote. **Ints Kalnins**

RIGA, Latvia — A pro-Russian party gained the most votes in an election in Latvia for the first time since the Baltic country won independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but the two runners-up moved on Sunday to block it from entering government.

Harmony Center, supported mostly by Latvia's large Russian minority, hoped to exploit anger over the ruling center-right's public sector wage cuts and fear over its pursuit of euro-zone membership when Europe is struggling with a debt crisis.

But if Harmony realizes its goal to be in a coalition, it could help Russia increase its influence in the NATO member and EU state, which has not had a party catering to its Russian minority in government since independence.

"I am convinced that Latvian politicians ... will be able to form a coalition where the interests of all voters are represented," Harmony Center leader Nils Usakov, 35, said on LNT television

on Saturday.

Harmony will begin talks with parties on Monday.

Though it came first in the election, Harmony's number of votes rose only slightly since the last ballot in October 2010. A lower turnout helped raise its share of the votes.

Usakov, whose party has ties to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's United Russia, had campaigned for a delay in entering the euro zone and for the terms of the 7.5 billion euro (\$10 billion) bailout taken in 2008 to be renegotiated.

About a third of the 2.2 million population are Russian speakers, and just over half of them have the right to vote.

According to initial results, Harmony won 28.5 percent of the vote, with 1,023 of 1,027 districts counted.

The two center-right parties, which came in second and third, said they would start talks on a coalition on Sunday after Saturday's election, called to break the power of oligarch businessmen less than a year after the last poll.

Former President Valdis Zatlers' new party won 20.8 percent of the vote. With 18.8 percent for third-placed Unity party of current Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, they hope to form the core of a new coalition to pursue earlier policies of fiscal austerity and euro-zone adoption in 2014.

Zatlers forced the election by ordering the dissolution of parliament after lawmakers refused permission for prosecutors to search a flat owned by a businessman, who is also a member of parliament and one of three men labeled an oligarch.

Opponents say the lawmaker and two others have used their wealth to influence politics and favor their business interests. The men have denied any wrongdoing.

Two of the three "oligarchs" are set to lose their places in parliament, the vote showed, while a farmers' party spearheaded by the third would have its representation cut to about 13 seats from 22, according to the LNT estimate.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/09/18/center-right-seeks-to-block-pro-russian-party-in-latvia-a9595>