



TRANSITIONS ONLINE: Gay Rights: **United in Hostility**

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*The strange anti-gay alliance forged by hardline nationalists and "Christian values" defenders testifies to the fragility of Latvian political discourse.*

The fair-haired, fresh-faced teen picks me out of the crowd and leans in as close as he can, angling his torso around the impassive policeman marching between us. He is giving me the finger and shouting in Russian, and I am too overwhelmed to catch the words. But his final comment – in Latvian – is clear as day: “*Mauka!*” (whore!). I am in the heart of Riga’s beautiful medieval Old Town on Saturday, 23 July, marching in Latvia’s first Gay Pride parade.



"Whore"!

Some opposition to the parade was inevitable, given that sexual minorities are as little understood and as little seen in Latvia as they are throughout the post-communist world. But the scale of the backlash – as many as 500 active counter-protesters – and the level of hostility directed at the 100 or so marchers that day far surpassed expectations. After all, at least 600 people marched without incident in the first gay pride parade in former Soviet territory last year in Tallinn, and some 400 turned out in mid-August this year despite heavy rain. Two factors may account for the intensity of the Riga protests. For the first time in a European Union member-state, politicians at the national level – including the prime minister – spoke out aggressively against the march. And the anti-gay backlash united two previously distinct and even hostile camps – radical Latvian nationalists and evangelical “Christian values” crusaders – and brought Latvians and Russia-speakers together in a bilingual front against gay rights.

#### FROM SILENCE TO CONTEMPT

There is very little research on the life experiences of gays and lesbians in Latvia or on popular attitudes toward gays, but perhaps the most salient indicator is the degree to which Latvian gays and lesbians remain “in the closet.” According to a recent survey of EU accession countries by the European Region of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA-Europe), over 70 percent of Latvian respondents attempt to conceal their sexual orientation from people other than

family and friends (compared to a low of 20 percent in the Czech Republic). And with good reason: gays and lesbians live in a climate of fear as, despite their attempts at invisibility, the incidence of verbal and physical abuse (by police and family members included) remains high, and face employment and housing discrimination. Gay (male) sex was decriminalized in 1993, but Latvia is the only member-state that has not yet implemented the EU employment equality directive banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In recent Latvian opinion surveys, only 16 percent of respondents stated that they personally knew a homosexual person, 38 percent identified homosexuals as undesirable neighbors, and 51 percent strongly disagreed with the statement that "homosexuality is a normal phenomenon in any society."

Geographer Gordon Waitt reports that some gay men in Riga feel pressure to be keep the closet door even more firmly shut than during Soviet times. In a journal article on "sexual citizenship" in Latvia, he writes that the private lives of gays "are increasingly under scrutiny by increased public awareness of homosexuality since 1991 and an emerging talk-show culture that presently obsesses over the sexual orientation of Latvian celebrities. ... Some informants expressed that they are now more cautious than during the Soviet era about publicly greeting any friend of the same sex by hugging or kissing. ... Several lament the passing of the system and its ... silence over sexuality that had guaranteed invisibility."

While the events of Riga's gay pride week were unprecedented in their scale and intensity, homophobic popular attitudes and statements by public figures, as well as anti-gay activism, are certainly not new to Latvia. Janis Vanags, the ultra-conservative archbishop of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, made headlines in 1994 when he banned practicing gays from receiving holy communion in his church (he is also well-known for banning the ordination of women pastors). Both Vanags and Roman Catholic Archbishop Janis Pujats contributed chapters to a book published in 2002 by the radical nationalist Aivars Garda, entitled *Homosexuality: Humanity's Shame and Ruin*.

## BREAKING NEW GROUND

But if aggressively homophobic rhetoric had been primarily the domain of church leaders and the extremist fringe, the situation changed with the arrival on the political scene of Latvia's First, a.k.a. the "Preachers' Party." Founded in 2002 by a Lutheran pastor and former Soviet dissident and elected to parliament the same year on an American-style "Christian family values" platform, Latvia's First Party has been explicitly homophobic since its founding congress, and it led the verbal assault on the parade. Its leader, Eriks Jekabsons, is interior minister in the current coalition government. The mainstreaming of homophobia is one consequence of this newcomer's injection of evangelical Christianity into the political culture of this heretofore decidedly secular society.



Marchers in July's gay pride parade in Riga.

Throughout the 15 years of post-communist transition, battles over diversity and tolerance have been waged – at both the domestic and international levels – almost exclusively on inter-ethnic grounds: first over citizenship, naturalization, and official language policies, and more recently over the transition to Latvian-language teaching in Russophone public high schools. The rage of nationalist extremists and the anomie of the disaffected masses have largely been channeled into hatred of the ethnic other, thanks in no small part to the divisive rhetoric of politicians. Latvia's political parties are rigidly polarized on ethnic lines, heavily controlled by powerful economic interests, weakly rooted in society, and deeply mistrusted by most citizens. Seeking to boost their weak ratings, office-seekers often resort to emotionally based populist appeals. For most parties with an ethnic-Latvian base, these emotional appeals have often focused on anti-Russian nationalism. But Latvia's First explicitly endorsed multiculturalism and ethnic integration during the 2002 campaign, seeking to win support among Russian-speaking voters. Its aggressively anti-gay rhetoric suggests that the party views homophobia as a useful replacement for anti-Russian nationalism.

While Latvia has always been a nominally Christian (predominantly Lutheran) nation-state, religion has never been a strong component of national identity (unlike, for example, Catholic Poland and Lithuania or Orthodox Russia). Historically, pre-Christian folklore and agrarian “peasant values” have provided the richest sources of symbolic material for constructions of nation and nationalism. Even after the collapse of communism and its enforced atheism, rates of church-going have remained low. But in Latvia, as in most of Central and Eastern Europe, the chaos and destabilization of post-communist transition has provided fertile ground for the rapid expansion of Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and evangelical denominations, or “sects,” as they are often pejoratively described in the Latvian media. It was perhaps only a matter of time before a political party would attempt to capture this growing segment of the electorate: hence, the arrival of Latvia's First in 2002.

The party was founded by Eriks Jekabsons, a devout Christian who fled the Soviet Union in 1988 due to alleged KGB persecution and spent the following 13 years in America, where he received a master's degree in theology and served for five years as a Lutheran pastor in Chicago (along with operating a martial-arts dojo). Jekabsons' lengthy stay in the United States, during a

period of increasing political and cultural de-secularization there, surely played a critical role in shaping his subsequent political agenda. As he observed in an interview shortly after returning to Latvia:

"America is definitely a Christian country. There are ordinary [mainstream] churches, but there are also many Bible-based and evangelical churches. ... A lot of incorrect perceptions about the U.S.A. have been created in Europe and Latvia. I have traveled all across that country and seen what happens on Sundays – how America is transformed on these days. Every block or two there is a church, and people are gathered there in their Sunday best. ... Many of our parliamentary deputies are not religious, but in America people understand that politics without morality is maimed, and morality without religion is impossible. Latvia's politicians and society don't realize that."

After his return to Latvia in 2001, Jekabsons founded a non-governmental organization called For Spiritual Rebirth in Latvia and then merged it the following year with two existing political parties to form Latvia's First. Since winning 9.5 percent of the vote and 10 seats in the 101-member parliament in 2002, the party has spoken out against abortion and campaigned for including references to Christian heritage in the EU constitutional treaty. It also secured a highly controversial budgetary allocation for church renovations under the rubric of promoting "sacral tourism," which critics have denounced as a transparent effort to win endorsements from the pulpit. As its "Preachers' Party" nickname suggests, many party members at the national and local levels are themselves members of the clergy. The party cultivates connections with all of Latvia's mainstream denominations, but it has provoked widespread skepticism through its close ties with evangelical churches, and particularly the New Generation. This Massachusetts-based charismatic church, with branches in many post-Soviet states as well as Argentina and Israel, has attracted a primarily Russian-speaking congregation at its Riga headquarters, where pastor Aleksey Ledyaev, according to a report by the non-profit think tank Politika.lv (Policy.lv), "promotes the idea of Christian government, mentioning George Bush's administration in the United States as an admirable example."

## A UNITED FRONT?

Radical Latvian nationalists have passionately denounced Latvia's First for its association with New Generation. In 2004, the extremist National Front published a lengthy interview with Ledyaev in its newspaper *Deoccupation Decolonization Debolshevization*, quoting Ledyaev as saying: "You're trying to say that a little country like Latvia, such a small nation as Latvians, can talk to Russia and the U.S.A. as an equal? What are you, crazy? ... Small nations must submit to big nations and follow their rules. They must understand that small nations are not equal with the rest. If the little ones don't know their place, and make too much noise, then it's no surprise if they get it on the head."

Even more alarming to the nationalists were Ledyaev's claims to close ties with Latvia's First and his assertion that the party and his church both favor the strengthening of bilingualism in Latvia. Commenting on this interview, the chairman of the National Power Union, another radical organization, asked rhetorically whether "a political party with such close ties to a socially dangerous religious sect, whose leader is hostile to the Latvian nation, can legitimately be represented in the Latvian government? ... Whom does Latvia's First Party serve...?" The

author called on the party's coalition partners to investigate its ties with this “scandalous pseudo-Christian community” and to consider expelling it from the government.

In this context, it was very interesting indeed to see the ethnically “integrated” scene on the sidelines of the gay pride march. Even the extremist nationalist organization Everything for Latvia remarked approvingly in an online photo essay: “This time Russians and Latvians are standing shoulder-to-shoulder ... this time none of that matters because everyone is standing up against a common enemy.” This united front is, most likely, only a temporary marriage of convenience. But it should certainly be cause for alarm that ostensibly respectable government ministers are making common cause with extreme xenophobes in attacking a highly vulnerable minority group.



Opponents of the gay parade with a banner decrying the "sin of Gomorrah."

Unfortunately, as Latvia prepares for the next parliamentary elections in September 2006, there is every reason to expect that populist appeals to crude prejudices will only intensify. As a prominent newspaper editor explained it to me, Latvia's First and other parties are terrified of the electorate, because they realize how unstable their approval ratings are. Thus, they are desperate to establish some kind of “emotional connection” with voters. Now that the passionate issues of de-colonization and the “return to Europe” and NATO are already *faits accomplis*, where will they find that emotional bond? Newspaper commentator Aivars Ozolins is not optimistic:

"Rather than addressing the question of why, for example, Latvia is the poorest EU member-state and why it has the highest level of political corruption, it is easier to set various social groups against each other. But such flirting by the parties of power with a portion of society's prejudices and the readiness of the self-proclaimed 'correct' and 'normal' people to even physically persecute and attack different or 'abnormal' people, threatens to turn the next Saeima elections into a contest between neo-Nazis, racists, Christian fundamentalists, anti-Semites, xenophobes, homophobes and every other subspecies of misanthropes and rejecters of freedom. The bigger the thief, the louder he will appeal to 'family values.' "

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*Photos by the author.*