Explaining the Electoral Failure of Extreme-Right Parties in Estonia and Latvia

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Abstract Extreme-right political parties have achieved significant electoral success in Europe in recent years. This paper considers why this electoral success has not been replicated in contemporary Estonia and Latvia. The paper begins with a discussion of the necessary background conditions for the success of extreme-right movements, finding that they do largely exist in Estonia and Latvia. The paper then moves on to map the rising levels of extreme-right mobilisation among both titular and Russian-speaking parts of the population. We examine two hypotheses to explain the electoral failure of extreme-right parties: (1) The institutional hypothesis argues that the party and electoral laws check extreme-right party electoral success; (2) The competition hypothesis contends that political parties lack the membership and traditions that act as constraints on party behaviour. As a result, mainstream parties are free to adopt the radical rhetoric of extreme-right movements and parties.

Key Words: Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, extreme-right parties, elections, political parties

The last few decades have seen the increased electoral success of extreme-right (also labelled ‘far-right’ or ‘radical-right’) parties across both Western Europe (Hainsworth, 2000; Ignazi, 2003; Norris, 2005) and, more recently, Central and Eastern Europe (Minkenberg, 2002; Mudde, 2005). Estonia and Latvia have also experienced a significant increase in extreme-right activity in recent years. Confrontations between ethnic Russian and Estonian/Latvian nationalist extreme-right groups have been fuelled by sharply differing interpretations of twentieth-century history. More recently this has been accompanied by a rise in rhetorical and actual physical attacks on ethnic and sexual minorities.¹

This grass-roots movement has also been converted into increased party activity, particularly in Latvia. Five overtly extreme-right parties were among a total of 19 parties campaigning in the 2006 Latvian parliamentary election. However, these parties won a combined share of just 18,950 (2.08 per cent) votes (Latvian Central Election Commission, 2007). In Estonia, the only extreme-right party registered in the most recent parliamentary election in 2007 obtained a mere 1,273 votes or 0.2 per cent of the vote.

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This has prompted our central research question: Why have extreme-right movements in Estonia and Latvia failed to convert grass-roots activism and established organisational structure into electoral success? We propose two explanatory hypotheses: (1) The *institutional hypothesis* argues that the laws shaping Latvian and Estonian parties and electoral campaigning check extreme-right party electoral success; and (2) the *competition hypothesis* contends that political parties lack the membership and traditions that Anthony Downs (1957) identified as constraints on party behaviour. As a result, mainstream parties are free to adopt the radical rhetoric of extreme-right movements and parties if they believe that this will maximise their share of the vote.

We begin with a discussion of the terminology and a summary of the recent scholarly debate accounting for the electoral success of extreme-right parties in Europe. We identify five common explanatory conditions for the rise of the extreme right in Latvia and Estonia, adopting Luke March and Cas Mudde’s (2005) three-level framework (parties, non-party organisations and grassroots subcultures). We then proceed to discuss the ‘new calendar demonstrations’ that have seen the extreme-right mobilise and adopt a high media profile in recent years. Finally, we attempt to explain the failure of the extreme right to turn this organisational structure and grass-roots activity into electoral success by testing our two hypotheses.

Hardly any research has been conducted on the Latvian and Estonian extreme right (Kasekamp, 2003; Mužnieks, 2005; Poleschuk, 2005). Latvia and Estonia differ considerably from the other Central European countries, having been incorporated into the USSR during the Second World War. Of the three Baltic states, Estonia’s and Latvia’s political development and evolution of the political party system have been quite similar (Mikkel, 2006; Pabriks & Štokenberga, 2006; Pettai & Kreuzer, 1999). Lithuania has followed a different path, with the successor party to the Communist Party remaining the most significant player in the political landscape. This did not happen in Estonia and Latvia, where the Communist parties collapsed upon the restoration of independence in 1991 as they were viewed as alien bodies associated with ‘foreign occupation.’ Moreover, the Estonian and Latvian Communist Parties were dominated by Russian-born individuals, whereas the Lithuanian Communist Party was composed mainly of native Lithuanians, many of whom played a significant role in the achievement of independence.

**Explaining the Success of Extreme-Right Parties in Europe**

The growth in the electoral success of extreme and radical right-wing movements in Europe has been accompanied by burgeoning scholarly debate. The literature has differentiated and classified different types of movements and parties, as well as considering the roots of their electoral success.

Cas Mudde (2006) distinguished between two types of anti-systemic movement: (1) Extreme movements that challenge the very idea of democracy; and (2) radical movements that challenge key liberal elements of liberal democracy, most particularly the protection of minorities, but not the legitimacy of the democratic system itself. However, the border between extreme and radical movements is both blurred and transferable, with both individuals and political organisations shifting between the two. As the focus of our research is on the roots of the electoral failure of these groups rather than the structure
of the groups themselves, we use the term ‘extreme-right’ to encompass both extreme and radical movements in Estonia and Latvia.

Recent scholarly debate has identified at least five major explanations for the emergence and increased electoral success of extreme-right groups. First, structural changes in society, particularly the extreme social strains of the post-communist transition in east and central Europe, have left voters open to extreme ideas and ideology (Anastasakis, 2002). Thus, the shift from planned to market economy caused economic dislocations such as unemployment and the loss of savings, along with a decline in both the quantity and quality of state benefits (cash benefits, as well as health and education). Moreover, immigration has simultaneously led to changes in traditional national cultures and demography in Western Europe (Gibson, 2002; Golder, 2003). These dislocations, it is argued, have left voters open to extreme political ideologies and movements.

Second, Jens Rydgren (2005) has argued that there are two major cleavage dimensions in contemporary Europe—socio-economic and socio-cultural—and as economic growth and development make the latter more salient, there are more opportunities for extreme-right parties. These opportunities primarily take the form of anti-immigration rhetoric, appealing for a return to the traditional values of the pre-immigration state, as well as a return to economic, and thus employment, protectionism.

Third, globalisation and Europeanisation has also impacted the former communist countries that had previously been held in a form of suspended societal animation for 50 years (Anastasakis, 2002). The post 1989/1991 influx of foreign investment and increased political influence of the ‘Brussels bureaucracy’ and other international political actors, such as the IMF, as well as international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), particularly the Soros foundation with its support to non-governmental actors, liberal democracy, and anti-corruption campaigns, has created the impression of a foreign imposed economic and political order. This creates the base for an anti-foreigner extreme-right electoral appeal.

A fourth factor has been the political ‘opportunity’ to new political actors offered by the decline in trust for political parties, institutions and actors in contemporary Europe (Rydgren, 2005). Thus, as established parties shed members and voters, the electorate has opened up to new political movements and ideologies, thus creating a political opportunity for extreme-right political actors. This is further exacerbated as mainstream parties have become less of a ‘big tent’ of left and right by clustering at the political centre (for example, as left-wing parties accept the major elements of the market economy, and right-wing parties accept the legitimacy of the social sphere), thus leaving the left and right extremes of the political spectrum open to new, extremist, political actors.

Fifth, extreme-right parties become increasingly legitimised if the political elite cooperates with them, or adopts their political ideas (Art, 2007; Bale, 2003; Rydgren, 2005). Thus, if established parliamentary or government parties treat the extreme right as actual or potential political partners, either through political cooperation or by using the rhetoric of the extreme right, they legitimise both these movements, and their ideas.

Do the Preconditions for Extreme-Right Movements Exist in Estonia and Latvia?

All five causal factors of extreme-right movement success—socio-economic crisis, growth in socio-cultural salience, and decline in political trust, a grudging internationalisation
of polity, as well as their legitimisation by the established political elite, and a clustering of parties in the ideological centre—can be identified in Estonia and Latvia.

First, the Baltic states suffered the greatest, and deepest, economic collapse of all the eight former communist states that joined the European Union in 2004. The first years of independence were marked by recession and social crisis. The economy contracted 32.9 per cent in Latvia and 14.2 per cent in Estonia in 1992, and then by 20 per cent and 8.5 per cent respectively the following year; real wages fell by more than half between 1990 and 1992 (Latvian Ministry of Economics, 2001; Statistics Estonia, 1999). However, the initial exuberance of independence regained after 50 years of foreign occupation allowed moderate centre-right parties (supported by the economic elite) to win the early post-communist elections and balance the rhetoric of more nationalist and populist parties in the Latvian and Estonian parliaments. Despite a brisk economic recovery from the late 1990s onwards, Latvia remained the poorest EU state until the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, and the Baltic economies significantly lag behind their Nordic neighbours.

Next, the socio-cultural dimension has long had salience. A major legacy of the Soviet period was the demographic transformation of Estonia and Latvia through a massive influx of mainly Russian workers. The ethnically Estonian component of the population dropped from over 90 per cent at the end of the Second World War to just over 60 per cent by the end of the 1980s, while the ethnically Latvian share fell from nearly 80 per cent to just over 50 per cent during the same period. This dramatic shift was viewed as an existential threat by Estonian and Latvian nationalists. It has had been an important factor shaping the contemporary Estonian and Latvian political party systems. Particularly in Latvia, this has resulted in a party system based around the linguistic divide (Auers, 2002). In Estonia, ethnic Russian parties have been completely marginalised, as Russian voters have tended to support the large Estonian Centre Party which has most effectively defended the interests of the losers of the transition period.

More recently, the gay rights movement has appeared in the Baltic states, with recent gay pride marches being met by vehement opposition from both extreme-right movements and the Christian church, as well as some mainstream politicians. More recently, the massive flight of Latvian labour to Ireland and the UK and Estonian labour to Finland following EU membership has placed the issue of migration and immigration firmly on the political agenda.

Accession to the European Union and NATO has inevitably caused a nationalist backlash. The transfer of sovereignty to Brussels was often bemoaned as replacing one union (the USSR) with another (the EU) (Mikkel & Kasekamp, 2008). The main extreme-right political party in Estonia, the Independence Party, has built its platform on protecting Estonian sovereignty from further European integration. The European Parliament elections of 2004 saw the mainstream Latvian nationalist—For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Independence Movement (Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/Latvijas Nacionālā Neatkarības Kustība, TB/LNNK)—win three of the seven seats up for grabs, indicating a wish for the rights of Latvians to be protected in Brussels. Indeed, the Latvian political rhetoric of recent years has been marked by a liberal-cosmopolitan versus reactionary-nationalist conflict. The liberal-cosmopolitans are often labelled as Sorosisti and accused of acting as agents of the philanthropic American billionaire, George Soros. They are identified as pro-gay, secular and anti-establishment, with a rhetoric that is marked by criticism of corruption in the Latvian elite. The reactionary-nationalist
grouping is coalesced around political parties and media sympathetic to the millionaire mayor of Ventspils, Aivars Lembergs (who faced political corruption charges in 2008). Their rhetoric emphasises the cultural uniqueness of Latvia (thus dismissing any conception of common European values), and traditional Latvian ‘Christian’ values; it is also virulently anti-gay (claiming that homosexual values are intrinsically alien to Latvia), and blames high inflation and other economic woes on Brussels.

Fourth, trust in political institutions in Latvia and Estonia has been low for almost a decade (see Tables 1 and 2). This distrust has recently taken the form of increased citizen participation. A gathering of 8,000–10,000 Latvians protesting government corruption in November 2007 in the centre of the capital city Riga (now known as the umbrella revolution, due to the snow storms that swept the assembled crowd) contributed to the resignation of Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis later that same month. Despair that the parties in power will ever respond to their concerns led to a remarkable popular initiative for a constitutional amendment that would give citizens the power to dissolve the parliament in a national referendum. The signatures of more than 10 per cent of the electorate were collected by April 2008, fulfilling the requirement for the amendment to be put to a vote. The extent of public dissatisfaction towards the Latvian political class was made clear in the result of the national referendum on the amendment held on 2 August: 97 per cent voted in favour, though the turnout was slightly less than the 50 per cent required. These recent developments fit well with Pippa Norris’s conclusion that ‘the most important political attitudes [for extreme-right success] are the existence of widespread political disaffection and processes of partisan dealignment’ (Norris, 2005, p. 271).

Further, both mainstream politicians and political parties in Latvia have been seen to work with, and thus legitimise, extremist groups. First, Aleksandrs Kiršteins, then a member of the governing Peoples’ Party (Tautas Partija), employed a prominent member of the neo-nazi Latvian National Front as the secretary of the Latvian parliament’s Foreign

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Relations Committee, while Jānis Leja (parliamentary deputy from the Social-Democratic Union—Sociālo Demokrātu Savienība) hired another member of the movement as his personal parliamentary assistant (Mužnieks, 2005). Both the late Roberts Jurdžs (a former Minister of Justice) and Juris Vidinš of the nationalist TB/LNNK have supported Aivars Garda, the Chairman of the Latvian National Front, by attending the presentation of his xenophobic and anti-semitic book We Won’t Give Latvia to Anyone. Miroslavs Mitrofānovs of the Russian-speaking For Human Rights in a United Latvia party (Par Cilvēku Tiesībām Vienotā Latvijā—PCTVL) organised a press conference in the parliament with Russian National Bolshevik Party activists in 2000 (ibid., p. 271). In 2006, the Estonian Independence Party (Eesti Iseseisvuspartei) recruited skinheads to the ranks of the leadership of the party (Kaitsepolitseiamet, 2007, p. 9) and the mainstream old nationalist parliamentary party, the Fatherland Union (Isamaaliit), also counts skinheads among its members.

Thus, the socio-economic preconditions for extreme-right political activity exist in Estonia and Latvia. The following section considers the organisational structure of the movements in these two countries.

Mapping Extreme-Right Groups in Estonia and Latvia

We adopt the March & Mudde (2005) framework of three organisation levels that combine to create a political family within radical movements: (1) political parties; (2) non-party organisations; and (3) subcultures. These parties, non-party organisations and subcultures share the essential key characteristics of verbal aggression, radical nationalism and ethnic intolerance (either Russian or Latvian/Estonian), and anti-liberalism (xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-gay).

Skinheads form the major contemporary extreme-right sub-culture group in both Estonia and Latvia. Although numerically small (Estonian and Latvian police estimate that there are no more than a few hundred skinheads), they have achieved prominence in recent years following a string of violent racially motivated attacks. There are actually two separate groups of skinheads in both Estonia and Latvia, divided across ethnic lines. In Estonia, skinheads have mainly gained attention for harassing non-white foreign students. Skinheads organise private parties and concerts on occasions such as Adolf Hitler’s birthday. Nevertheless, their main site of activity is the internet. Estonian skinheads became more active in connection with the conflict over the Red Army monument described below. It is also important to note that skinheads are part of an international network. Baltic skinheads have been inspired by and developed close connections with Scandinavian skinheads and neo-Nazis. Estonian skinheads have particularly warm ties with their linguistic kin in Finland (Kaitsepolitseiamet, 2007, p. 9).

These skinheads have informal ties to non-party organisations in Estonia and Latvia, attending demonstrations and other public activities. There are a number of non-party extreme-right organisations in Latvia. However, the only organisation that stretches across the ethnic divide and recruits both ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers is the anti-homosexual No Pride movement, created specifically as a counter to pro-gay movements in Latvia, and particularly the annual gay pride march. No Pride is an umbrella organisation, incorporating Latvian and Russian nationalists and extremists, skinheads and religious groups. Other extreme-right groups are organised on an ethnic basis.
Ethnic Latvian extreme-right organisations are splintered into several small groups—the xenophobic and anti-Semitic Latvian National Front, which publishes radical periodicals and monographs (including a reprinting of the anti-Semitic *Elders of Zion*), the more populist Klubs 415 (which targets a younger audience and thus also attracts younger recruits), and the secretive Thundercross/Gustava Celmina Centrs that largely operates underground and whose members have engaged in terrorist activity, such as attempting to blow up the monument to victory in the Second World War in 1999, which serves as the primary Russian-speaker monument in Latvia (Muiznieks, 2005). The main Estonian extreme-right non-party organisation is the Estonian Nationalist Movement (*Eesti Rahvuslik Liikumine*), founded in 2006, which is more temperate and less conspiratorial than the abovementioned Latvian organisations. However, there have been a few high-profile instances of foreign extremists moving to Estonia and setting up informal white power or neo-Nazi networks (Kaitsepolitseiamet, 2007, p. 9).

Ethnic Russian non-party organisations in Estonia and Latvia can be divided into two categories; those that are indigenous, and those that are local branches of organisations based in Russia. Thus Russian National Unity and the National Bolshevik Party, which are not legally registered in Estonia and Latvia, are part of the larger Russia-based organisations. The latter achieved prominence in Latvia in 2000 when three of its members (all Russian citizens) forcibly occupied the St. Peter’s church tower in downtown Riga on 17 November, one day before Latvian independence day (Coleman, 2000). In 2004, the National Bolsheviks set fire to the entrance of the Latvian Ministry of Education. However, the two other major ethnic Russian organisations—Red Youth Avantgarde and the Latvian Anti-Fascist Committee—are both based in Latvia. The latter is the primary organiser of marches and counter-demonstrations that face down Latvian nationalists, and partly organises the ceremonies and large festival that takes place at the Soviet ‘Victory Monument’ in Riga on 9 May every year.

Political parties are also organised around the ethnic cleavage. Extreme-right ethnic Latvian parties are far more prevalent than Russian-speaking parties, primarily due to the Latvian law on political parties which states that at least half of the 200 individuals needed to form a political party need to be Latvian citizens. Five of the twenty parties that competed in the 2006 Latvian parliamentary election can be best described as extreme-right: Everything for Latvia (*Visu Latvijai*), A Latvian Latvia (*Latviešu Latvija*), the National Power Union (*Nacionālo Spēku Savienība*), Our Land (*Mūsu Zeme*), and the Fatherland Union (*Tēvzemes Savienība*). At the same time, the only extreme-right Russian-speaking party (the Latvian National Democratic Party), lacked the organisational resources to compete in the 2006 parliamentary election. This party was formed by the Russia-based Russian National Unity group, and won one seat in the Liepaja local authority council in the 2004 local elections (Muiznieks, 2005).

The Estonian political party system is somewhat more consolidated, with fewer parties competing in national elections. Altogether there are 14 registered parties, two of which can be classified as extreme-right: the Independence Party and the Republican Party (*Vabariiklik Partei*) which has suspended its activities. In the most recent March 2007 national election, 11 parties participated, six of which obtained seats in parliament. Only one extreme-right party, the Independence Party, contested the elections, but received only 0.2 per cent of the vote. Two ethnic Russian parties competed in the election, the Constitution Party and the Russian Party in Estonia, but together mustered only
1.2 per cent of the vote. Though proponents of a stronger Russian identity, nevertheless, they can not be classified as extremists of either right or left.

**Mobilisation—New Calendar Demonstrations**

The anti-Soviet dissident movement in the 1980s initially organised itself around a number of ‘calendar demonstrations’—dates of special significance to the Estonian and Latvian nations, such as the Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (23 August) and the Stalinist mass deportations (14 June). In the same way, the activity of extreme-right groups in contemporary Latvia and Estonia is focused around at least three major commemorative dates: (1) 16 March (Latvian legionnaires’ day); (2) 9 May (Soviet victory day); and (3) Gay Pride.

The first two dates reflect conflicting historical narratives. 16 March commemorates fallen Latvian legionnaires drafted into the Waffen SS during the Second World War. It has become a symbolic date for Latvian nationalists—the contemporary narrative argues that the Latvian legionnaires’ main concern was to fight against the Communists and for an independent Latvia, and laments the forced formation of these units. In contrast, Russian nationalists consider this an affront to the Russian patriotic interpretation of Soviet soldiers ‘liberating’ Europe from the fascist menace. All the major Latvian nationalist organisations and parties coordinate their activities on this date, marching towards the Freedom Monument at dusk with flaming lanterns and dozens of fluttering Latvian flags. In the most recent procession, in 2008, 1,500 Latvian marchers faced 200 Russian nationalist demonstrators encircled by hundreds of riot-armed police (Leitāns, 2008). Smaller confrontations also take place in other Latvian towns.

While there is no equivalent single, large commemorative event for Estonian veterans, in August 2004 the Association of Estonian Freedom Fighters erected a monument to those who fought in German uniform against the Soviets in the Second World War in the provincial town of Lihula. Fearing the damage the monument would cause to Estonia’s international reputation, the government immediately removed it. The removal caused great public controversy, because it was seen as the first time the government used force against its own patriotically-minded citizens. The government’s move prompted the activisation of extreme-right groups (Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2008).

In the same way, Russian nationalists have turned 9 May into a celebration of Russianness as much as a celebration of Soviet victory in the Second World War. Most Estonians and Latvians view 9 May as the beginning of the post-war Soviet occupation (Onken, 2007). Following the removal of the Lihula monument, red paint was splattered on the Red Army ‘Bronze Soldier’ monument in Tallinn, the locus of the annual 9 May celebration. Estonian nationalist demands for the removal of the Bronze Soldier grew louder, and in May 2006 there were scuffles between ethnic Estonian and Russian youths around the monument. The controversy prompted the establishment of a new umbrella organisation of the extreme right, the Estonian Nationalist Movement. Inspired by developments in Estonia, Latvian extreme-right groups, led by the Latvian National Front, laid a bouquet of barbed wire at the foot of the Soviet victory monument in Riga on 9 May (Leitāns, 2007). Prime Minister Andrus Ansip of the pro-business Reform Party harnessed the Estonian nationalist discontent and ordered the Bronze Soldier’s relocation away from the city centre. While this action greatly enhanced his popularity with Estonian nationalists, it was accompanied by scenes of unprecedented street disturbances—two
nights of riots and looting in the heart of the capital by mainly Russian youths in April 2007 (Petersoo & Tamm, 2008).

The first Gay Pride was held in Estonia in the summer of 2004, and in Latvia a year later. The parade generated much negative or sarcastic commentary in the mainstream media. Though the first two Gay Pride parades in Tallinn passed without incident, marchers were physically assaulted by skinheads in 2006. The following year, the police initially refused to give a permit for the march claiming that they could not guarantee public safety. The parade, nevertheless, was allowed to go ahead under close surveillance and this time without any violent incidents. In contrast, marchers in Riga have found themselves abused and assaulted by a combination of Russian and Latvian extremist groups from the very start. In the summer of 2006, an umbrella movement—No Pride—was created to coordinate extremist action against the Gay Pride march. No Pride is not a purely anti-gay movement, but a vehicle for reflecting opposition to the increasing westernisation, Europeanisation and globalisation of Latvia.

The extreme-right family in Latvia and Estonia is organised from the grass-roots to political party level, and has become mobilised through the new calendar demonstrations of recent years. However, this increase in activity has not resulted in parliamentary representation. To explain the reasons for this failure, we now turn to a discussion of the two hypotheses raised in the introduction.

Why No Electoral Success? Testing the Hypotheses

The institutional hypothesis argues that the laws shaping parties and political campaigning place limits on the extreme right’s electoral success. The second, competition hypothesis, argues that political parties lack the membership and traditions that can constrain party behaviour, thus allowing mainstream parties to adopt the policy positions and rhetoric of the extreme-right.

There are two key dimensions to the institutional hypothesis: (1) the regulations that structure the creation and organisation of political parties; and (2) the financial regulations governing party finances and political campaigning.

First, there are few institutional barriers to creating new parties and entering the party system. The Latvian law on political parties requires only 200 signatories to form a political party. The threshold is significantly higher in Estonia: 1,000 signatures are required. The cost of registering a new party is small: 300 kroons ($30) in Estonia and 100 lats ($200) in Latvia. In addition, parties have to submit an annual report to the ‘enterprise register’, and in Latvia, a financial report (several in an election year) to the Anti-Corruption Bureau. The low financial and organisational cost of creating a new political party in Latvia partly explains the splintering of the extreme-right movement into several competing political parties.

The institutional context governing the electoral process has a significant impact on the electoral fortunes of minor parties. While it has long been recognised that proportional representation is more conducive to fringe party success than majoritarian electoral systems, Pippa Norris (2005, p. 271) has recently demonstrated that the use of a low threshold in a proportional representation electoral system is the key enabler. Both Estonia and Latvia employ proportional representation but with a 5 per cent threshold, which is a substantial barrier impeding extreme-right parties from obtaining seats in parliament.
Second, Latvia remains one of the few countries in Europe that still has no direct form of state funding for political parties, and has few political campaigning restrictions. The first Latvian post-communist party financing law, passed in 1995, allowed for annual individual and corporate donations of up to 25,000 lats ($50,000) a year. In 2002, the limit was slimmed down to 10,000 lats ($20,000). However, this merely led to an increase in the number of dubious donations, as party sponsors attempted to circumvent the new legislation. More changes to the law on political party financing were made following the 2002 election. Party spending was limited to a maximum of 20 santimes per voter, and parties could only accept donations from individuals who could prove a legal source for the donation. However, there are no criminal or other punitive sanctions for breaking these regulations, and the monetary fines for parties are relatively small. Moreover, there are no regulations governing third party financing and political campaigning. This opened the door for several third-party campaigns in the 2006 election—clearly financed by political parties, or those supporting these parties, but outside the purview of campaign finance (although a recent ruling by the Constitutional Court declared that these third party campaigns should be counted as part of the concerned party’s electoral costs). This situation is exacerbated by the extremely liberal law on political advertising. There are no limits on television, radio or newspaper advertising. Adverts can run right up to and including the day of the election.

The absence of any form of direct state financing and the lack of any substantial restrictions on party income and expenditure creates a clear electoral advantage to parties with the corporate connections to attract private financing. Table 3 shows that, with the partial exception of All for Latvia (Visu Latvijai), parties elected to parliament in 2006 had far greater financial resources than the extreme-right parties, whose extreme-right rhetoric was unlikely to attract corporate financial support. These financial rules also mean that extreme-right parties cannot make their programmatic voices heard, which drastically hinders their ability to create broad coalitions of support (which Kitschelt and McGann [1995] and, more recently, Sarah L. de Lange [2007] identified as a key source of the extreme-right’s electoral success).

Table 3. Party spending in the 2006 parliamentary election

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<tr>
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<th>Number of votes</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Spending (lats)</th>
<th>Cost per seat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tautas Partija</td>
<td>177,481</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19.56%</td>
<td>139,000</td>
<td>6,040</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Zaļo/Zemnieku Savienība</td>
<td>151,595</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16.71%</td>
<td>259,000</td>
<td>14,390</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Jaunais Laiks</td>
<td>148,602</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16.38%</td>
<td>206,000</td>
<td>11,440</td>
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<td>4. Saskaņas Centrs</td>
<td>130,887</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14.42%</td>
<td>273,000</td>
<td>16,060</td>
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<td>5. LPP/LC</td>
<td>77,869</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.58%</td>
<td>312,000</td>
<td>31,200</td>
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<td>6. TB/LNNK</td>
<td>62,989</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.94%</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>31,250</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. PCTVL</td>
<td>54,684</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.03%</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>12,500</td>
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<td>10. Visu Latvijai</td>
<td>13,469</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.48%</td>
<td>132,000</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Maras Zeme</td>
<td>4,400</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.48%</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Musu Zeme</td>
<td>2,065</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.23%</td>
<td>5,485</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. NSS</td>
<td>1,172</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.13%</td>
<td>1,240</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Latviesu Latvija</td>
<td>1,130</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.12%</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Tevzemes saienība</td>
<td>1,114</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.12%</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast, Estonia has a mixed system of public and private financing for political parties; parties obtaining over 1 per cent in the parliamentary election receive an annual subvention from the state budget. No extreme-right party has yet to benefit from this provision. While the laws requiring reporting of campaign finances are in place, monitoring is left in the hands of a parliamentary select committee, which by all accounts is not able or willing to exercise rigorous supervision (GRECO, 2008). The Chancellor of Justice has been unsuccessfully trying for several years to force parliament to increase transparency of party financing.

As a result, the institutional rules of the game hinder the electoral success of extreme-right parties in both Estonia and Latvia. The extreme right is institutionally splintered due to the ease and minimal financial expense of creating a new political party. At the same time, party electoral success is limited by the party financing system which, in Latvia, gives a clear advantage to parties with corporate fundraising ties and, in Estonia, to parties with an established record of electoral success as well as corporate ties. Moreover, the 5 per cent threshold makes it difficult for smaller parties to win seats in parliament.

Second, the competition hypothesis states that the major Estonian and Latvian political parties lack the membership and traditions that Anthony Downs considered constraints on party behaviour. As a result, they are free to adopt radical policies, or, more likely, a radical rhetoric, if they believe that this will attract votes, thus stealing the signature policies of the extreme-right groups. Tõnis Lukas, the erstwhile chairman of the main national-conservative parliamentary party, the Fatherland Union, has even claimed that his party’s ‘idealism’ has been responsible for denying extreme-right parties political space in Estonia (Lukas, 2006).

Certainly, the small, elite membership of Latvian parties makes them more flexible in terms of policy. Less than 1 per cent of the Latvian electorate are members of a political party (Auers & Ikstens, 2005), and membership of government-coalition parties can be as low as just 400 members (as was the case with New Era (Jaunais Laiks) in 2003). As well as having a small membership, political parties also lack the long traditions and ideological associations that constrain established political parties. For example, among the four Latvian government coalition parties as of August 2008, the oldest party was TB/LNNK, having been formed following the merger of two nationalist parties in 2007, while the First Party of Latvia/Latvia’s Way (Latvijas Pirmā Partija/Latvijas Ceļš) was less than a year old (although based on the merger of a party founded in 2001 and another established in 1993). A remarkable feature of the Latvian political party system is that, until 2006, all national elections were won by a party which had not existed at the time of the previous national elections. Though the Estonian political party system can be characterised as more consolidated, it was only in 2007 that an Estonian prime minister and his party were re-elected (the same occurred in Latvia in 2006).

Nils Muiznieks (2005) has pointed out that both Latvian and ethnic Russian political parties contain leading politicians and activists that hail from the relatively mainstream nationalist ‘first wave’ of the late 1980s who were involved with the struggle for independence. The same applies to the Estonian case (though not for the ethnic Russian politicians). And while they have become largely ‘socialised’, they are still liable to the occasional extreme rhetorical outburst. In April 2007, Visvaldis Lācis of the Green/Farmers Union (Zalņu/Zemnieku Savienība. ZZS) sang an old Latvian Waffen SS song in a parliamentary plenary session.3 Parliamentarians have also become quite outspoken with regard to gay rights. For example, in a 2006 parliamentary plenary, the
current chair of the Latvian parliament’s human rights committee, Jānis Šmits, declared ‘God save Latvia from sodomy and sin!’ In the same year, Leopolds Ozoliņš of the ZZS declared that ‘Pederasts are not just content to make love in their own bedrooms, they are now shamelessly and openly pushing their perverse lifestyle propaganda on all of us!’ Finally, Pauls Klavins of the self-described liberal-centrist New Era party responded to a question about gay rights by asking if ‘apes that walk on two legs also be granted human rights?’ (Mozaika, 2007).

Estonian political discourse by comparison has been more tempered. Perhaps the most notorious words came from the mouth of Prime Minister Ansip in 2006, who described the Red Army soldiers buried underneath the Bronze Soldier monument as looters and drunkards.4 A common undercurrent frequently encountered in Estonian political commentary is suspicion of the loyalty of the Russian-speakers towards the Estonian state. After the Russian invasion of South Ossetia in August 2008 to supposedly protect Russian passport holders, Russian citizens in Estonia have been portrayed in some media commentary as a potential ‘fifth column.’ Likewise, gay pride activists and Nazi war-criminal-hunting organisations, such as the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, are sometimes chastised in the Estonian media for their aggressive advocacy tactics—they are blamed for provoking negative reactions that contribute to homophobia and anti-Semitism.

This use of extreme-right rhetoric by mainstream parties has further weakened parties of the extreme right, whose electoral success has already been hindered by unfavourable institutional rules.

Conclusion

The ideological impact of extreme-right groups in Estonia and Latvia has certainly been more significant than their electoral impact. Mainstream adoption of extreme-right rhetoric has resulted in legitimisation of virulently anti-homosexual language, as well as the continuing salience of the ethnic cleavage. Thus, in the case of Latvia and Estonia, we have the situation that while there are no extreme-right parties represented in the parliament, the public discourse on gay rights, minority policy, immigration and other traditional extreme-right ‘issues’ is more extreme than in West European states where extreme-right parties have actually achieved electoral success.

However, this extreme-right discourse has not been reflected in policy, largely due to the constraints placed on Latvia and Estonia by accession to the Council of Europe, the UN, the EU and other international organisations with human rights legislation commitments. Indeed, the increase in extreme-right discourse in recent years might be partially explained by post-accession ‘democratic backsliding’—having achieved NATO and EU membership, politicians may no longer feel constrained by the demands of foreign policy (Rupnik, 2007).

Notes

1 The Latvian Human Rights Office first reported an increase in physical and verbal attacks on minority groups (race, ethnic, sexual) in 2005 (Valsts Cilvēktiesību Birojs, 2005). The Latvian Ombudsman’s office, which replaced the Latvian Human Rights Office in 2007, reported a continued rise in attacks in 2007, particularly physical attacks of a racist nature (Latvian Ombudsmans Office 2008). In April 2007, Estonia experienced its first riots since the restoration of independence in 1991.
2 The Chancellor of Justice (Õiguskantsler) is an independent official appointed by the parliament who
ispects the conformance with the constitution of state institutions.

3 Läcis sang: “We’ll hit those reds again and again, and then those green-greys again and again . . .”
(“Mes sitisim to sarkanos arvien, arvien, pec tam tos zili-pelekos . . .”).

4 Ansip was expressing the common Estonian belief that the corpses belonged to those Soviet soldiers
who had been court-martialed for looting since there had been no actual military action anywhere near
Tallinn in 1944.

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