

**First Freedom and Solidarity Foundation forum
Jūrmala
March 15, 2008**

How to democratize political parties? On the road to abolish political serfdom Latvia.

Observing the contemporary political scene in Latvian politics in a wider perspective, one can find historical precedents. It is not the first time that political parties are held in such low esteem. A similar situation prevailed in the early 1930's. We know what that led to. We also know how much that costs several generations of Latvians.

Will history repeat itself? Will the inability of parties to serve the needs of society continue to increase political apathy, mistrust of democracy, and, in the end, lead many to long for authoritarian rule? We must remember, however, that any crisis can be turned for the better; one has only to create the right conditions leading to the solution.

Latvia has to have such political parties which people are not afraid to join without losing their honor and self-esteem. Otherwise we will never have a democracy in the true meaning of the word. It is only through the representatives of the people that the will of society at large is made manifest. How to achieve this?

The purpose of the forum is to answer this question. Latvia has before it three elections: municipal, the EU parliamentary elections, and, in less than three years, elections to the *Saeima* (parliament). During these three years our political parties must critically evaluate their past, and begin to resemble parties that benefit those belonging to the western political culture. We must begin to resemble the political and economic model of our Northern neighbors; they have been able to raise living standards, security, and economic growth. People in the Nordic countries are not running away to Ireland to pick mushrooms.

The forum will address the following main questions:

1. Traditionally the left wing social democratic parties have been able to mobilize many supporters (hence mass parties). What is the situation today,

when people in the developed west are less inclined to become politically active?

2. How should parties do in order to engage young and active members and supporters? Issues such as ecology, the EU closer to its citizens, or new modes such as the internet, special activities, etc? If we want people to join parties not for the sake of financial gain but to defend an ideal, then we need to think how to make politics more “humane”.

3. Why are Latvian parties on the whole ethnically divided? Is this simply the result of fifty years of occupation or is it because they are elitist and oligarchical?

Morning session.

Three 20 min. long contributions by experts followed by debates.

1. The Latvian political party system then and now. Where have we progressed, and where are we behind compared to 1920-1934?
2. A comparison of the political crisis then with that of today. Causes, similarities and difference.
3. What is the Nordic Model? How does that model’s party system look like?

Afternoon session.

Four 20 minute contributions followed by debates.

3. Reform, abolish, develop, renew political parties?
 - 3.1. Change the election system?
 - 3.2. Simplify the procedure for dissolving the parliament?
 - 3.3. Introduce state funding of political parties?
 - 3.4. Have a popularly elected state president?

Conclusion.

What kind of political party will the Latvian citizen vote for? Which parties will he be ready to join?

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