

Latvia's governing coalition is falling apart: a dispute over the Istanbul Convention

Bartosz Chmielewski

On 5 November, under pressure from public opinion and the president, the Latvian Parliament (*Saeima*) decided to suspend further proceedings on the bill proposing Latvia's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, ratified by Latvia in 2023). The matter has been deferred until the next parliamentary term, with elections scheduled for autumn 2026.

The most turbulent political debate in Latvia in recent years began in late October, when, after hours of heated deliberations, parliament passed a bill to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. The measure was supported by 56 out of 100 deputies, representing both the opposition and the governing coalition. In response to the vote, approximately 5,000 supporters of the legislation gathered for a demonstration in central Riga. In the following days, Latvian citizens collected over 60,000 signatures on a petition urging President Edgars Rinkēvičs to block the promulgation of the bill.

The unprecedented public mobilisation in Latvia – unseen since the COVID-19 pandemic – and the accompanying sharp polarisation of public opinion are likely to be exploited by political actors. The ideological dispute over the Istanbul Convention will, to a large extent, shape next year's electoral campaign.

Commentary

- **The debate over Latvia's potential withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention has exposed the dysfunction within the ruling coalition and suggests that domestic politics may become paralysed next year, largely due to anticipated obstruction by the government's conservative wing.** The bill was introduced by the opposition party Latvia First (LPV) and supported by the National Alliance (NA), the United List (AS), For Stability! (S!), and the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS) – the latter being part of the ruling coalition. The other coalition members, New Unity (JV) and The Progressives (P), opposed it. ZZS's position angered Prime Minister Evika Siliņa (JV), who announced that she would take political action against her coalition partner. Meanwhile, members of the Progressives suggested forming a minority government. Maintaining the coalition in its current form is likely to hinder the passage of key legislation and lead to political stagnation until next year's parliamentary election. The current coalition is a temporary alliance of ideologically divergent parties, and the Istanbul Convention dispute has only deepened those divisions. It can be expected that ZZS will obstruct reform initiatives

proposed by JV or P. New Unity's prospects of building an alternative majority under the current parliamentary balance appear unrealistic.

- **The joint vote by nationalists, populists, and the party representing Latvia's Russian minority in favour of withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention demonstrates that, despite deep divisions, conservative forces are capable of acting collectively.** To some extent, this marks a departure from the traditional pattern of political divisions in Latvia. Until now, the country's political polarisation has been characterised by cooperation among the so-called 'Latvian parties' – ranging from nationalists to liberals, despite their ideological differences – against parties representing Latvia's Russian community. The present ideological conflict over morality and social values is not yet strong enough to unite pro-Western nationalists, populists, and the Russian minority party into a lasting political bloc. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that, in the sphere of social policy, ideological divisions – rather than the traditional ethnic divide – will play an ever more significant role in shaping Latvia's political landscape.
- **The 2026 election campaign in Latvia is likely to focus on ideological issues, despite the pressing need to address the country's economic and social challenges.** Conservative-leaning parties – both from the mainstream (such as the NA, the AS, and the ZZS) and from the anti-establishment camp (LPV), as well as those representing the Russian minority – are expected to shape their narratives around the themes of 'fighting gender ideology' and defending traditional values. By contrast, progressive parties – JV, P, and smaller liberal groups – will stress adherence to European values, alignment with the West, and the protection of human rights. Consequently, vital issues such as overcoming economic stagnation, shaping migration policy, and addressing demographic decline are likely to be relegated to the background.