

**SOCIAL PROTEST IN LATVIA 2006-2009:
POLITICAL DISENCHANTMENT AND
IDENTITY FORMATION**

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Abstract

The thesis focuses on social contention in Latvia, and in particular on the last spectacular protest wave prompted by the country's political misfortunes and recent economic troubles in the context of the global financial crisis. In doing this, two main questions are addressed in the thesis: how do we account for protest activism in Latvia over the period 2006-2009? And what do social contentions reveal about Latvian society, namely its mobilization capacity, main actors involved in protest activities, their motives and the significance of protest activities for broader society? In order to answer the above mentioned questions, newspaper based protest event analysis was used. Information on protest events in Latvia from 2009 to May 2010 was conducted from the daily *Diena*.

I conclude that within the most recent wave of contentious activism two broader types of protests can be distinguished: mobilization based on ethnic lines and mobilization activated by economic motives, such as a sense of social, economic insecurity. Further, I show that an unprecedented development of political events strengthened general frustration with the political system which merged with the austerity protests.

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Introduction

Active civic involvement and vibrant civil society are the underpinnings of participatory democracy. Participation either in elections, NGO activities, or participation in social movements fighting for or against something can be considered effective channels of expressing public voice. Protest is widely recognized and used as one of those channels. Protest as a form of action has not only the capacity to mobilize public opinion but also to challenge and pressure decision-makers. While for some organizations protest is often considered as a mean of last resort, for some societal groups protest is the only available means to voice their opinion. Nevertheless, complementing conventional political participation protest as a form of action and communication is widely used all over the world.

In Europe, the most recent wave of protests was triggered by the economic crisis. While state authorities respond to unprecedented challenges via negotiations with the IMF, EU and other international organizations, and implementation of austerity programs along with institutional and structural reorganizations, often increased protest activism is what one observes as a response from society. Newspaper titles such as, “Greek riots spark fear of Europe in flames”, “Crisis meeting called on violent protest across Europe”, “Dublin hit by mass protest over economic crisis”, “Several million protest across France for action on economic crisis” give a small insight about the scope and prevalence of contentious activity all over the Europe in the last couple of years. In this light Latvia was not an exception. Titles like “Protest turn violent in Latvia”, “Anti-government riot hits Latvia”, “Thousands of Latvian Teachers Protest Government Pay-Cut Plan” indicate that in Latvia, one of the hardest hit countries, society was voicing their discontent on a new scale.

Large protest demonstrations are not common for Latvian protest culture. To the contrary, “peaceful and silent” would be a more appropriate label attached to Latvian society. Taking into account the fact that it was only after 1991 when uncontrolled participatory

culture could start to develop, this label does not seem to be inappropriate. Even though, in the period from 1991 to 2006 public sector employees, pensioners and farmers took to the streets to voice their grievances, these were not major events. The only other serious mobilization was by the Russian-speakers¹ protesting against minority education reform, which was over by the end of 2004. Unlikely before, this time it was mobilization based on ethnic identity. During this time, mass grassroots mobilization experienced in the late 1980s over struggle for independence was never repeated again.

Nevertheless, when looking at collective action more closely, it can be seen that Latvia experienced spectacular wave of protest activism shortly before the outset of the economic crisis. In November 2007 8 000 people gathered in the rally “For Honest Politics!” to voice their discontent with the political practices of Latvia’s politicians. Then in 2009 10 000 gathered in order to voice their frustration with the arrogance of political elite, lack of accountability from the executive to sovereign (namely people) and planned austerity measures. These events were seen as a new awakening of civil society in Latvia, because this was the first time since the 1980s when thousands across socioeconomic and ethnic divides mobilized for collective action. It can be perceived as an awakening of the society with non-violent protest culture, with generally low level of political interest and high distrust to political institutions².

Social contention in Latvia has not been widely researched. The most thorough study conducted by Brigita Zepa and Rasma Karklina (2001) examines political participation in Latvia over the period 1989-2001. Thus in the light of the most recent protest wave, I will attempt to fill the gap in study of contentious activity in Latvia, building on the previous

¹ The group described colloquially as “Russian speakers” is not homogenous and refers not only to ethnic Russians, but also to various ethnic minorities mainly speaking Russian.

² Trust in political parties has decreased from 9 percent in 2006 to 2 percent in 2009 (Eurobarometer 2006, 2009).

studies of collective action and providing my own data on protest activism in Latvia from 2006 to 2009.

Hence, the thesis focuses on social contention in Latvia, and in particular on the last spectacular protest wave prompted by the country's political misfortunes and recent economic troubles in the context of the global financial crisis. In doing this, two main questions are addressed in the thesis: how do we account for protest activism in Latvia over the period 2006-2009? And what do social contentions reveal about Latvian society; namely its mobilization capacity, main actors involved in protest activities, their motives and the significance of protest for broader society?

There is no systematically gathered data available on protest events in Latvia. In order to answer the above mentioned questions, newspaper based protest event analysis was used. Information on protest events in Latvia from January 2006 to May 2010 was conducted from the largest daily *Diena*. Collected data enables me to draw preliminary conclusions about contentious activism in Latvia: the motives and the demands of the protestors, direct targets of their actions, repertoire of contention chosen by the protestors, and the mobilization capacity of various societal groups.

In this study, the definition of protest is adopted from Ekiert and Kubik (1998, 553) who define the protest event "as collective action by at least three people who set out to articulate specific demands". Extreme, politically motivated individual acts and strikes, rallies, or demonstrations are considered to be protest events due to their political implications. One of the main preconditions is that "in order to qualify as a protest event, such action can not be the routine or legally prescribed behavior of a social or political organization" (1998, 553). Nevertheless, demands articulated by protestors can be addressed to public and private institutions, organizations and enterprises (Szabo 1996, 1163).

The point of departure is the assumption that the “socioeconomic structure of a society influences the type of conflicts that develop in it” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 35). In other words, economic shifts and changes in social structure have an influence on collective action. The relationship between social change and mobilization is not a one-way phenomenon. These changes can be multiple and their effect on collective action varies ranging from facilitation of action to pacification of previously salient issues (2006, 35). I argue that the most recent protest activism in Latvia is associated with a combination of political disenchantment and insecurity related to economic hardship. In other words, protest derives from the interaction of frustration with the functioning of political system and mobilization prompted by heavy consequences of economic crisis on individual wellbeing³.

The thesis reveals that in Latvia an unprecedented development of political events led not only to a legitimacy crisis and political alienation of the public but also to increased protest activism. The consequences of political crisis fueled by implications of economic crisis brought increased level of the societal uprising where both political and economic grievances merged. I claim that the mixture of economic and legitimacy crises brought to the forefront not only economic issues but also issues of social justice, political accountability and exacerbated the salience of national issues and historical confrontations among the two largest ethnic groups.

I attempt to show that while there can be seen mobilization for collective action which is not divided on an ethnic basis, such as the protest against economic arbitrariness and austerity measures, one can observe ritualized protest activities based on the ethnic divide. Since the scale of the protests based on different ethnic identities is increasing in concord with economic hardship, I claim that this is a response of the Russian-speaking minority⁴ to both

³ In October 2009 30 percent of the population in Latvia faced economic difficulties at the household level (Golubeva 2010, 38).

the state's integration policies and the economic hardship that are complementing each other. Thus while the everyday interaction of two ethnic groups can be characterized as improving over time, also indicated by the high intermarriage rate and the perception that "ethnic conflict has become less likely over time", the two groups still see their identity as endangered and still have two divergent geopolitical identities (Muiznieks 2010, 282). This leads to the development of ethnic prejudices. Mass mobilization by ethnic groups in historically controversial dates adds to the negative labeling of one or the other group and to the development of intergroup prejudices and tensions.

The structure of the thesis is the following. In the first part of the work, a theoretical framework on the political opportunities shaping emergence of social protest is presented. In the second chapter, policies and legal regulations shaping mobilization capacity in Latvia are analyzed. Further I proceed with the examination of political participation practices in Latvia for the period from 1991 to 2006. Assessment is based on the data collected particularly for this study and secondary sources. A section on data collection method is included in this chapter. In the third chapter I examine political participation in Latvia from 2007 to 2009, building on the assessment of a broader political and socioeconomic context and more detailed examination of various protest events. Having clarified that there are two broad groups of protest, in the following chapters I continue with more detailed examination of each protest type. Hence, in the fourth chapter societal responses toward economic hardship is assessed. Drawing on the gathered data I reveal how a combination of economic and political demands constituted the basis for certain types of protest. In the fifth chapter I examine broader group of ethnic protests that reveals intergroup conflict based on identity formation. Finally, I conclude that unprecedented development of political and economic events strengthened general frustration with the political system, increased social insecurity and heightened ethnic tensions, but did not lead to substantial mobilization of the society at large.

Chapter 1 - Theories on protest politics

Perspectives and theories accounting for protest activism are part of a broader set of social movement theories. Literature on social movements presents various theories accounting for engagement in social movements and protest activity. The new social movement, collective behavior, resource mobilization, and political process theories are among the most influential and distinguished in the field (Ekiert and Kubik 1998, 549; della Porta and Diani 2006, 29). However, none of the major approaches alone can account for the emergence and development of contentious activism over time. While it is hard to comprehend and encompass all the factors that shape level of protest, for the purposes of this thesis, a theoretical framework accounting for contentious activism will be built, drawing on political opportunity structure developed by Charles Tilly (2004), Sidney Tarrow (1998) and the broader notion of social responses elaborated by Bela Greskovits (1998) and Pieter Vanhuysse (2006).

1.1. Protest as a form of expression

For a long time there has been a debate on which social groups use protest as a tool to voice their demands and pressure the government. Scholarly work reveals that representative governance goes hand in hand with protest activism. Thus those who are politically active (e.g. participate in elections, referendums, party membership) do participate in protest activities (Goldstone 2004, 342; Norris 2006, 6). Hence, the number of protests is not going to decrease on a global scale. Even though there is no clear cut threshold between conventional and unconventional participation, protest can be seen as an extension of conventional political action, where “the degree to which protest disrupts and challenges cultural and political authority” varies (Dalton and Sickle 2005, 3; McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly 2001, 7).

Concerning the number of protests and institutional framework, there are counter arguments. Hence even though “protesters seek to influence social and political outcomes, not through traditional channels of political participation, but rather by exerting pressure and demands from outside of traditional channels and institutions”, opening of access to the traditional channels in political system does not directly imply that protest activism would fade away (Dalton and Sickle 2005, 2). Thus on a case to case basis protest as a political, social response can be exercised when the access to policy making process is either limited or there is no access at all, or political channels are widely available.

Normally, conventional political participation is determined by electoral cycle (e.g. every four years in Latvia), whereas protest and associational action do not have any time constraint and “can go on throughout the years” (Goldstone 2004, 342). Hence, protest can be used as an additional tool in order to ensure accountability of elected representatives between elections and secure that political actors are responsive to claims and demands of the society. Moreover, since most of the time protest activities are specific and directed to a particular issue, chance that the reaction of political actors will follow is relatively high. In addition, mobilization around a particular issue can increase or play down its stand on political agenda. Furthermore, as empirical evidence indicates “left movements may protest more when a rightist government is in power (and vice versa)” which is the way how protest and associational actions can refine and reinforce the results of elections (Goldstone 2004, 343).

Societal conditions and structural tensions should be taken into consideration when evaluating mobilization capacity of a particular society. Social structure and its changes do affect mobilization for collective action. For instance, more general conclusion is that high level of unemployment more likely will preclude from participation in protest, while higher prosperity more likely will have a positive influence on participation and mobilization capacities (della Porta and Diani 2006, 35). Though, societal response in a form of collective

action varies within different contexts. For instance, in relation to voter turnout one could observe that „in the 2006 parliamentary elections, 36 per cent of those living below the line of poverty risk did not vote, a rate below that of higher income populations. The overall rate of non-participation was 28 per cent” (Rungule et al. 2007, 201 in Eglitis and Lace 2009, 340). Thus shifts in social structure, in this case, large scale macro-economic and political reforms in time of transition to market economy, came at a cost of “the creation of a broad and diverse mass of economically disadvantaged inhabitants” who remained silent within political context (Eglitis and Lace 2009, 329).

As far as contentious action is related, then peoples’ perceptions and assessments of their life conditions and economic situation are not always transformed into direct action – protests (Ekiert, Kubik 1998). In other words, objective economic indicators or people’s satisfaction with reforms might increase and so can the magnitude of protest. Hence, these are not only objective economic indicators accounting for variation in protest activity. Rather, it is broader context of the institutional setting, political environment, or in other words, political opportunity structure, which shapes emergence of social movements and “regulate agenda setting and decision making process” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 16).

Different socioeconomic contexts lead to application of various protest forms chosen by protestors. For instance, analyzing social survey data, Maris Brants (2009) comes to the conclusion that in Latvia non-violent protest forms, such as strikes and demonstrations more often are supported by the people who assess their incomes for the next six months as stable. More disruptive forms of protest such as, road or street blockades are supported by the people who are generally pessimistic about their future financial situation. Whereas those, who are most pessimistic about their financial situation and assess their financial situation as unstable and uncertain, are more likely to support violent protest forms, namely, confrontation with the police, hunger strikes and occupation of public buildings.

Bela Greskovits (1998, 71) concludes that “it is one’s economic, social position in society as well as social, political, and cultural structures and institutions which determine and influence individual’s response to economic hardship”. Thus protests in the form of a riot or a strike are only some of the means available to an individual in order to express one’s grievances. The author extends the repertoire of social responses, bringing in the exit option which implies capital flight, migration, and various activities in the informal economy sector (Greskovits 1998, 73). Similarly, Vanhuysse (2006, 196) claims that during times of economic hardship Central Europeans’ “had both the opportunities and the incentives to earn informal private sector incomes, rather than pursuing public goods through collective protests”. All in all, these social responses account for lower collective mobilization experience and relative quiescence of the society.

Thus, drawing on the previous scholarly work (Bohle, Greskovits 2007; Cerami, Vanhuysse 2009; Ekiert, Kubik 1998; Szabo 1996), I conclude that these are legacies of the past and political decisions and choices made on the ground of popular perceptions which had crucial impact on the consolidation of the society and the development of participation culture. The shifts in the structure of political opportunities changed actors’ identities, behavior and agenda of action.

1.2. Opportunity structure and protest activism

The form and intensity of collective action can be explained from the perspective of “political process” (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982). At the centre of this approach is “the relationship between institutional political actors and protest”. The theory of political opportunity structure (POS) builds on the assessment of “the properties of external environment”, which determines the emergence (if at all) and further development of social movements and protest forms it has chosen to exercise (della Porta and Diani 2006, 16).

According to Tarrow (1998, 76), POS is as follow: “the opening of access to participation for new actors; the evidence for political realignment with the polity; the appearance of influential allies; emerging splits within the elite; and a decline in the state’s capacity or will to repress dissent”. Thus the political context conditions the emergence of contentious action. One of the main shortcomings of the perspective is related to the operationalization of the opportunity structures. For instance, it is hard to measure various aspects of institutional context and their direct implications. Besides structural and institutional aspects, there are informal institutions (e.g. norms and values) which “influence movement strategies as well as their chances of success” (Goodwin, Jasper 2004 in della Porta and Diani 2006, 17). Thus while structural limitations can be identified and their implications examined at least to some extent, it is almost impossible to “distinguish between “objective” reality and its social construction” (Berger and Luckmann 1966 in della Porta and Diani 2006, 18).

Nevertheless, changes in political opportunity structure have an effect on the level of collective mobilization only when these changes are perceived as important by social actors. In other words “ [f]or protest to emerge, activists must believe that an opportunity exists, that they have power to bring about change; and they must blame the system for he problem” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 18). It is not only political opportunities *per se*, but actors’ perceptions of these opportunities what matters and determines behavior. For instance, Goldstone (2004, 354) claims that political opportunity structure can not account for complex set of factors which are in play when determining frequency of protest actions when there is access or opportunities available for collective action at least to some extent. Here, another limitation of the theory is that analysis of involved actors’ perceptions at various points in time is necessary (della Porta and Diani 2006, 18).

Chapter 2 - Legacy of the past and political participation

This chapter assesses the direction and significance of political change in Latvia since 1991, looking at possible implications for societal mobilization capacity. In the first part of the chapter I claim that the idea of building the nation state and corresponding policy choices made, shaped the identity formation and mobilization among both the Russian-speaking minority and Latvians. In the second part drawing on secondary sources I describe political participation practices and culture in Latvia for the period of 1991 to 2006. In the third part, I give a short description of the research method, and follow with the analysis of contentious action in Latvia, building both on data collected for this study and secondary sources. Finally, I argue that within the most recent wave of contentious activism two broader types of protests can be distinguished: mobilization around issues related to ethnic identities and mobilization activated by economic motives which, in most of the cases merges with political frustration.

2.1. Policies shaping participation culture

Institutionalized political participation and political protest are “avenues of political action that open up to ordinary people with the advance of democratization” (Goldstone 2004, 343). During the times of the Soviet Union unconventional political participation unfolded in the frame of regime support or was illegal and was organized underground in order to avoid suppression. The change of political opportunities after 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet regime conditioned general shifts in the political participation culture of Latvia. This was the time when protest was “legally and constitutionally regulated and accepted both by the new elites and the civil society” (Szabo 1996, 1165). Moreover, it can be argued that “unprecedented mass mobilization”⁵ after the launching of president Gorbachov’s *Glasnosts*

⁵ 250.000 people were participating in the Latvian Popular Front movement. Among, other those were mass protests against building metro, construction of hydroelectric complex and historical Baltic Way (Pabriks and Purs 2001, 45).

and *Perestroika* policies were crucial in triggering collapse of the Soviet Union and restoring Latvia's independence.

According to the principles of representative democracy, elections are the only time when elected officials are being held accountable by citizens. However, the process of nation building in Latvia removed this opportunity of political participation from a large part of Latvia's society. The main dilemma for the recently established state was to decide, whether to extend citizenship to Soviet immigrants and their families, most of whom were ethnic Russians. Since preservation of the Latvian language was one of the main elements of nation building, in October 1991 the Supreme Council restored citizenship only to pre-1940 citizens and their descendants. Citizenship law itself was introduced only in 1994. As a result 700, 000 or 28 percent of population were left without citizenship, but with the opportunity of being incorporated through a naturalization process, which included knowledge of the Latvian language and history (Budryte 2005; Pabriks and Purs 2001). Since a substantial majority⁶ of Russian nationals did not speak Latvian, they became legal residents without citizenship. In practice it means that even today almost 20 percent of population⁷ has no right to exercise their voice either in local or national elections.

Nevertheless, Latvians are more concerned about the threats against the Latvian language and culture than Russians are about the threats against the Russian culture. Only 53 percent of Latvians said that there are hardly any threats to the Latvian language and culture, while 78 percent of Russians think that there are hardly any threats to the Russian culture (Muiznieks 2010, 262). Latvians opposed the idea of a two-community state and that is why common understanding and agreement of the history became part of the official nation

⁶ In the 1989 62.3 percent of the population could speak Latvian and only 20 percent of those who were not ethnic Latvians (Budryte, 2005, 113).

⁷ In 1991 72 percent of Latvia's residents were Latvian citizens, in 1996 - 72.33 percent and in 2009 – 82 percent (Budryte, 2005, 116, Ministry of Foreign Affairs home page).

building discourse, shaping political arena in the 90s, and continue to be “hot issue” in contemporary political sphere (Budryte 2005, 123).

In Latvia the “ethnic card” was strategically used in order to get the acquiescence of the larger part of society and to guarantee social order in light of economic reforms (Cerami and Vanhuysse 2009). Market reforms strongly affected the Russian speaking minority because they were employed in industries whose main market was the Soviet Union (Bohle and Greskovits 2007, 451). There were economic reform losers among ethnic Latvians too, though popular saying “in *pastalas* (simple footwear made of one piece of leather) but at least in our own independent state” illustrates the popular mood of the time among titulars. In other words, needs that were not fulfilled on daily basis, were compensated by common identity and shared idea of emergence of a new and better state. As Viesturs Abolins (2009) notes, this popular slogan removed any possible responsibility from political elite in relation toward economic situation and hardship. Moreover, the political elite by highlighting ethnic as opposed to class cleavages within the society, affected “the Russian speakers’ capacity to coalesce with socio-economically similar but ethnically different transition losers” (Cerami and Vanhuysse 2009, 64). Therefore, one can say that the policies like Citizenship law, Election laws, and Language law were deliberately implemented by the political elite in order to deprive large part of population of its ability to exercise basic political rights⁸, to mobilize for collective action and exercise voice option.

2.2. Political participation in Latvia: 1991-2006

The change of political situation after 1991 conditioned general shifts not only for state (re)building but shifts and new trends in the political participations culture. Latvia was

⁸ Parties representing Russian speaking voters haven not been in any of Latvia's 14 governments since the beginning of 90s. Russian speaking minority participate less than ethnic Latvians in various political activities. For instance, only 17.4 percent non-Latvians, compared to 42 percent Latvians, signed the petition in 2008 calling for amendments to the Constitution. Moreover, these are 12.5 percents of Latvians participating in trade union activities, while only 8.1 percent Russians do (Muiznieks 2010, 116-118).

on its way toward establishing a working democracy and market economy. Membership in the NATO and EU was set as the strategic goal. Economic and social transformations came with the great social costs for majority of population. That is why these changes were expected to come with the wave of protests and even possible weakening of democratic institutions. However, contrary to expectations, Latvia and countries of the Central and Eastern Europe over the period of economic transformation met relatively little social protest (Greskovits 1998). Greskovits sees an explanation for this “phenomenon” in the interplay between “certain structural, institutional, and cultural legacies of communism, coupled with the demobilizing effect of the crisis and reforms” (1998, 70). Here, the role of various strategic policy choices to quiescent different society groups, discussed in the previous section, had role to play.

By analyzing political participation in Latvia, Karklina and Zepa (2001) distinguish three stages of activism. In the analysis of political participation authors included assessment of conventional participation, contentious activism and changes in people’s attitudes. According to the authors, the first phase from 1987 to 1991 is characteristic with grassroots social movements and unprecedented mass mobilization under various pretexts as a support for restoring Latvia’s independence (2001, 335).

The second phase, seen in the period from 1991 to 1998, was marked by a decrease of political activism, disappointment in the performance of elected officials, low political trust and alienation from state institutions (2001, 338). Contentious activism appeared in the form of rather small-scale events where the number of participants ranged from a handful to a few hundred protestors. Mass protest by various societal groups in 1995 when governmental policy towards “Bank Baltia” (“*Banka Baltija*”) was contested can be seen as an exception rather than rule (Rozenvalds and Ijabs 2009, 27). To some extent, large-scale reform protests were avoided because of policies implemented by the post-communist elite.

Karklina and Zepa distinguish the third phase for the time period 1998-2001. Taking into consideration characteristics of this phase, I will draw on Vanhuysse categorization. He extends the third phase of protest activism until 2008, when a new stage of protest began. For the clarity of this thesis, protest activism in this section will be analyzed until 2007. On the basis of collected data, I argue that it is 2007 when the new wave of protest activities started in Latvia.

Characteristic to third phase is increasing disenchantment with conventional political participation. That is why protests were more often seen as an alternative channel of political participation and was increasingly used. Karklina and Zepa claim that during this period there was “an increase in mostly spontaneous and vocal protests of dissatisfied social groups” (2001, 341). For example, there were disruptive protests organized by farmers against state agricultural policies, using blockades of border points and pickets in the capital city, which not only led to the beginning of negotiations with state institutions, but led to partial fulfillment of the demands. In addition, these were health sector employees who in the spring 2001 protested against low wages and employed nationwide pickets as one of their strategies (2001, 341-342). The other broader mass mobilization in this period is related to pensioner protest against their socioeconomic conditions. In March 3 1998 pensioners decided to choose radical means of protest and blocked streets in Riga (Rozenvalds and Ijabs 2009, 27).

In this period the country experienced mobilization of non-Latvians due to the emergence of European minority convention on the political agenda. Russian language newspapers and minority organizations emerged as main actors mobilizing Russian-speaking population. However, even more than minority convention it was minority education reform which induced mobilization. That is why in 2000-2004 heightened mobilization of minority group could be observed⁹. In this case Russian speaking NGOs consolidated in counteraction

⁹ According to estimates, from April 2003 to November 2005 198 actions were organized and 35 of these actions had more than 1000 participants (Muiznieks 2010, 119).

against the state, because there was no formal dialogue between the state and interest groups during the period of drafting reform. The culmination of this period of mobilization was on the day of Latvia's accession to the EU. On the 1st of May 2004 demonstrations took place at the Victory monument in Riga where around 20 000 participants gathered. To a large extent, this event gained little exposure because representatives of Latvia's government, parliament and the president were delivering speeches in another public meeting to those, who gathered to celebrate accession in the EU (Muiznieks 2010, 119).

Unprecedented mobilization of Russian-speaking minority, which did not substantially change scheduled reforms, had significant long-term consequences on the mobilization capacity of the group. Namely, five years after the protests, data indicates that Russians school students feel less ready to protest than do Latvian school students. 50 percent of Russian school students believe that protests will have no result, or will not change anything, while only 32 percent of Latvian school students hold this view (Providus 2009, 10). The difference among assessment of capacity and ability to affect government policy indicates that the past experience had negative influence on beliefs of Russian students and teachers about effectiveness and instrumentality of civic participation.

Moreover, this was a time when both authorities very often used legal and administrative tools in order to limit mobilization and protest activities. Often these limitations were on the verge between violation of human rights and more general principles of administrative process (Pleps and Meijere 2005, 3; Muiznieks 2010, 120).

All in all, over the years of independence contentious activism has not been very common in Latvia. Yet in the period 1991-2006 increase in protest activism by various social groups can be observed. Over this period participation in elections has decreased steadily due to a widespread sense that the system is corrupt and serves only a narrow elite. In the "How Democratic is Latvia: Audit of Democracy 2005" it is stated that one of the reasons of why

social movements in Latvia are almost absent is availability of institutional channels. I argue that this was largely so not because “there are few issues in Latvian politics that could not be addressed through other means of public participation” (Miezaine and Simane 2005, 150), but rather because of the low mobilization capacity of society, due the past experience combined with the adopted policies shaping participation framework. Institutional channels of negotiating with the government were closed not only to the Russian-speaking group who were excluded from control over policy making, but also to other groups, including pensioners (Lulle 2002).

2.3. Data collection method

Unlike in the case of conventional political participation (e.g. participation in elections, referendums) official data on the number of protests in Latvia is unavailable. In order to answer the research question, information on protest events was collected from the newspapers. Data collection on protest from newspapers is seen as a valuable and widely used research method (Dalton and Sickle 2005; Ekiert and Kubik 1998), because it ensures researcher with the comparatively valid data on protest events for the time period and spatial area of particular interest (Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992, 90).

Information, reported in the daily newspaper *Diena*, about protest actions which took place in Latvia between January 2006 and May 2010 was registered. *Diena* was chosen because it is the daily with highest circulation rate and is generally regarded as having highly professional standards¹⁰.

The main biases characteristic of this research method are: the problem of representativeness of the data concerned, namely, media selection bias, and information description bias. In other words, it means that media tend to report on events with sensational, disruptive nature and that is why less scandalous events might not be represented. Further,

¹⁰ Moreover, *Diena* was called “the best newspaper in the Baltic states” (Edward Lucas in Rudusa 2009, 7).

printed media have limited space and that is why some protests might not appear in printed editions or coverage will be limited to basic presentation of the event without giving more detailed description of the actors and their claims (Dalton and Sickle 2005; Earl et al. 2004).

Specificity of the media in Latvia is related to the fact that there are two media spaces– one in Latvian language and the other in Russian (Muiznieks 2010, 249; Golubeva 2010, 62). The difference in these media spaces is not only in a linguistic sense, but more importantly, very often these information spaces differ in terms of content. Information that is provided by Latvian and Russian language press publications, the manner events are interpreted and opinions expressed differ greatly. However, due to limited resources and scope of the research, data will be compiled only from daily in Latvian language.

A detailed database of all forms of collective protest in Latvia was constructed based on data gathered. The data collection protocol was adopted from the protocol “The Logic of Civil Society, Contentious Politics in New Democracies” elaborated by Ekiert, Kubik, Greskovits, and Wittenberg. I used the questionnaire and the instructions from this protocol in order to cover protest in Latvia based on the daily newspaper. Main data coding categories are the following, number and social-vocational category of the protest participants, strategies and methods of protest, scope of the protest action, demands of the protestors, targets of the protest event and reactions to the protest event.

Two aspects - attitudinal and behavioral – can be distinguished in relation to collective action. Scholarly research has revealed that very often attitudes and “protest potential” are poor predictors of behavior (Norris 2006, 12). For collective action to emerge, in addition to supportive attitude real action, namely participation, should follow. That is why in this study both attitudinal and behavioral aspects of mobilization will be revealed. The former, by the analysis of opinion polls and the later by the data on actual protest activity reported in the newspaper.

Chapter 3 - Political participation in Latvia: 2007-2009

According to Vanhuyse (2009), most recent phase of protest activism came with the worldwide economic crisis in 2008. This stage is even more contentious than previous as response to shrinking economy, wage cuts, and uncertainty about ones future and general development of political situation. On the basis of gathered data, I will show that in Latvia the new wave of increased protest activism can be seen one year earlier, namely in 2007, due to the conjuncture of political events, which marked a period of political crisis. Hence, economic crisis not only increased salience of some latent issues within economic structure of the country, but merged with the political disenchantment of large societal groups leading to contentious action.

Latvian society is characterized with a “low level of political interest, low level of political participation, low self organization capacity, alienation from the state” (Rozenvalds and Ijabs 2009, 79). In order to explain this societal behavior Rozenvalds and Ijabs (2009, 17) draw attention to the interconnectedness between individual and public responsibility. The central “problem” which accounts for increasing disenchantment and participation can be seen the “privatization of profit and nationalization of loss”. In other words, it is a phenomenon when individuals develop and form their attitudes on grounds of the “example” given by political elite. Unfortunately, very often corrupt deals in relation to business and state administration undermine legitimacy of the state and state institutions. Perceptions about the high level of corruption undermine the capacity for networking, social cooperation, collective action and the development of interpersonal trust¹¹ (2009, 18-19). Corruption and belief that politics is subordinate¹² to narrow business group interests are only two among many aspects

¹¹ The level of interpersonal trust in Latvia is 4,8 (where 10 is the highest) (Rozenvalds and Ijabs 2009, 18).

¹² For instance, in scale from 0 – not at all to 10-completely, Latvians’ believe that politicians take into consideration public interests on the level at 3,64 (Rozenvalds and Ijabs 2009, 23).

negatively affecting civic confidence. As mentioned earlier, these are socioeconomic factors and historical experience, namely, the communist past, accounting for the lack of trust in public organizations.

However, in comparative perspective, participation rate in civil society organizations in Latvia is below average, compared to other ex-communist countries (Uhlen 2009, 274). Nevertheless, Karklina (2010) has observed that the number of various civic initiatives is on the increase. Positive trends in the participation culture are by Karklina linked to the positive side-effect of the economic crisis, because people more often associate particular political decisions with possible influences on their lives. Hence self-mobilization has become not just a manifestation of protest, but more often it comes with highly professional proposals and initiatives. New and creative solutions are being searched and cooperation networks extended in order to diminish hardship of the crisis (Karklina, 2010). Similarly Petrova and Tarrow (2007, 88) find that transactional capacity (interaction and ties among various actors) in reality might be bigger than the capacity to mobilize individuals for collective action.

2008 data indicates that public participation is most often manifested through signing petitions (27 percent of respondents), 12 percents have participated in protests or demonstrations and 11 percent claim to be involved in NGO activities, while a political party membership in Latvia 1-2 percent (AC Konsultācijas 2008, 31; Rozenvalds and Ijabs 2009, 24). According to the data, civic activity in Latvia is mainly expressed through participation in recreational organizations. Nevertheless, these organizations in long-term do affect individual values and support for democratic principles (Rozenvalds and Ijabs 2009, 24; Uhlin 2009, 282). Since neither the majority of Latvians nor Russians see Latvia as a political subject and do not associate country with concepts like “democracy”, “national parliament”, and “constitution”, we can conclude that civic participation culture and appraisal of various

institutional channels, seen as communication and accountability channels, are at developmental stage (AC Konsultācijas 2008, 46-47).

3.1. Political grievances and mass mobilization

Increased public attention to and discontent with the political sphere began in 2007. The 9th Parliamentary elections in 2006 were won by the same four party coalition ruling already in the 8th Saeima. However, within a year the legitimacy of the parliament steadily declined. The sequence of events leading to the mass disenchantment is as follows. First, in spring 2007 there were attempts to modify security legislation, which in practice widened the group of people having access to the information of national significance. Society perceived this decision as politically motivated. After a wide public debate and following the overturn of the Presidential veto, a referendum was initiated on this issue. Even though the referendum turnout was insufficient, its initiation *per se* and heightened public attention pressured legislators to retract the previously enacted legislation (Spruds, Daugulis, Bukovskis 2009, 18).

Second event provoking public debates and mobilizing individuals for protest activities was election of the new president by parliament. The main point of discontent directed to the political elite was related to the selection, negotiations and agreement on presidential candidate. Contrary to expectations to advance a politically known person, a politically inexperienced medical doctor Valdis Zatlers was elected. Frustration with the decision making mounted even more, when information that presidential candidature was agreed beforehand by some political leaders meeting in the Zoo (Spruds, Daugulis, Bukovskis 2009, 18). As a culmination of political arbitrariness came attempt by the Prime Minister Aigars Kalvītis to dismiss the chair of the Anti-Corruption Bureau Aleksejs Loskutovs (Rozenvalds and Ijabs 2009, 28). In response to this announcement a protest campaign immediately was organized. These events were followed with by the corruption scandal of the

Parliamentary Chairman Indulis Emsis, publication of the book “Tiesāšanās kā ķēķis” (“Litigation as in the kitchen”) which revealed discrediting practices in the judiciary system, and the participation in official coalition session of Aivars Lembergs who had been charged with committing criminal offenses. In the long term perspective these events certainly harmed the legitimacy of government and political institutions.

Collective mobilization around these issues can be seen as a mirror of societal attitude. For example, on the day presidential elections were held, supporters and opponents of both presidential candidates gathered in front of the Parliament building. Even though several hundred protesters were mainly mobilized by coalition and opposition political parties, action revealed the popular mood of the time. For instance slogans such as “No to communism phantom!”, “Thief”, and symbolic envelopes symbolized that the newly elected President, as many of his fellow doctors, has possibly received in the form of money “gifts of gratitude”, which he failed to declare in his income declaration (Dreijere 2007). Nevertheless, accusations of the new president were justified.

In June attempts to fire the head of Anti-Corruption Bureau led to public support action of Aleksejs Loskutovs on the day when decision about his dismissal had to be made. A few months later, on November 2007, as the culmination of societal frustration and dissatisfactions came the manifestation “For law governed state and honest politics”. This event later was called “umbrella revolution” because of the rainy weather. The protest action was organized by opposition parties and various civil society organizations. Local intelligentsia and other well know personalities had a central role to play in mobilization of society. The largest daily *Diena* published an appeal to society and a call for participation. Under the appeal the signatures of well known people were listed. This was the central element in the successful mobilization campaign which gathered around 8000 people to a

rally. Those, who could not attend, were asked to cut out and send in the *Diena* printed appeal to the Saeima as a symbolic protest to political arbitrariness (Egle and Sloga, 2007).

Intellectual elite played crucial role in order to mobilize society for the largest protests since the beginning of the 90s. The “Umbrella revolution” often is called the “fourth awakening” of society marking a new turn in political participation culture. First, because of the large number of participants and second, because mobilization was not based on ethnopolitical issues as it was three years earlier with minority mobilization campaign. Society was united in its demand for compliance with democratic values and principles. This was not mobilization around particular ethnic, political or social demands and that is why there is no distinct social-vocational profile of the protestors. There were several implications of this event for the political landscape. First, was resignation of the Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis. Second, Loskutovs retained in his office only to be removed in June 2008 under another pretext (Rozenvalds and Ijabs 2009, 28).

2008 was the year when the economic crisis strongly hit Latvia’s political, economic and social conditions. In the public sphere more and more discussions appeared on the forthcoming reorganization of state institutions, changes in taxation policies and involvement of the IMF. One of the most discussed issues was the governments (spontaneous and almost secret) decision to take over private “Parex Bank” (“Parex Banka”) (Dreifelds 2009, 308). 2008 was not politically less interesting, because two referendums were held. The first of them was organized by the Latvian Federation of Free Trade Unions aimed at making amendments in Constitution in order to ensure that voters had the right to initiate a procedure for the dissolution of the Saeima. Until then only the President had this right. Even though the referendum failed to be passed¹³, it was of great political importance because 40 per cent of all Latvian citizens demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the ruling elite and low trust in the

¹³ In order to amend the constitution by referendum, more than 50 per cent of all eligible voters in Latvia have to vote in favor of the amendments. The turnout in the referendum was 42 per cent of whom 97 percent voted in favor of the amendments (Kazoka and Akule, 2009, 2).

parliament. On the other hand, it indicates that there was no unanimity on the referendum proposal either. Some speculate that insufficient turnout was due to the referendum date (08.08.08.) which was very popular for weddings (Kazoka and Akule, 2009, 2-3). The second referendum was held some weeks later and the question put to the popular vote was about the increase in pension payments and changes in the pension system. This time the referendum was organized in cooperation by association “Society for Different Politics and Law-Governed state” together with Pensioners and Seniors Party. And similarly as previously, the referendum failed to produce a sufficient number of votes (Dreifelds 2009, 312).

The majority of organized protest events called into question the legitimacy of authorities. Often the legitimacy of the whole political system was questioned and even “endangered” when people demanded not only the dismissal of particular MP, but rather the whole parliament. The “umbrella revolution” in 2007 was the first. Within society there was growing concern about government performance and practices and inability of people to hold the parliament accountable between official elections cycles. That is why one of the primary demands during a demonstration on the 13 of January 2009, later known as the “penguin revolution”¹⁴, was to ask the president to call early elections and dissolve parliament. After peaceful demonstration organized by opposition parties and various NGOs attended by more than 10 000, mass riots in front of the parliament building followed. As a result more than 50 persons were injured and 106 arrested. This action brought about the Presidents ultimatum which demanded compliance with several demands, such as to broaden governmental coalition, affirm the new head of Anticorruption Bureau, amend state Constitution and Election Law, aimed to restore public confidence to parliament by 31 March 2009, or procedure to dismiss the Saeima will be initiated. Even though only some of the demands

¹⁴ In his 2008 New Year’s Eve address Premier Minister Ivars Godmanis appealed to the society by an idea that it will be easier to get through economic crisis if Latvians will learn from penguins in Antarctica and huddle together when facing hardship. This is why in the demonstration two weeks later this allegory was adopted (Kazoka and Akule, 2009, 4).

were fulfilled (e.g. new Prime Minister was appointed, the coalition was enlarged, and eventually the Constitution changed, giving right to people to dismiss the parliament) dissolution of parliament did not follow (Kazoka and Akule 2009, 4).

One of the intangible benefits from collective action is related to the ability of “large demonstrations [to] empower participants by spreading the feelings of belonging to a large community of equals” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 173). That is why in public discourse the “umbrella revolution” and the “penguin revolution” are being compared with the mass grassroots participation in the beginning of the 90s. That time, struggle for independence united the nation despite social and ethnic stratification. Thus these events, which were mainly based on political issues, built a sense of collective identity, feeling of belonging and empowerment. At the same time, the mobilization in 2007 met ignorance and denial from coalition members, especially Prime Minister Aigars Kalvītis who described the protestors as impersonal and alienated mass of “8000 opponents” (Driere et. all. 2007).

3.2. Protests in numbers and character of the new wave of contentious action

Drawing on the collected data, in this chapter I will present an assessment of the motives of the protestors, their concerns and demands and the repertoire of contention they choose in order to display their agenda. Further, data¹⁵ allows for drawing preliminary conclusions about the scope of contentious activism in Latvia within the period under study.

116 protest events were reported to have taken place in Latvia from 2006-2009. From January 2010 to May 2010 this number has grown by 22 new protests. Thus, based on the newspaper analysis, in total there have been 138 protests coded. (See Figure 1) Even though this number might seem relatively small, in practice it embraced at least two protests per

¹⁵ One should remember that these are not firm numbers, rather estimates of the level of protest activism, based on event coverage in the media. The actual number of protests is expected to be larger due to the media selection and description biases, and the fact that no local newspaper was analyzed.

month. Here, one should take into consideration, that online petitions were not coded, since there was no media coverage on them. Coverage on open letters and public appeals was relatively small. They constitute 13 percents of all protest events. I assume that various appeals were more often published in online editions of the newspaper.

There are other important aspects that account and had a direct influence on protest activism during this period. These are: parliamentary elections in October 2006, local government and European Parliament elections in June 2009, and three referendums¹⁶ held within two years. These conventional channels can be considered as widely available (at least to those who are citizens) voice options to express positions on several domains of national importance.

Even though the number of protests has increased over time, the society remains skeptical about its ability to influence decision making process. For instance, 78 percent of population believes that society has limited possibilities to influence the decision making process. And only 44 percent believes that by participating in protests it is possible to influence decision making process (Strode 2010). It is hard to “measure” real implications of mass mobilization on policy choices, because there are more factors affecting policy making process than a particular protest activity. However, from the examples of protest activism in Latvia, it is clear that the protest activities had implications on the policy makers. For instance, Rajevska claims that:

The fact that in summer 2009, government did not reduce the untaxed minimum for dependent children and has been fairly cautious in dealing with child care subsidies indicates that those who are in power believe that there would be massive public protests if generous family support policies were trimmed in any crude way (Muiznieks 2010, 186).

The approximate total number of protest days is 117. 83 percent of the sampled protests were staged for a single day, whereas 3 percent of the events lasted for a time period

¹⁶ The national referendum for the “Draft Law Amendment to the Law “On State Pensions””, the referendum about the Draft Law “Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia” in August 2008, and the referendum “Amendments to the State Security Authorities Law” on March 2007 (Central Election Commission home page).

from two to seven days. 1 percent of events lasted more than one month. Protest campaign started by Gints Gaikens stands out from the general pattern on this account. He started to protest on November 30 2009 in front of the government building. He expressed dissatisfaction with the situation in the country and claimed that unemployment problems are to be solved. Soon other protestors joined Gaikens and the tent city in Riga's center was pitched. The number of participants varies around 20 and has been changing over time. Protestors plan to protest till the Parliamentary elections in October 2010. On an individual level this protest had direct implications for its founder Gaikens, because he was offered a work place by Riga city vice-mayor. This was the only protest event where the unemployed were identified as a main social group organizing and participating in the protest.

Lack of identification and solidarity from the general public with protestors in the tent city has been identified (Sloga 2010). Main reason for that are seen the broad and blurred demands of protestors. The spectrum of demands ranges from a demand to call for government's resignation to better living standards and employment for everyone. Moreover, protestors are not united in their demands and many of them were rather general rather than specific. Nevertheless, according to social survey, 71 percent of citizens support tent city protestors (LETA, 2010). And still, large-scale support campaigns, or leaders who would try to capitalize protest potential did not appear. One of the explanations might be related to the chosen protest form, because living in the tent during one of the coldest winters, is dangerous for one's health. Attempts of the state authorities to mediate with protestors failed. Furthermore, this campaign was surrounded by the ambience that these are unemployed and homeless people gathering there. Even though, there were employed as well as unemployed people protesting and even some students, the perception was not helped when founder of the camp was offered a job and promptly left.

The majority of protests were national in scope. Consequently, 22 protest events attracted no more than 500 people. There is an increase in the number of large protests. (See Figure 2) This is an evidence of increased mass mobilization during the “umbrella revolution”, the “penguin revolution” and numerous rallies organized by trade unions with relatively large number of participants.

In total 91 percent of analyzed events were protest incidences. These were mainly demonstrations, marches, and pickets involving short action, usually less than 8 hours. The most “visible” protest campaign was organized in 2009 by farmers and peasants who demanded not only “EU direct payments from the various loans to Latvia be paid before March 31st”, but also “for 2.5 percent of the national budget to be spent on agricultural aid” (TBT staff, 2009). With very intensive protest campaign - by blocking the roads and causing traffic distraction, bringing cows’ head in a coffin to the government building – farmers not only received a financial support package but also obtained the resignation of Minister of Agriculture Martins Roze (BBC News, 2009).

As far as the protest forms, adopted in Latvia are concerned, those were mainly non-violent protest actions. Violent protest events comprise 5 percent of all protest events. Violence has occurred in the riot following peaceful demonstration on January 13, 2009, and on occasional basis during protests taking place on 16th of March, and 9th of May and Pride parades for the LGBT community. Hence, protest culture in Latvia can be marked as non-violent. When looking at non-violent protest forms in more detail, one can see that 71 percent of protest events were characterized with non-violent disruption of the public order and 24 percent were marked with no disruption at all. Demonstrations, marches, rallies and pickets are among the most used forms of protest. These forms account for 70 percent of protest events. Blockades of road or bridge as a more disruptive form of protest have been used rarely.

Due to the spread of new information technologies, new forms of protest and mobilization are introduced and successfully exploited. The Internet was used for mobilization purposes during the “umbrella revolution”. After the “penguin revolution” several internet platforms emerged. Those platforms were created and used not only as information (opinion) exchange places, but were used as mobilization channels for other actions. For instance, on February 2009 members of parliament received symbolic presents (Rozenvalds, Ijabs 2009, 28). Internet and radio was used in order to organize flashmob action in support for Latvia’s Radio on 30 January 2009. As Kazoka and Akule (2009: 4) put it “[these internet communities] give a little hope that there is “life after crisis””. However, it should be noted that within a year activity of those communities has declined dramatically.

Most recent protest event related to information technologies is the cyber activist movement, called the “Fourth Awakening People’s Army”, which attacked Latvian State Revenue Service and later leaked acquired information on public sector employees’ salaries “during the crisis” in the mass media. Hence, this protest, not only indicate that the new forms of protest are being used, but allows to assess public reaction of the society. After information on salaries in public sector (which were not reduced as was often publicly asserted) appeared in the media, no public reaction, in terms of real activity, followed. There were no protests coded on this matter. However, society could have, for instance, voiced their discontent by boycotting particular organizations or institutions (Kaza 2010). When in mid May a hacker nicknamed Neo was arrested, within a day, dozens of protesters gathered for his support in flash mob demonstration, and protest outside the Prosecutor-General’s office. Further, his arrest brought about “verbal” protests in a form of appeals and open letters by journalist and lawyer communities (Domburs 2010).

All in all, according to the data, protest activity from 2006-2010 has increased. Ethnic gap when protest activity was higher among Russian-speakers than Latvians in the mid-2000s

has converged. Thus, in 2008 these are 12 percent of Latvians and 11 percent of Russians who have participated in protests (Muiznieks 2010, 120).

Furthermore, the dynamics of conventional participation reveals that electoral mobilization and voter turnout in the national, local and the EU parliamentary elections has dropped. For instance, in 1993 elections electoral turnout was 89 percent and in 2006 elections it was only 61 percent (Karklina and Zepa 2001, 337). Voter turnout for European parliamentary elections is even lower - 41 per cent in 2004 and 54 per cent in 2009 (Central Election Commission home page). This can be seen as a social response by those who can not identify themselves with any of social groups addressed by political actors and thus “simply withdrawn from politics and not even vote” (Greskovits 2007, 41).

Protest vote can be seen as another available channel for those who are willing to voice their discontent. In this context, extremely important is the finding by Aivars Tabuns that in the EP elections in 2009 “more than 124 000 voters gave pluses to two people [former Soviet Latvian Communist Party leader Alfreds Rubiks and Euro-MP Tatjana Zdanoka] who actively fought against the restoration of Latvia’s independence and gave far fewer pluses to other candidates who did not do so” (Muiznieks 2010, 271-272). Thus, in addition to the increased protest activism, these trends indicate growing political disenchantment and expression of ethnic identity which is based on different visions about the country’s future and current political environment.

Chapter 4 - When political and economic crises merge

In this chapter I will show that the general frustration with the political system was present before the economic crisis. However, it merged with the austerity protests leading to contentious activism where the main base for mobilization is a sense of social, economic insecurity and political disenchantment. Building on the gathered data, I will demonstrate that people more often voiced their discontent about both specific domestic policies and more general political dissatisfaction. In the first part of this chapter I will present development of the political and economic situation at the time. In the second part I proceed with the assessment of austerity protests in the light of political background.

4.1. “Seven fat years¹⁷” or rather an illusion?

In May 2004 a strategic goal was met and Latvia became member of the EU. Since then Latvia was seen as a “Baltic tiger” with one of the fastest growing economies in the EU. The Latvian economy experienced 8-9 per cent GDP growth annually (Plakans, 2009, 522; Kazoka and Akule 2009, 2). After accession to the EU Latvia experienced increase in consumption prices and fast salary increase which not only to some extent counterbalanced and reduced the gap between old and new member states¹⁸, but spread “a massive wave of optimism” (Vela, 2010). Among the reasons for optimism were not only appealing and widely used option to travel, work and study in Europe, but rather changes in the labor market. This was a time when the unemployment rate fell from 10.4 percent in 2004 to 6 percent in 2007 (Spruds, Daugulis, Bukovskis 2009, 24). Very flexible and open labor market together with steady increase in salaries for majority of society gave access to never before available loans

¹⁷ In his 2006 New Year’s Eve speech the Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis was addressing people with very optimistic speech referring to Biblical story about “seven fat years” which are going to come (Kazoka and Akule 2009, 3).

¹⁸ The annual income level in Latvia is 28.3 percent of EU average. While there have been regular increase of salaries, real monthly minimum wage in 2009 was only 256 Euros (Karnite 2009, 9).

and markets. For many this was the time when “belt tightening” over many years finally had brought rising living standards and employment opportunities for those who did not have them before (Plakans 2009, 322). Even more, a labor market study conducted by Mihails Hazans shows that over the time period 1997-2007 due to the experienced economic growth and labour migration, ethnic and linguistic minorities were successfully integrated into the labour market. This was not least, because of the “*de facto* easing of Latvian language requirements” (Muiznieks 2010, 281). Nevertheless, unemployment rate was always higher for minority groups. Moreover, with the onset of the economic crisis the ethnic gap in employment has increased compared to previous period (2010, 153).

In practice, the vision of Aigars Kalvitis about “seven fat years” was never realized. At its best these were only three “fat years”. This was due to various external and internal processes, that the inflation reached two-digit figure and was 10.1 percent in 2007 (Spruds, Daugulis, Bukovskis 2009, 23). The failed “Full throttle!” economic policy, based on increasing domestic demand, at the time praised by some political actors, later strengthened public perception that it is irresponsible government to be blamed for economic troubles (Kazoka and Akule 2009, 2-3). However, these were mainly economists who voiced their skepticism concerning Latvia’s economic competitiveness on global stage and an economic structure which was not based on increased productivity, diversified production, but rather on market speculations (Spruds, Daugulis, Bukovskis 2009, 23-24).

2008 came with unfamiliar and deterrent debates about the possible collapse of the second largest bank and the state’s bankruptcy. In order to avoid the first one, Latvian government was “forced” to take over the “Parex Bank”. In relation to the second, besides the debate whether state’s bankruptcy is possible at all, it became evident that if no measures will be taken, the state will be unable to cover social expenditures – pay pensions, wages in public sector, and the like. In order to avoid worst scenario, outside financial assistance was asked

and was provided¹⁹. Latvia was granted a 7.5bn Euro rescue package (Latvijas Banka 2009, 11). In practice this means that there was (and will be) a high price to be paid in order to comply with “draconian belt-tightening measures”, cutting the budget deficit from 12 per cent to 3 per cent by 2012 (Paterson, 2010).

So far these measures implied reorganization of public administration (several ministries were closed down), cuts in fiscal spending (especially public sector wages), and increased taxes (Kazoka and Akule 2009, 1). Since January 2009, value-added tax rate was raised “from 18% to 21% and from 5% and 10% to 21% in some important sectors of the economy, such as heating, food, tourism services and book publishing” (Karnite 2009, 9). These policies resulted in protest activities, particularly from publishers and book sellers. Furthermore, the positive movement toward a higher untaxed minimum from 15 Euros in 2004 to 63 Euros in 2009 was halted on 1 July 2009 when it was 25 Euros. In practice it meant that people with low wages had a high price to pay, contributing an additional 9 Euros a month to the national budget (Muiznieks 2010, 186). Among affected groups were pensioners, who from July 2009 faced pension cuts. This governmental action did not bring about mass mobilization of pensioners separately but rather contributed to the spirit of a broader rally organized by trade unions in June, where one of the slogans was “Hands off the pensioners!” (Leitans 2009c). More effective protest strategy, supported by some political actors, was individual appeals to the Constitutional court, which on December 2009 led to the court decision in favor of the pensioners. The Constitutional court announced these cuts illegal and judged that collected money should be repaid by 2015 (Diena.lv 2009).

Hence, cuts in public and private sector salaries and increasing unemployment are “contributing to the general sense of insecurity” for large groups of society. It was sense of legal and economic unfairness and broad distrust to political institutions leading to perception

¹⁹ Main loan providers are: the IMF, the European Commission, the World Bank, the EBRD, the Nordic countries, the Czech Republic, Poland and Estonia (Kazoka, Akule, 2009: 1).

of government as an unfair institution which is unable/ unwilling to solidarize with the people (Brants 2009). Public behavior of officials aggravated government's legitimacy problems and increased antagonism toward elite and alienation from politics in general. One example of irresponsible behavior of state authorities in Latvia is an interview with ex-finance minister Atis Slakteris in 2007 for Bloomberg television, who described the situation of Latvia's economy as "nothing special". Assessment of the country's economic situation in the eve of the crisis as "nothing special" led not only to a wave of parodies but also to increased public awareness of incompetence of politicians and poor capacity of state administration in general (Kazoka and Akule 2009, 3-4).

4.2. Economic grievances

The collected data indicates an immense increase in the magnitude of economic demands. For instance, in 2006 these were 5 percent of total, while in 2008 their share reached 44 percent. The number of political demands remained high (33 percent) in 2009. While political demands reached a peak in 2007 when they comprised 73 percent, gradual equalization with economic demands can be observed in 2009. (See Figure 3) The data on protest activity indicate that since 2008 people were more often voicing their discontent about political systems failures together with economic demands. For instance, in 2008 political and economic demands merged in every fifth (19 percent) protest action, while the respective share for 2009 is every second (44 percent). Hence, the signs of not only widespread political frustration and dissatisfaction with austerity measures were voiced, but with increasing social insecurity and feeling of injustice as well.

According to the data, the main targets of protest actions are national institutions, namely, the Parliament (19 percent), the government (24 percent) and particular ministries and ministers (18 percent). Protestors' targeted national institutions in 77 percent of total, while organizations of civil society in 22 percent of total. If in 2007 due to the very unpopular

political decisions these were political parties to whom protestors were addressing their claims, then with the outset of economic decline and austerity measures appearing on the agenda, shift to the government as the main scapegoat for economic failures on the one hand, and central actor in the decision about the submission of the budget bills to the Saeima can be observed. The number of protests directed to the government has increased steadily from 9 percent in 2006 to 30 percent in 2009. (See Figure 4) This should not be surprising, since 82 percent of Latvians think that it is government to be blamed for economic crisis in Latvia (Brants 2009a).

By looking at social-vocational category of participants one can see that there is no one particular profile of “typical” protestors. People engaged in protest activities come from various social backgrounds and are employed in various sectors. Six larger groups of social-vocational categories of protestors can be identified. These are: public sector employees, farmers, pensioners, students, ethnic, religions groups and sexual minorities, and representatives of culture, art and mass media. Among those, public sector workers comprise 19 percent, pensioners comprise 10 percent, students – 8 percent, ethnic groups and minorities 10 percent of total protest number. These groups have been active throughout all the studied period. (See Figure 5) Activity of public sector employees has remained relatively stable over the period 2007-2009. In 2010 activity of public sector workers have not been coded, except protest action organized by Unite Trade Union of Policemen in demand for written guarantee by the prime minister that there won't be further salary cuts (Egle and Rutule 2010). This leads us to consider possible political calculations related to the postponement of passing the 2011 budget. One of the possible assumptions is that delay is deliberately aimed at avoiding a protest vote and large scale social tensions before the Parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2010 (Martina 2010).

While these are public sector employees who are most often involved in protest activities, one does not see many protests by private actors. Only in 2 percent of total private sector workers were coded as participants in the protest. Thus in comparison with public sector workers, private sector employees are relatively demobilized. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that employee representation on national level is minimal or there is none (Kohl 2008, 5). Moreover, according to Charles Woolfson's findings, "at least three out of four in the Baltic countries feel that salary issues are best of all discussed individually between employer and employee – and not on a collective level" (Lyager Olsen 2008, 2). Furthermore, it can be explained by the size of the country's labor market and large share of informal economy, and communism legacy which left people without the experience and knowledge about their rights and responsibilities (Darzina, 2010). All these elements account for quiescence of private sector workers.

As far as public sector workers are concerned, they are mobilized by trade unions. Trade union density in Latvia has declined from 28 in 1995 to 16 in 2006 (Kohl 2008, 4). Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia leads coordination of 21 independent trade unions within country. Among those, the largest are: Education and Science Workers Trade Union building up to 30 percent of the total Confederation members, the Health and Social Care Workers Trade Union constituting 10.8 percent of the total membership (Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia home page; Karnite 2009, 3-4). Together with Unite Trade Union of Policemen these were main organizations leading and participating in protest activities. Main subject of negotiations with government usually are low salaries and tough working conditions which are not compensated with financial or any other benefits. These issues are central for collective action in cases when agreement could not be reached via negotiations and strike was used as a last resort²⁰ (Karnite 2009, 7).

²⁰ For instance, teachers' strike in 1994 and in 1999 achieved salary increase. Demands of health sector employees in 2002 were met too (Katlaps 2002).

Strike event itself was coded only once²¹, while according to “Eurostat”, number of strikes over time has increased. From 2005 to 2007 there were not been registered strikes. Though 14 strikes were registered in 2008 (Eurostat home page. Labour disputes). Event that stands out occurred in 2008 when health sector employees, first time in Latvia’s history, announced a two day strike. “Verbal activism” in a form of strike alert and threat to undertake protest activism has been coded in only in 3 percents of total (Szabo 1996, 1165).

Even though, according to “Eurostat” there is increased labor union activity, relative rarity of strikes can not be explained only by the awareness of the trade unions that by exercising strike as their protest strategy they might lose public support rather than undermine the legitimacy of government, because the immediate victims of a strike are the “citizen-users” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 175). Rather, as a main reason can be seen legislation which by lawyers is considered “in parts extremely restricted and, being prohibitive in tendency²²” (Kohl 2008, 15). All in all, bureaucratic legislation and the fact that collective bargaining agreements coverage is for less than 20 percent of all employees combined with “the highly individualistic “grey” economy” accounts for a “lack of union success (regarding job security, labour standards, wage-determination procedures and statutory minimum pay), and consequential decline in union membership and less favourable working conditions” (Kohl 2008, 4; Karnite 2009, 2; Martin and Cristescu-Martin 2000, 347).

As far as political involvement and activity in shaping policies on national level is concerned, labor unions are restricted by the Strike Law, which stipulate that strike shall be regarded as illegal if is initiated in order to express political requirements, political support or political protest (Strike Law 1998). Hence, it is legislation which shapes actors’ ability and

²¹ Event was coded as a strike when the actual performance of work has stopped. Events, when school teachers were protesting/ striking but classes were though, were coded in a category of demonstrations or pickets.

²² In practice restrictive nature can be seen in the legal norm stating that the employer must be notified about the intention to strike at least 7 or 14 days before the action is taken. Moreover, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the workforce should have voted in favor of the action. Besides that, “previous involvement of a statutory arbitration panel is mandatory before any industrial action can be taken at all” (Kohl 2008, 15).

willingness to engage in a particular collective action. However, as noted before, it was the Free Trade Union Confederation initiating national referendum in 2008 and thus, going beyond “traditional” sphere of interest representation (Karnite 2009, 2). Besides legislation and formal regulations, these are perceived opportunity structures, regarding possible benefits, which matter, if contentious activism is chosen as a mean of last resort.

For instance, in the picket organized by Unite Trade Union of Policemen on October 4 around 500 policemen participated. It was planned that several thousands will participate. In this case low mobilization can be explained either by the fact that many policemen have a second job and that is why they could not attend the event, or else because they did not believe that collective action will stop further salary cuts and reductions in staff numbers (Novicka 2008). Moreover, when some days later on October 8 the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia organized strike in symbolic solidarity with other European trade unions under the slogan for “Decent work and decent pay”, most represented were health sector workers and teachers with minimal mobilization from policemen side. Public statements after the event indicated that most probable these will be teachers and nurses who might receive increase in salary (Dreijere 2008). Hence, the vital role played by the perceived and real opportunity structures. Perception that one can influence decision making process is of central importance, and as it was mentioned before, only 44 percent Latvians believe in the effectiveness of protest. This largely accounts as to why “protests against the public salary cuts and social expenditure cuts were half-hearted and weak” (Golubeva 2010, 59).

For large scale collective action to emerge and common identity to develop, it is important whether the cooperation and solidarity between the various societal groups is possible and likely and under what conditions (Tilly 2004, 473). On this dimension, dissent among various societal groups, such as farmers, pensioners, teachers, workers in health services, is identified (Stroda 2009, Rozenfelde 2009). An underlying reason is divergent

economic interests. Inability to cooperate among various actors was very visible during the time of heightened protest activism in November/December 2009. In two days (November 30 and December 1) four protests took place. One was a rally organized on December 1 by the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia as a protest against the 2010 state budget. Next, thousands of students and education sector workers were marching through Riga expressing discontent with cuts in higher education spending. Motorcyclists protested against a raise in motorcycle road tax. Finally, local citizens of the small town Livani (14 000 inhabitants) blocked the road and burned the state Constitution in a protest against planned tax policy and arrogance of politicians (Rozenfelde 2009).

In conclusion, the main issue of contention was dissatisfaction with the planned budget and political system in general, demands of protestors were divergent and incompatible. Even though Latvian society is experiencing a period when austerity measures have affected all spheres of public and private life, one can not observe collective mobilization under any common idea. In other words, there is an increased societal discontent due to the economic hardship and austerity package, but because the social groups affected are very different, in terms of their demands and mobilization capacity, higher macro-level incidence of protests is not necessarily to emerge (Vanhuyse 2004, 432). This notion is crucial in the Latvia's context because Latvian society can be considered as a rather "divided society" (Vanhuyse and Cerami 2009). It is not only division among ethnic lines, but rather a huge poverty gap²³ which divides Latvian society. Thus I conclude that, the main reason that there has not been substantial mobilization of Latvian population is socioeconomic and ethnic divide which hinder mass mobilization. Sociologist Arnis Kaktins argues that "Latvian society is united in its general dissatisfaction" (Rozenfelde 2009). However, this general

²³ The number of those living under the relative poverty (incomes do not exceed 120 Euros), in 2008 was 26 percent. It was 21 percent in 2007. Moreover, those older than 75 are under 58 percent poverty risk. Income inequality is increasing. In 2008 Gini coefficient was 38 percent (Ministry of Welfare home page).

dissatisfaction is insufficient for mobilizing society for large scale action on more regular and systematic basis.

4.3. Other forms of social protest

In this section a wider set of societal responses, which can be seen as the manifestation of protest at individual level, to economic hardship will be analyzed (Greskovits 1998). Among those are: specific exit options available to non-citizens of Latvia in a form of possibility to acquire citizenship either Latvian or Russian, possibility to enter into illegal or grey economy and possibility to exit the country by emigration.

According to the results of the study on social integration, citizenship for ethnic Russians has a practical value because it brings various privileges related to the right to travel, work in particular occupations, and less often the right to vote. Thereby, widely spread is the assumption that if the state does not give citizenship to its residents, it does not care about them (AC Konsultācijas 2008, 47). In 2008 the Secretariat of the Special Assignments Minister for Social Integration, responsible for integration policies, due to the public spending cuts and reorganization of public administration system was closed. Since the state can not afford to promote integration policies, integration process of ethnic Russians (as well as other minorities) is left on its own. That is why there is more “space” for mobilization activities of local radical organizations, or NGOs sponsored by the Russian Federation which “has become much more active in seeking to win the hearts and minds of Russian-speakers in general and non-citizens in particular” via additional funding to the media (Muiznieks 2010, 283-284).

As a result of these strategic actions and economic hardship in 2009 there were queues in the Embassy of the Russian Federation, because more and more non-citizens chose to acquire Russia’s citizenship. After receiving citizenship, majority of those applicants remained residents of Latvia. In relative terms, number of applicants for Russia’s citizenship was somewhat higher than the number of non-citizens who acquired Latvian citizenship by

naturalization (Muiznieks 2010, 284). Motivation of those who applied for citizenship might have been based on economic calculations. Mainly pensioners applied, because the pensions paid by the Russian Federation exceeded those paid by the Latvian state. Moreover, European Court of Human Rights on February 2009 ruled that Latvia's pension policy has discriminated against those non-citizen pensioners (around 16 000) who have worked outside the territory of Latvia, because this time was counted in calculating pensions for citizens, but was not counted for non-citizens (Muiznieks 2010, 281).

On the other hand, motivation of those who applied for Latvian citizenship was based on the practical necessity to cope with the economic crisis, because citizenship broadens employment possibilities both at home and abroad. While some choose to apply for the citizenship because of the unpredictable political environment, namely possible changes in the naturalization process, others - because the will to become politically active and influence political processes in the country (Sloga 2009).

Another strategy of coping with economic hardship is the turn to informal economy. Turn to informal economy can be seen as a silent exit option or silent protest. This option is available to both citizens and non-citizens. According to State Revenue Service estimates, the proportion of grey economy in the country amounts to 16 percent of GDP, while the more pessimistic diagnose of entrepreneurs predicts a 39 per cent (Zalite 2010). The assumption that with economic hardship number of those who turn to grey economy increases is confirmed when looking at opinion poll data. Thus in 2006 these were 40.9 percent supporting tax evasion. In 2009 this number has increased to 49.8 percent. This trend is confirmed by the data on proportion of collected taxes against GDP. During 2005-2008 average proportion of collected taxes against GDP was 30 percent. In 2009 proportion of collected taxes has decreased from 29.9 percent to 25.3 percent (SAKI 2010). Hence, it is by

turning to grey economy how part of the society are expressing their protest and coping with the hardship.

Among the problems Latvia is facing are: increasing poverty, high level of unemployment²⁴ and relatively low level of living standards. These troubles lead to mass emigration which can be seen as one more protest form widely used by Latvians. High level of emigration can be explained with poor economic situation at household level, even if the macroeconomic level indicators showed improved economic performance. For example, in 2005 half of the citizens were satisfied with economic situation of their household. In May 2008 86 per cent described their household economic situation as bad and fairly satisfactory, and number has increased to 92 per cent in February 2010 (Rose 2005, 9; SKDS 2010, SKDS 2008).

These factors largely account for the fact that Latvia has one of the highest emigration rates among the new member states of the EU. From 1991-2004 around 23 000 people emigrated from Latvia (Abolins 2009). In 2009 emigration has increased by 23 percent compared to 2008 (LETA 2010a). Most of them were economic migrants. Hence, emigration since the beginning of the 90s can be seen as the strategy applied by those who were dissatisfied with the social and economic conditions in Latvia. According to Abolins (2009), in the 90s emigration was accepted by the political elite because it was in concordance with the ideas of “decolonization and deoccupation of the state”. Therefore, even during the period of high unemployment and economic transformation there were less of social tensions due to the mass emigration. Around 2005-2006 the issue of migration appeared on the public agenda because it started to hamper entrepreneurship (e.g. lack of work force, disproportional rise in salaries). That is why there were attempts to minimize emigration by various campaigns. As for today, the emigration issue frequently appears on the public stage as a

²⁴ The unemployment level has grown from 7% in December 2008 to 22 % in November 2009 (Eurostat home page).

viable²⁵ strategy for coping with the economic hardship, rather a danger of increased depopulation of the Latvian state²⁶ (Kilis 2010).

In conclusion, it can be argued that emigration is widely accepted as a solution for social and economic problems. Exit rather than voice is used when one chooses to become citizen of the Russian Federation while living in Latvia, and when one turns to the grey economy. More detailed examination seems to support the assumption that the number of protests decrease in line with the size of the country's informal economy (Greskovits 1998). However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis, to assess the importance of these aspects for collective mobilization capacity in Latvia.

²⁵ In 2009 50 percent of respondents (660 in total) were ready to leave the country (Zerncugova 2009).

²⁶ Number of inhabitants in 2009 is 16% lower than it was 20 years ago (Kilis 2010).

Chapter 5 - One history and two interpretations or two histories of one country

As it has been shown in the previous chapter, the legacy of the past has not only shaped the idea of the ethnic Latvian state, but also contributed to the development and increased salience of ethnic dichotomy – we and they/others. In the “we” group are ethnic Latvians, while others are marked with the label “them”, mainly Russian-speaking minority (Hanovs and Vinnika 2005, 191). In the first part of the chapter I show that on 16th of March different understandings of history by two societal groups are revealed and mobilization of radical groups are taking place. In the second part events taking place on 9th of May are analyzed. Different understandings of history and development of identities by mainly Russian-speakers and Latvians are examined. I argue that the memory of past and ethnic identity mark one of the protest types. The ethnic type of protests can be characterized by extreme politicization, sensationalization and ritualization. Even though these protests are not based on everyday conflicts and are rather rare, they are regular. According to the collected data, ethnic protests constitute around 11 percent of all protests for the time period from January 2006 to June 2010. They indicate only partial social integration and reveal numerous interethnic cleavages.

5.1. Commemoration of 16th of March

On March 16 1944, the 15th and 19th divisions of the Latvian Legion, which was created by the Nazi German occupation forces in 1943 as a combat divisions called the Waffen SS, joined forces to battle the Soviet army at the Velikaya River in Russia. That is why for many Latvians this day is a day of remembrance for the war veterans (Kalnins 2008).

For a long time (1991-1997) this day was celebrated peacefully and with the participation of the state authorities. There was no, or minimal mobilization of radical

organizations or broad attention from either domestic or international media. However, it was in 1998 when the ambience around this event became politicized, radicalized with annually provoked counter-protests, mainly due to the following events. First, in February 1998 there was a critical coverage in Swedish media condemning the Latvian government for passivity related to elimination of consequences of Jewish genocide. As an example of governmental passivity was mentioned upcoming “Waffen SS 55 year anniversary celebration” in Riga. Second, event was the picket on March 3 in front of Riga municipality against poor social conditions mainly by Russian-speaking pensioners who blocked traffic. In order to clear the road, police used force. Sequentially, in the Russian Federation media coverage on how “Russian pensioners are brutally beaten” in Riga appeared. This event attracted Russia’s media attention to the “Wafen SS march in the city center”. In response to international and local pressure state officials announced about non-participation in the event. However, due to the large media coverage in 1998 event attracted three times more participants than before and mobilized dozens of protestors displaying posters with anti-fascist slogans (Leitans 2008).

Despite the efforts from the state to quiescent this event, in 2002 national radical organizations started to mobilize in order to organize the event. For two years Riga municipality under various administrative pretenses successfully banned radical organizations from holding the event. However, in 2004 a march was organized by the radical organization “National Power Union”. In 2005 a march draw mass counter-protests where organizers and participants were national Bolsheviks and Riga municipality deputies from, so called Russian party, “For Human Rights in a United Latvia”. Protestors were dressed in prisoners’ clothes with attached Star of David (Sloga 2006).

To preclude from similar disruption, in the following year people were asked by the state authorities not to participate in the public commemoration activities and not yield to any possible provocations (Araja 2006). Furthermore, confrontations were prevented by the large

involvement of police (Leitans 2007a). Crucial role was played by the Riga municipality who issued permission to organize the march only to some organizations while under various pretexts banning other applicants (Leitans 2008). However, in practice those who are officially not permitted to organize any activities, join the organization which is permitted.

In 2009, first time since 2006, Riga municipality did not permit any activities due to the security measures (in fear that it could heighten tensions within society following riots in January). However, more than 1000 people gathered to commemorate veterans. Similarly, mobilization of opponents took place. Dozens of protestors, wearing prisoners' hats with Star of David, jeered at the veterans as they carried flowers to the base of the Freedom Monument. Other protestors as identification mark were using the Ribbon of St George (Leitans, 2009, 2009a; 2009b). Similarly, in 2010 the authorities in Riga banned the march because of the security concerns. Nevertheless, a court lifted the ban and the parade gathered around 1000 people and a counter-demonstration with approximately 40 protestors participating. Police kept protesters at bay and there were no violent confrontations (Arnicans 2010).

Debates and protests around 16th of March reveal different understandings of history within Latvian society. While one part of the society sees this event as homage to soldiers who died fighting for the idea of an independent state during the Second World War, the other part sees it as a glorification of Nazism. While officially there is an agreement and the verdict of the Nuremberg military tribunal, there is nothing bad per se that there are individual interpretations and understandings of history vary, because plurality of opinions is a fundamental underpinning of democracy (Feldmanis, Kangeris 2004).

However, this case uncovers the role of radical organizations on Latvian political stage. Even though there are not many extreme radical organizations in Latvia and "by any standard, racist extremism in Latvia has been very weak" (Muiznieks 2010, 277), Security police divide these organizations in three groups: left oriented, organizations which favor

increased Russia's influence in Latvia or support Latvia's incorporation into the Russian Federation, and Latvian national-radical organizations which insist on the state decolonization by radical means (Leitans 2009d). These organizations "use this day for stirring up ethnic hatred thus discrediting the country's image on the international arena" (Riekstins 2010). Besides "the personal agenda" of radical organizations, these organizations and their activities add to the ethnic divide of Latvian society. For instance, survey of high school students reveals that there are very controversial opinions about 16th of March. Two thirds of students in schools with Latvian language asses this day positively, or rather positively, while 80 percent of students in Russian language schools asses this day negatively, or rather negatively (Makarovs, 2009). Thus, by questioning, denying state's official position toward Nazism and Holocaust radical organizations with the help of attracted media attention, not only disseminate biased information but undermine the legitimacy of state both domestically and internationally (Muiznieks 2010, 250).

5.2. To whom is 9th of May the Victory Day?

On May the 8th, Europe commemorates the anniversary of the end of the Second World War. In the Russian Federation Victory Day is celebrated on 9th of May. For Europe 9th of May comes with the celebration of Europe's Day when the Schuman Declaration was signed. For Latvia, defeat of Nazi Germany brought not only the end of the Second World War and liberation of the country, but another occupation the Soviet Union (Vike-Freiberga 2005). Hence, controversies are related to this day.

At the beginning of the 90s this event attracted relatively little media attention (for example, this event was not covered in "Latvijas Avize" up until 1998) and these were mainly war veterans gathering together (Locmele 2009, 11). Commemoration events took place on 8th of May when flowers were placed by state officials and foreign ambassadors at the

cemeteries. While on 9th of May Victory day was celebrated in the Victory Park in the capital Riga with participation of Russia's ambassador and left oriented/ minority representing politicians. Increased media attention to this event can be observed in 2005 which can be explained by the celebration in Moscow of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Furthermore, the decision of the president at the time Vaira Vike-Freiberga to attend the event provoked wide popular debate.

Newspaper content analysis conducted by Locmele (2009) reveals that over time the Victory Day's representation in Latvian language newspapers transformed from "diplomatic" to more expressive underlining "picnic" atmosphere around the event. Moreover, commemoration of war victims and veterans has lost its significance and has moved to the second plan, while political questions and issues have moved to the foreground. This event is widely used by left oriented political parties to mobilize support, for example, since 2008 media reports on political campaigns, mainly by minority representing parties, who distribute party newspapers, the Ribbon of St. George and flags with party symbolic. Furthermore, the event is exploited by political actors for signature collections, political speeches and in this perspective mirrors Russian-speaking minority problems and difficulties in Latvia (Arnicans 2008). This collective event allows to voice discontent with current policies and unites those feeling oppressed by Latvian state. Hence, identity of victimized group and tendency of self-isolation develops (Hanovs and Vinnika 2005).

Annually for the period 2006-2009 these were around 10 000 people participating in the event. Estimates for 2010 indicate that in total around 100 000 people attended the celebration (Rutule 2010). In 2010 it was 13 hours long festival program, starting with a live broadcast of Moscow's Victory Day parade, following concerts, official speeches and fireworks attracting participants (Abolina, Zalite, 2010).

Compared to the number of celebrators, the number of participants in counter-protests is relatively small, and can be measured in dozens. Protests usually are organized by nationalist radical organizations, such as “National Power Union”. In 2007 there was an attempt to leave a barbed wire wreath at the Monument of Victory as a symbolic manifestation of sufferings of people during the period of the Soviet occupation. An encounter between a protestor and an individual followed (Leitans 2007). Later similar confrontations did not follow and not because they were not planned, but rather because of the measures taken by the police (Leitans 2009b).

5.3. Two histories – two identities?

Crucial element in national identity building is a unified perception of state’s history. Lack of agreement and understanding of the past contributes to the development of two distinct identities and splits Latvian society. Among the most debated issues both on political and public agenda in the Latvian history is the occupation and incorporation of Latvia into the USSR in 1940. For instance, two out of three students who are taught in Russian do not believe that Latvia was reoccupied in 1945, while opposite answer is characteristic in schools with the Latvian language. Moreover, students in schools with Russian language unambiguously assess May 9 positively, while only half does in schools where classes are taught in the Latvian language (Makarovs, 2009).

The reason why history matters is strongly related to the identity formation. The judgments about historical facts within Latvian society differ significantly. In the light of this paper, the statement that “each ethnic group says that its identity is one about which pride, not shame can be felt” has a strong explanatory power (Muiznieks 2010, 277). Hence, if the Russian-speaking minorities lack elements they can identify with, and they feel troubles to identify themselves with Latvian society and state, it is easier for various external and internal

actors to mobilize people who perceive themselves as the victims of political system. For instance, 76.2 percent of teachers in Russian language schools think that education content reflects mainly the Latvian position. And that is why, “there is a tendency to „correct” the content of education and present alternative, more fair interpretation of history in the class” (Providus 2009, 18). Because the knowledge and interpretation of history is directly related to possibility the naturalization process, one’s perception of history might hinder a will to join the citizen community (AC Konsultācijas 2008, 52). Thus it is memory of the past which shapes the identity and social mobilization of Latvian heterogeneous society, encouraging Russian-speaking minority’s alienation from the state. The problem partially is related to the divided education system which builds positive grounds to the formation of ethnic stereotypes due to the low interaction between school students of both groups (Golubeva 2010, 76).

Furthermore, it is the media both in Latvian and Russian languages, printed as well as electronic, which produce ethnic stereotypes and support ethnic mobilization. For instance, while in Latvian language newspapers ethnic “other” is portrayed as dangerous to the political stability of the Latvian state, than Russian language media very often portray Russian-speakers’ as oppressed minority and transition losers, while ethnic Latvians are presented as “the unjust winners” of transition and supporters of fascist ideology (Golubeva 2010, 60). Even though, 60 percent of Russian and 48 percent of Latvian respondents fully or partly agree with the statement that “it would be better if there was less talk in Latvia about historical issues with respect to which unified position do not exist in society” (Muiznieks 2010, 271), there is no reason to believe that in the near future it will happen.

An important element related to the identity formation and mobilization of Russian-speakers is the Ribbon of St. George. According to Benedict Anderson (1991, 7), the way people will act and organize themselves depends on their notion about the “imagined community” Building on this argument one can draw parallels with the Russian state which

“drags” together imagined community, namely, Russian citizens and nationals living abroad, via media sending the message that you are not stranger to the Russian Federation (Denisa-Liepniece 2010). Hence, even though majority of Russians in Latvia have never been to Russia, they are watching Russian TV channels and they do feel belonging to this “imagined, mythological country” (Sloga 2009a).

In Latvia the Ribbon of St. George is not only distributed and used on the Victory Day, but also is used as an identification mark of protestors in protests on 16th of March. Moreover, as a sign of Russian identity Ribbon of St. George in addition with a small Russian flag often are fixed on individual cars. Actions of national radicals who disposed in the Internet “occupant list” with personal information, such as personal code, residence address, car registration number, about the people on whose cars Russian symbols were displayed, to large extent demonstrate the popular mood and significance of such symbolic actions. Often negative media coverage in Latvian newspapers emerges in relation to the Soviet and Russian symbols, such as flags, military uniforms, and posters with slogans “Russians do not give up!” (Leitans 2007).

Hence, celebration of May 9 marks not only commemoration and honour to war veterans, but also a symbolic protest. It is a protest against state policies, politics and socioeconomic conditions. It is a protest showing that Russian-speaking minority is a substantial part of Latvia’s society which is to large extent self-sufficient and able to mobilize (Sloga 2010). Further, it is a protest against official history interpretation. That is why it is a day when many parents and grandparents bring their children to the Victory Park in order to explain history. This assumption partially account for huge increase in the number of youth attending the event in 2010. Furthermore, Victory Day celebrations can be compared to Latvian Song and Dance Festival which is integral part of Latvian cultural and national identity.

To sum up, it can be said that many non-Latvians still identify themselves with Russia. It does not imply that they are not loyal to Latvian state. Rather it can be seen as a response to socioeconomic processes within society. However, it must be stated, that these were both Latvians and Russians who participated in the peaceful demonstration on January 13 and these were people from both ethnic groups later participating in riots (Muiznieks 2010, 119). Thus it might seem that these are economic and social hardships serving as a common denominator for concerted voice of population. Nevertheless, some groups of protestors on January 13 displayed Russian flags, and this might be translated as a symbolic protest and distinct identity expression (Sloga 2009a). Similar observations about solidarity with different countries could be observed in regard to the Russian-Georgian conflict and the Bronze Soldier of Tallin (Dreifelds 2009, 308).

Conclusion

The thesis focused on social contention in Latvia, and in particular on the last protest wave prompted by the country's political misfortunes and recent economic troubles in the context of the global financial crisis. Building on the collected data on protest events in Latvia, I demonstrate that protest activity has increased over the period 2006-2009 due to the shifts within socioeconomic structure of society, rather than as an emerging culture of protesting. Within the recent wave of contentious action two broader types of protests can be distinguished: mobilization based on ethnic identity formation and mobilization activated by economic motives which in most of the cases merges with political frustration.

An unprecedented development of political events strengthened a legitimacy crisis and political alienation of the public. The general frustration with the political system merged with the austerity protests leading to contentious action where the main base for mobilization is sense of social, economic insecurity and political disenchantment. Even though, mobilization for collective action occurs around various social-vocational groups, it is public sector employees who protest the most. The absence of trade unions in the private sector can be seen as accounting for the lack of protests in this sector.

Further, the most recent protest activism in Latvia can be associated with ritualized protest activities based on ethnic identities. Mass mobilization by the Russian speaking group on historically controversial dates and over various issues opposing the state's official position indicate that salience of ethnic divide has not decreased over time. In this case collective action of the Russian-speaking group is not only based on the linguistic identity, but also on geopolitical identity and historical memory. These elements largely account for the collective action by the group.

Whether the current period of economic hardship is going to increase the magnitude of the Russian speaking group mobilization in the long term remains to be seen. The study

reveals two current patterns. First, large scale mass mobilization had occurred across ethnic divide, mainly as expression of political and economic discontent. Thus large scale collective mobilization in Latvia mirrors societal attitude about processes within social and political environment. Second, the scale of the traditional protest events based on Russian ethnic identity is increasing. I speculate that collective action by this group can be seen as an expression of identity facilitated by the extensive mobilization campaigns by domestic and foreign actors. Hence, socioeconomic grievances combined with other factors lead to mass mobilization.

Here, more extensive and thorough study on collective mobilization of Russian speaking group is needed. Since data on protest events for this study was coded only from the Latvian language newspaper, analysis of protests covered in the Russian language newspaper would shed more light on motives and mobilization capacity of the group.

Other forms of how protests are manifested by Latvian society across the ethnic divide include several exit options: emigration from the country, turn to informal economy, protest vote and acquirement of citizenship – either Latvian or Russian. All of these choices of action in the given context can be seen as a protest against economic hardship and more general dissatisfaction with current policies.

All in all, even though the number of protests over time has increased and a potential for collective action in Latvia can be observed, in practice it is effectively utilized and capitalized only when the common motive for action across social and ethnic divides is found. So far this has occurred only on an occasional basis. Otherwise, majority of Latvian society stays on the sidelines. The experience of contentious action in Latvia over the last 20 years has not led to the development of a grassroots protest culture where protest is widely and regularly used as a form of expression.

Appendix

Figure 1. Number of Protest by Year

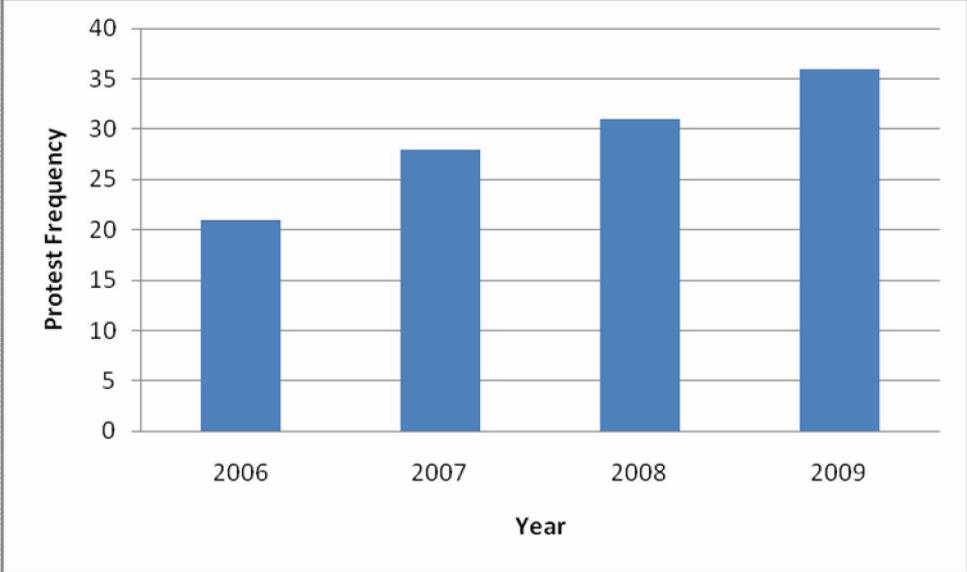


Figure 2. Protests by Participant Number Over Time

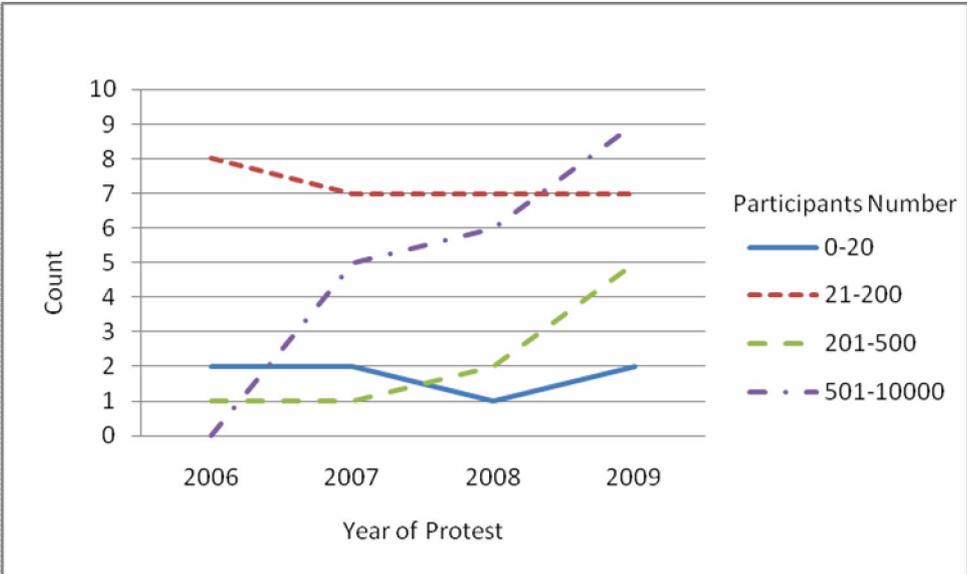


Figure 3. Types of demands (Percentage of Total per Year)

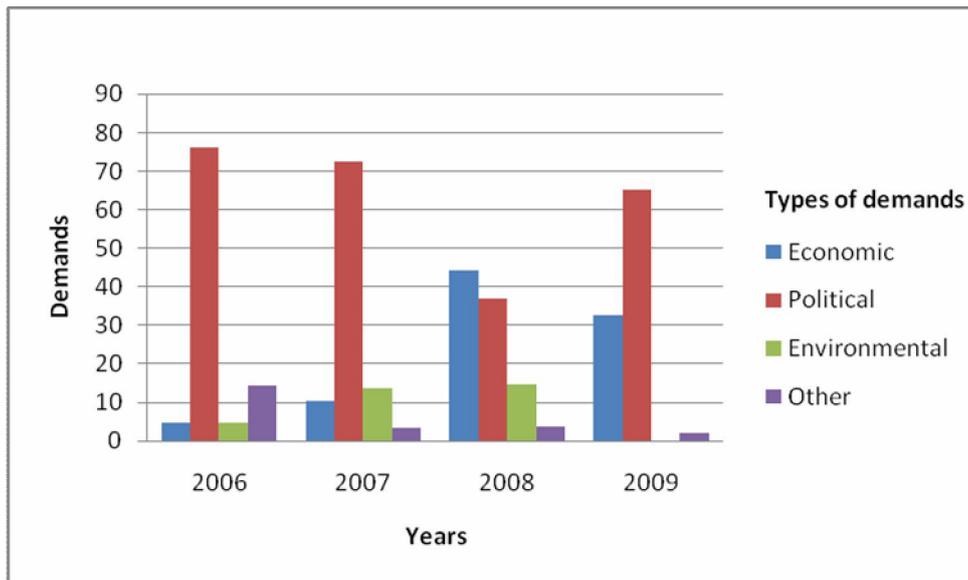


Figure 4. Percent of Direct Object of the Protest Action by Year

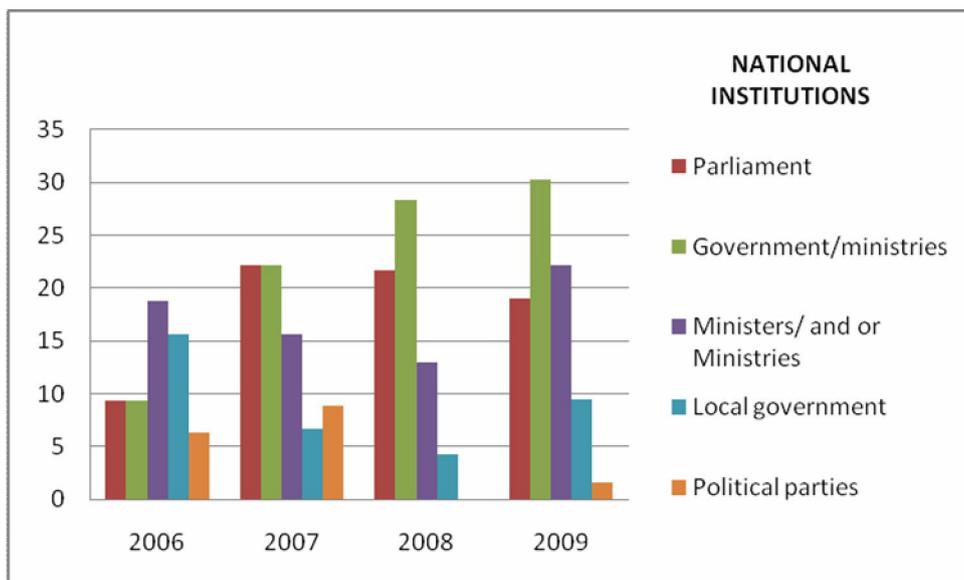
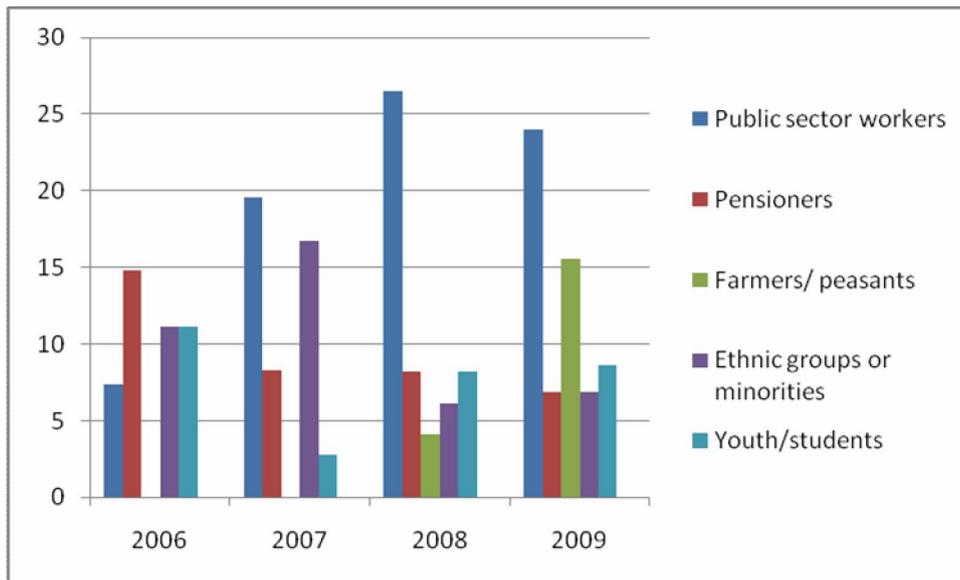


Figure 5. Percent of Protests by Participants per Year



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