

Janis Urbanovičs: «PARTY PROGRAMS CANNOT CHERISH DREAMS OF THE PAST»

Leader of the Harmony Center consolidation faction in the Latvian parliament Janis Urbanovičs is a true old-timer in domestic politics. He became Saeima deputy in 1994 and has been reelected every four years to parliament since. All these years Janis Urbanovičs has spoken in parliament about painful problems which for some reason have to be constantly reiterated in Latvia. He urges politicians to launch a dialogue with each other and residents of the country to promote accord because internal split in society has not allowed the Amber territory to harmonically develop in the past two decades.

Although so far elections in Latvia were based exclusively on ethnic principle - Latvians voted for Latvian parties and Russians - for Russian, the Harmony Center does not consider itself an ethnic party. It offers its own political formula as it believes multilingualism and multiculturalism are Latvia's advantages rather than drawbacks. It is difficult to advocate the formula in conditions of dominating national ideology and nationally-minded voters, however the number of supporters is on the rise.

At self-government election on June 1 the Harmony Center won a landslide victory in Riga - nearly two thirds of residents entrusted Ushakov and his team to govern the city for another four

years. For the first time in Latvia's modern history a political party won an absolute majority. It was also for the first time that the vote in the capital of Latvia was not based on the ethnic principle. At least a third of Harmony Center supporters are Latvians. It was a genuine victory which was preceded by strong campaigning. Now all of us and mostly Harmony Center leader Nils Ushakov have to prove that the choice was correct and make those who did not vote for us change their mind, said Urbanovičs. It is typical of Janis. Even such a major victory he perceives only as an opportunity to improve and grow.

HISTORY AS WEAPON

Mr. Urbanovičs, you have been in politics for 20 years. How do you assess what has been done in the years?

On the official level the main achievements of Latvia is the joining of the EU and NATO or the return to the European family, so to say. But these are successes for the outside "market" while inside the country there is little to boast of because we failed to achieve the main thing - create the foundation for national development. No country like no building can be erected without a reliable foundation. The foundation comprises citizens of the country while we deliberately split society into citizens and non-citizens after regaining independence in 1991. Hundreds of thousands of people and there are 300 thousand non-

citizens in Latvia were bluntly told: we reject you, you have no rights here, and in order to vote or become a lawyer you have to naturalize, i.e. take citizenship exams to confirm loyalty. It was an insult for people who were born in Latvia and lived here for many years. Legal deliberations saying the Latvian Republic and commonness of its citizens were restored in 1991 were no consolation to anyone.

Over 20 years have passed but the split is still there. We keep living in society which is split into citizens and non-citizens, Latvians and Russians. The split is the root of all problems. We do not have normal political competition as Latvian and Russian parties are competing instead of conservative, liberal, and social political forces. Most heated political debate focuses not on economic, but historic and national issues. We discuss where people were

born, which language they speak, and on which side of World War Two front they fought.

Why are Latvian politicians so obsessed with history?

It is a paradox but many parties in Latvia build their political programs on the dream about the past. Unity, National Alliance, Union of Greens and Farmers are cultivating the dream of restoring the First Latvian Republic which existed in 1918-1940. But you cannot turn the time back. And there is no paradise which they promised after accession to the European Union. Moreover, the recent crisis considerably complicated the life of ordinary Latvians. According to official data, over 300 thousand people emigrated to earn their living abroad. It is an astronomical figure for Latvia. What do the ruling parties have to do in such a situation? It is politically risky to speak about the real situation

and they switch to the past as history can offer various arguments if you look thoroughly.

But sober-minded people have to understand it is impossible to go back to the past no matter how wonderful it was ...

Yes, it is true for sober-minded politicians. But one of the main problems is biased and provincial mentality. It helps plough the historic and national field. We are constantly trying to convince ourselves that we suffer because nobody understands how unique we are and that no common recipes for treating public and state diseases are good for us. It is gross provincialism! But it definitely helps maintain a conflicting atmosphere in society. For example, the Saeima has recently divided citizens of the country into "correct" and "incorrect".

What is the "correctness" criteria?

It is the country where a Latvian resident wants to get a second citizenship. Earlier the possession of two passports was strictly banned and even punished by stripping the Latvian citizenship. Now the law is liberal but with a limit as dual citizenship is allowed only with members of the European Union, European Free Trade Association, NATO countries, as well as Australia, New Zealand, Brazil and countries with which Latvia concluded agreements on dual citizenship. The Russian Federation and other CIS member-countries, as well as Israel are not on the list.

The Harmony Center believes the approach is discriminatory. It turns out that a citizen of Latvia residing in the United States or Brazil enjoys more rights than Latvian citizens living in Russia or Israel. The amendments to the law do not allow thousands of Latvian citizens and their descendants to maintain ties with the native land. They are actually pushed out of the country for good. We requested Latvian President Andris Bērziņš not to sign the amendments into law, but he did not adhere to our call.

TRAPPED BY MYTHS

Harmony Center is the winner of the latest parliamentary election and the biggest faction in Saeima. But it is still in opposition. One of the conditions advanced to Harmony Center for joining the ruling coalition is the recognition of Soviet occupation. Isn't it strange?

It is strange, of course! Latvia calls itself a democratic country but has only one official interpretation of history. It is banned not only to deny but also to doubt it. The answer to the question "Do you recognize occupation?" is a kind of a password in Latvia. If you agree with what the asking person means by occupation then you get a foot in the door. If you reject occupation or at least doubt it (because you know more about the period than the asking person) you immediately become an alien and further communication with you is impossible...

It is a genuine totalitarian approach when they proclaim the only truth which needs no proof. Truth cannot be afraid of facts and evidence because it is truth that always passes the test for truthfulness.

The Harmony Center was offended by the demand to recognize occupation as a precondition for joining the government. Why should a politician elected by a big number of Russian voters in Latvia take a history exam with another politician elected by Latvian voters? Voters of the Harmony Center are no worse than voters of currently ruling national parties of Latvia! Deputies from Harmony Center are not going to take exams. We have to report only to our voters.

The problem in Latvia is that nobody is ready to seriously discuss recent history and 1940 developments. The country is trapped by myths which are reproduced every year.

What is your opinion? What happened in Latvia in 1940 – occupation, annexation or incorporation?

For me the issue of incorporation, annexation or occupation is secondary. It is a dispute over definitions rooted exclusively in history mythologize. International law does not use "occupation" definition regarding Latvia. It is used only by Latvian experts to preserve and expand the myth they created.

You suggested to impose a moratorium on discussion of historic issues.

The Harmony Center is ready to discuss historic issues at any level but the problem is that no discussion is possible. Politicians who rule Latvia for the past twenty years are used to the language of ultimatums rather than dialogue. If the ruling parties are not ready to change the

record it might be better to put it aside. Let us first provide decent pensions to the elderly and allowances to children and give medicines to hospitals and patients and jobs to able-bodied people. Then we can argue about half a century-old developments.

They will object by saying it is possible to build up the present only on correct historic foundation...

The foundation is necessary but, unfortunately, in Latvia reference to history does not mean the construction of a correct foundation for the country. By constantly raising the occupation theme the Latvian political elite gives a signal that there are aliens, good and bad guys. Occupation thus stops to be historic fact as it is raised to the level of religion.

I am very much concerned by the ongoing calls to revise World War Two results and hold the second Nuremberg trial this time of Communism and that Russia has to compensate Latvia for "occupation" damage. They even created a special commission to calculate the damage and it regularly meets to count something. A Latvian Internet site offered to vote for pulling down the monument to Liberators in Riga close to which hundreds of thousands of residents mark the Victory Day every year.

This year on the eve of May 9 the ruling coalition decided to make a special "present" to Latvian war veterans - it banned the use at festive events of Nazi and Soviet symbols. It was the initiative of Unity, National Alliance, and Reform Party to equate swastika with the red flag, star, hammer and sickle. There is the second meaning behind it - to equate Nazi Germany and the USSR. This year the ban was not approved but the ruling parties will definitely push it through by next May 9.

It is all very frustrating and serious when they judge the past and plan to demolish monuments. It is no fight with the past but shooting at future. Neo-Nazism is raising head in Europe and the revision of World War Two

results is becoming a modern political trend.

I believe Europe and Russia need a new peace conference similar to the one held in Helsinki to discuss a lot of accumulated vital issues. Russian President Vladimir Putin and European Parliament President Martin Schultz can initiate it as both men have Passionist mentality and figuratively speaking can build an amber bridge between Russia and Europe. Latvia would only benefit from its construction.

ACCOUNTING HARMS

They call the performance of current Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis a success story as budget deficit was reduced to the necessary level and the country is ready to introduce euro. How do you assess his work?

First of all I would dare say that I am convinced the country



should better have a budget deficit than a deficit of the population. Three hundred thousand Latvians who left the country are the true assessment of the performance of Dombrovskis' government rather than polite words he hears from Brussels offices. I am sure the government has to report not only to the International Monetary Fund but to all residents of the country. You will agree that not all residents of Latvia are planning to emigrate to London or Dubai. The government has

mostly to think about them and their interests rather than about praise from the IMF.

Does the prime minister think about Latvians?

Domsbrovskis is a very good accountant who skillfully deals with figures. However accounting is no economy. Economy means development. The Harmony Center calls to stop constantly cutting all budget expenditure but to develop the country instead. The prime minister has recently said the Harmony Center headed by Riga Mayor Nils Ushakov is dragging Riga into a financial abyss. In reality it is vice versa. The Harmony Center controls the economic and social situation in the Latvian capital and prevents Riga and the whole of Latvia from falling into a pit. Riga today is the float of future development in the country. The new victory of Nils Ushakov at elections in Riga I shows city residents are well aware of that. Gradual development of the capital city in the past four years

We have to argue rather than obediently fulfill instructions from above. We have to think how we should develop ourselves in order to secure Latvian prosperity.

RUSSIAN SYNDROME

Common sense prompts that Latvia should develop good economic relations not only with EU countries but also with Russia and CIS members. Nobody denies it at the official level but western vector clearly dominates real politics. What do you believe is the reason?

Let's look at the map for the beginning. It is clear that Russia and CIS countries are our closest neighbors. They know Latvia and Latvian products well. Mounted activities on the avenue would give an impulse to economic development and create new jobs. But the problem is that the political elite constantly adds not a spoon but a

to Latvian language. In a word, the emotional background of Russian-Latvian relationship leaves much to be desired. It is a shame that Latvia turned its back on Russia for many years while neighboring countries - Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, and Poland successfully competed for Russian investments. We should have long admitted to ourselves that we want to operate on the eastern market. We have one major advantage for accessing Russian and CIS markets against Lithuanians, Estonians, Poles, Germans, Chinese - we have a much higher share of Russian-speaking population. But there is an obligatory condition: all people in Latvia - Latvians, Russians, Belarussians, Ukrainians, Jews, Poles and all other nationalities should agree a formula of joint existence and begin constructing a big common home. I always say the Latvian book of happiness can begin only with the following phrase: "and finally they agreed." Only after that we shall be able to join global competition.

As long as Latvian leaders fight for the ballots of Latvian voters without paying attention to Russians and even declaring them enemies and as long as Russian politicians struggle for Russian voters there will be no breakthrough in the country. Remember the words of Professor Preobrazhensky in Mikhail Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog*: "Havoc is in heads". I would add in the heads of politicians. Believe me, when the havoc is over the country will immediately improve.

SMILE!

Dou you believe interethnic relations in Latvia are improving or deteriorating?

For the given moment they are mostly mothballed. Each community leads its own life. The Latvians keep repeating the mantra about occupation and hard destiny of the Latvian people, the Russians complain of being blamed for all historic deeds of the USSR and treated as second-tier people.

It is most dramatic that both are right in their own way as everyone believes only his own truth and does not even want to hear another truth. Any withdrawal from habitual and convenient perceptions and notions painfully hits at self-conscience. We like to live in the closed zone of personal psychological and political comfort and ignore everything happening around in the country and the world. It is the diagnosis of our dis-

ease and the first remedy is the understanding that we are ill. But we are stubborn patients and shall never agree that we are ill. It is a hard job for us to try and understand a neighbor of different nationality. We are all very lazy. Therefore, the ideas of reconciliation, harmony, forgiveness are unpopular. It is more important for us to hit the opponent as hard as possible.

At the same time huge money is spent to integrate society, but nothing is changing.

Integration is joint work. But we turned it into a process of converting unfaithful to genuine faith. Figuratively speaking, Latvian politicians are telling Russians in Latvia: "Dear Russians, you were unlucky to be born in wrong families but we shall correct it. We shall help you become Latvians!" The Saeima has recently adopted amendments to the citizenship law which list only Latvians and Livs as Latvian nation leaving all other nationalities aside.

But Russians in Latvia do not want to become Latvians. They want to remain Russians, speak Russian, read Russian newspapers, watch Russian TV, and they want their children study in Russian. The Russians also want to be treated as full-fledged citizens rather than schoolchildren who have to be taught how to grow up as genuine citizens. Instructions from above will not create a common life formula in Latvia. We already had such an experience not long ago.

During heated debate we often forget the main thing - you should not wish other people what you do not wish yourself. We forget that pronounced words often materialize: if you call someone a friend he will become a friend, if you call him enemy he will be an enemy...

There is an old animated cartoon about a small raccoon who was afraid of a big beast that lived in a pond. The raccoon made horrifying faces but the beast in the pond also grinned. And then the raccoon was advised to smile to the monster and the beast smiled in response... It is a cartoon for kids but with great philosophy - anger and negative emotions do not resolve but complicate problems which can be settled only through a positive approach. For genuine politicians it should be a commonplace truth in their profession.

Ina Oshkaya,
for Amber Bridge



Janis Urbanovičs and Nil Ushakov

gave a guarantee that not everything in Latvia is consolidated, stolen and reduced.

Positively thinking we should admit that current economic crisis helped Latvia get rid of a very bad illusion and belief that someone would come to rescue it. Neither the EU nor the United States will come. Egoists work in every country and we also have to learn to be egoists.

whole bucket of tar into relations with Russia. Now we honor SS legion and then we speak about the danger of not only Russian investments but also of cultural organizations of compatriots as they comprise the "soft power" of Russia.

Now and then the issue of closing all Russian kindergartens is raised and calls are voiced to switch education in budget-financed schools only