

Interview with Boriss Cilevics, Harmony Centre, at an election meeting in Imanta, Riga, 2009-05-19

Mats Engström (ME): How do you think the economic situation affects politics in Latvia?

Boriss Cilevics (BC): It does everywhere. In Latvia, until recently, these economic conditions were not crucial, as economic considerations had a strong competitor in Latvia because of these perceptions of multiculturalism and multilingual nature of the society. This factor has been crucial until very recently. So, the society was actually divided in two, not two, I would say three groups.

One group is ethnic Latvians, who perceive the state as their property, and historical justice is understood as a restoration of a state, not only where ethnic Latvians live, but where ethnic Latvians rule.

Another group are Russian-speakers who strongly disagree with this and promote claim to be co-owners of this state, but mainly live in their own designated areas, with a domination of the Russian language and Russian media, strong influence on the part of Russia, mostly cultural rather than political, but still. I can't say that these people are loyal to Russia rather than to Latvia, but they painfully perceive anti-Russian sentiment that is actually part of the mainstream politics of Latvia.

Finally, there is a third group, which is slowly growing but still quite small, which encompasses people who can be considered to be really integrated, who speak both languages, who really don't have any problems switching from one to the other, who belong to both cultures. But this multiple identity is still exception rather than the rule in Latvia and it is perceived with a certain suspicion as a part of mainstream discourse.

Until recently, this division was absolutely dominant in Latvia, and actually all economic issues were perceived from this ethno political, linguistic prism. In particular, all left-wing parties were perceived as pro-Moscow parties, pro-Russia parties, so they were not popular in Latvia. This is the famous Latvian paradox when poor people vote for the right-wing parties.

ME: Is this changing with the economic situation? Are they becoming more interested in taking in your party in government in the future, that kind of dialogue?

BC: It is changing. Some five years ago, one could hardly believe that a party like ours could lead the ratings for more than one year. But I am afraid that there is no such simple explanation that Latvians like us more than they used to. Rather, ethnic Latvians feel disappointment, passivity, and the very large (part) Latvian voters simply do not like any political parties. So we didn't increase substantially the number of our supporters, but we lose much less than others of the mainstream parties, so we keep the position.

ME: What will happen if the budget cuts come through and even more people become, at least in the short term, unemployed, what will happen politically, do you think?

BC: I guess the word "if" is redundant here, because it will happen. Unfortunately, this new government tries not to do anything, to save, I would say, this credit of trust it got. If they do what actually they should, their rating would go down, so they just delay any serious decisions until elections. And this makes the situation even worse. If indeed some decisions are painful but necessary, this must be done as soon as possible. Because of this uncertain position we already lost the next tranche of the international grant. So actually, we have only maybe, according to different estimates, only until the end of July, until the end of June even some people say. If indeed we take all necessary decisions immediately after elections, still we have a chance to get the next tranche and to save basically the budget, more or less.

ME: Will you and your party be prepared to participate in that task, if the other parties would be prepared to govern together with you?

BC: No doubt. It's difficult for me to imagine a party which refuses to participate in the coalition. And these right-wing parties were highly seduced at some point to invite us, to involve us, to make us responsible for what's going on. I agree it's much easier to suggest anything without bearing any responsibility, because we can always say, you didn't listen to us. But what should we do?

ME: What is the difference between what you would like to do and the present government?

BC: We supported this agreement between the government and the international financial institutions. We believed that this loan was necessary. Of course it is painful, but without this money we wouldn't survive. But we were very selective on other measures of the entire package. Particularly, we were strongly against raising taxes. It might seem somewhat unusual for a Social Democratic party to be against raising taxes, and now this is done by the right-wing parties.

ME: It was the VAT and that kind of taxes?

BC: Yes.

ME: The trade unions were also against that?

BC: Yes, because it kills the producer. We warned that as a result the total revenue of the budget would be reduced, and in fact yes, everything decreased, but income from VAT decreased much more than from any other taxes. Again, the entrepreneurs fought this grey economy zone, because it is impossible to survive. We are against it, and we see it as we must now reduce the taxes, we must fix the mistake, and this is one of the basics.

ME: And these reductions in school and hospitals and wages?

BC: Again, this is a matter of priorities. We have different priorities. There are some sacred cows that the government does not want to touch upon.

ME: Such as?

BC: For example, this famous national library building. It is anything but library. Of course, we need a new national library, but it would be much better to spend more money for digitalization that makes them available for every pupil in the countryside schools and so on. Otherwise, this is a monument and a memorial of ambitions of the politicians. Because unofficially they recognize that everything that has been built in Latvia, that is visible, remaining was built either during the First Republic of Latvia, or during Soviet times. The first generation of post-Soviet politicians are about to leave, so they want to leave something behind them.

ME: You don't think some Russian-speaking people would prefer parties that are not so co-operative as you are prepared to be, on the more far side, in this situation with unemployment rising?

BC: We do not know, of course, but this radicalization is going on not only among Russian-speaking people but among ethnic Latvians too. What is not surprising at all.

ME: But for your party in this election?

BC: Well...

(We are interrupted by people wanting to ask Boriss Cilevics some questions. A few minutes later, I ask about former Communist leader Alfreds Rubiks, now first on the Harmony Centre list for the European elections)

ME: How do you think Rubiks candidacy affects the Latvian-speaking voters?

BC: Very many people realize that Rubiks is a symbol, that we have one communist who was imprisoned, actually for all communist crimes. Those who were together with him in the central committee, who were responsible for ideology, for sub-punitive bodies... they, as Latvian saying goes, they turned their coats round quite timely. And now, they turn from communism to nationalism. Rubiks is a victim of historical circumstances. Actually, he was never involved in ideology or politics. Of course, he was a staunch supporter of the Soviet regime, but actually he was involved in industry, in economy, he was a very good mayor of Riga, he was not involved in corruption, he was fighting corruption. He was, by Soviet standards, a patriot of Latvia, maybe the Russians even considered him Latvian nationalist, because he really demanded that the Latvian language is used, so by Soviet standards, he was really a dissident. No one wants to recall it now, but during the perestroika he was considered one of the possible leaders of the People's front, I was an activist of the People's front, I remember very well how he was celebrated. What reversed the situation was... the story of the metro in Riga. He supported it very much. And Riga really needs it. Then we had nearly one million residents, now we have less, but now very often when waiting stuck in traffic jam, some people say that it is such a pity that the Soviet regime collapsed so quickly, maybe we should have waited for five more years to allow Rubiks to finish metro.

This is the law of propaganda. For political discourse, one needs an enemy. Rubiks was unlucky to become such an enemy. But I am not sure that all Latvians, or even an absolute majority of Latvians, follow this official discourse. He is a tragic figure.

ME: You think he can attract voters?

BC: Yes, of course. In politics it is always difficult. We realize very well that by him leading our list for the European elections, we lose somewhat. But we also gain other votes. In practical terms, I believe that we gain much more than we lose. And if we speak out of some inner considerations, not related to practical aspects, electoral strategies and so, I do believe in consolidation of left-wing parties, particularly in Latvia, it is so important. His socialist party is by ideology a normal European communist party. In Latvia, Communist party is prohibited, so it is called Socialist party. But the ideology is the same. It is very close to the United European Left, to the Nordic Green Left parties, so particularly in Latvia, right-wing parties were in power for 20 years. It is very important that socialists and all left-wing parties are consolidated.

ME: Thank you very much.