

Welcome to the geography of populism: The diaspora vote in the UK during the 2018 Latvian elections



Latvia held parliamentary elections on 6 October, with Harmony – a social democratic party usually associated with the country's ethnic-Russian population – securing first place. [Aija Lulle](#) assesses the diaspora vote in the election and how patterns of support differed outside of Latvia. She notes that the geographic divides present among Latvians living in the UK had parallels with those seen in the UK's Brexit vote, highlighting the importance of geography in understanding populist politics.

Latvia is a country of pronounced emigration. According to different sources, we can comfortably say that at least 16% of its population has emigrated, especially after the Baltic state joined the EU in 2004 and during the economic crisis, which hit Latvia particularly hard in 2009–2011. Many people emigrated also during the Second World War and, as a result, politically active communities exist in the US, Australia, Germany, Sweden, the UK, and elsewhere. For new emigrants, the UK is the most popular destination. Up until the EU referendum in 2016, at least 100,000 Latvians were living in the UK, but the numbers have plummeted due to Brexit uncertainties. Current estimates put the figure at around 70,000. Even so, this number is quite high for a rapidly depopulating country of only 1.9 million inhabitants.

On 6 October, Latvia held its general elections, and this time the Baltic state had record numbers of eligible voters living abroad – more than 130,000. These are those Latvian citizens who have declared their residence outside of Latvia, but in reality, the number is higher. Many people maintain an address in Latvia, and there are few incentives to deregister from the country they feel they belong to. Although researchers are cautious about using the term 'diaspora' to describe all migrants, there is a trend among emigrant nations to ditch the negative term 'migrants' and use 'diaspora' instead to signal more inclusive attitudes towards extra-territorial voters.

The ethnic divide, populists, and new promises

The [2018 Latvian elections](#), much like previous elections in the country, had relatively low voter participation, with a turnout rate of just 54.6%. Among the diaspora this was even lower, with only 24.4% casting their vote in the elections. Seven parties collected enough votes to reach the 5% threshold required to claim a seat in the Latvian parliament.

Harmony, a social democratic party usually associated with ethnic Russians, came in first with 19.8%. It was followed by KPV LV, which is usually translated as 'Who owns the state?', on 14.3% of the vote. This party's campaign was characterised by impossible promises of 'radical change', aggressive rhetoric, actors and singers in candidate lists, and anti-EU sentiment. The New Conservative Party won 13.6% with its anti-corruption platform, followed by the newly established liberal party For Development, which took 12%. Three long-term government parties also gained seats – the National Alliance with 11%, the Union of Greens and Farmers with 9.9%, and New Unity with 6.7%.

Questions of ethnicity, which have characterised Latvian elections since the early 1990s, still persist. The clear winner by far in Riga, with its large Russian-speaking population, was the Harmony party with 30.1%, followed by For Development with 13.4%, and only then KPV LV with 12.2%. According to Latvian legislation, diaspora votes all go to Riga, the capital city's election district. So, if we disentangle extraterritorial votes from the common 'pot' in Riga, how did the diaspora vote in these elections?

Table: Result of the 2018 Latvian elections and result for diaspora voters

Party	Percentage vote share (overall)	Percentage vote share (diaspora)
Harmony	19.8	6.5
KPV LV	14.3	35.7
New Conservative Party	13.6	12.0
For Development	12.0	15.3
National Alliance	11.0	7.7
Union of Greens and Farmers	9.9	2.9
New Unity	6.7	8.9

Source: <https://sv2018.cvk.lv>

The voting landscape among diaspora voters was radically different. The populist KPV LV party was the clear winner with 35.7%, while the liberal For Development party came second with 15.3%, the New Conservative Party third on 12.0%, New Unity fourth on 8.9%, and the National Alliance fifth with 7.7%. Harmony, the winner of the overall election, was only sixth on 6.5% among diaspora voters. The Progressives, a new social democratic party, would also have made it into parliament with 6.1% if diaspora voters were used, while the Union of Greens and Farmers would have been left out with only 2.9%. As it happened, the Progressives achieved only 2.6% of the total Latvian vote.

Geography matters: Votes in the UK

Voting in the UK reveals a dramatically different landscape, which somewhat mirrors recent patterns seen in the [Brexit vote](#). The populist KPV LV party won in all UK-based polling stations for the Latvian general elections, but London clearly stood out as different from the rest of the country. Although KPV LV gathered 23.7% and 26.5% in two of London's polling stations, Latvians living there would also have confidently elected the newly-established liberal party For Development (with 20.2% and 20.8% respectively). The social democratic values represented by the Progressives would have also comfortably made it into parliament under diaspora voting (10.5% and 11%). The big winner in Riga, Harmony, would not have made it above the threshold in some parts of the UK.

But away from London, in the Midlands and especially in the North of England, KPV LV enjoyed extremely high levels of support: 71.6% in Wolverhampton; 71% in Peterborough; 68.8% in Boston; 68.4% in Burton on Trent; 68.2% in Margate; 64.6% in Leicestershire; 62% in Bedford; 65.1% in Newry; 62.9% in Mansfield; 58.8% in Birmingham; 51.9% in Derby; 50.9% in Bristol; 46.5% in Manchester; 40.8% in Edinburgh; and 39.7% in Nottingham.

What lessons can researchers of EU politics and diasporas derive from this snapshot of political convictions? First and foremost, we are reminded that geography matters. Populism is a persistent theme in the politics of other countries across Europe, including in [Poland](#) in the leadup to local elections later this month. Competition in unequal spatial landscapes – a key feature of the Brexit vote – is not a purely English or British phenomenon. Inequalities and a very real lack of opportunities for social mobility permeate the lives of the people who cast their votes for aggressive and populist promises. Unequal class positions matter in how migrants imagine their futures after Brexit. And it is important to recognise that impossible promises frequently go sour once populists get into power. Such a turn of events would increase feelings of bitterness and make it even less likely supporters of the populists would return to their countries of origin.

On the other hand, we see qualitatively new trends in the diaspora vote calling for liberal values and support for a social democratic stance beyond the ethnic divide. In fact, this is the first time since Latvia regained its independence in 1991 that Latvians are voting liberal; this might, in part, be attributed to the Latvian diaspora's British education. These points offer avenues for future research: there is certainly more in-depth work to be done on the diaspora vote in Brexit Britain.

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