

A New Kind of Politics for Latvia

Article by Antoņina Nenaševa

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Progresīvie, a party which began as a small collective of activists today holds the balance of power in the Latvian capital, Riga. The party's co-chair Antoņina Nenaševa looks back at its development and how it is working to make Latvian politics more transparent, diverse, and green.

Green European Journal: Can you tell us about the birth of the party?

Antoņina Nenaševa: Despite being relatively young, Progresīvie has roots in the old Latvian social democratic party from before World War II and the occupation. In 2009, a group of activists founded an NGO. Back then, the movement campaigned in two key areas. Firstly, it criticised austerity policies and emphasised the need for investment in social care and education. Secondly, it demanded the introduction of a progressive tax system – this is in fact where the name comes from.

At some point, progressive taxation came along at the national level, but that was mostly thanks to the European Union. And soon, we realised that to become effective drivers of change, we had to establish a political party. We did so in 2017. It was not easy as most of our members lacked political experience. We also had no money or big sponsors, so we relied on the generosity of our members. And that seemed to work. We started with a little over 200 members and five years on, we are close to 800!

How did this growth and the party's local electoral success come about?

An important turning point in our history was the 2020 Riga city council elections. This election caught us somewhat unprepared – the previous council was dissolved as a result of a failed waste management policy, and snap elections were called. This council had a deep corruption problem – there was a tremendous waste of public resources and non-transparent procurement. But the mayor enjoyed huge electoral support due to his populist policies that involved providing free public transport to pensioners, as well as free food in schools and pre-schools.

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At the national level, we were polling around 2 per cent. By contrast, we received 5 to 7 per cent in Riga from young, educated, and cosmopolitan voters. Given that we were not strong enough to run alone, we partnered with two parties that shared our values and had a

successful track record: Movement For! (Kustība Par!) and Latvian Development (Latvijas attīstībai). In the previous election, they won 13 per cent of the seats in parliament.

In an internal referendum, our members voted to support the decision to join forces. This allowed us to create a list made up of these two parties and run a campaign called “Restart Riga”. We also invited non-political, non-party activists from the city – a handful of them were put on the list.

Was it difficult to run a joint campaign without compromising on your principles?

To avoid losing our independence, we had strict boundaries. For example, all expenses related to our third of the candidates were financed by us directly, as we can only vouch for the origins of our own funding.

Anti-democratic forces often win elections because the democrats keep fighting each other instead of cooperating on shared goals. We supported Mārtiņš Staķis for mayor who was not from our party, and we ran a very friendly campaign. It was important to team up with these parties and show it was possible to work together.

When election day came, we won with a landslide: we received 26 per cent of the votes, while the second list received only 17 per cent. So, it was clear that we would form the governing coalition. At the end of the day, we had a rainbow coalition with our mayor and three other parties. It was important to unite as many opponents of the old mayor as possible to have a fresh start.

The most important outcome for us was that 11 of the 18 elected councillors were members of the Progressives. Coalition partners thought that with so many successful candidates, we would pick our own mayor, but we honoured our commitment. We came to Riga to introduce a different political culture. Out of our 11 councillors, seven are women and most are in their 30s or early 40s – which is young by Latvian politics standards. Other factions barely have any female councillors.

Progresīvie asserts a “Green-Red” political identity for itself - can you explain this?

Our party has four core values: green ideas, social democracy, anti-corruption, and transparency. In 2017, we realised that we have a huge community of social democrats – a lot of older ones, but also some who are young. At the same time, we had many Greens in the country – many of them climate activists – who were never represented in the political landscape in Latvia. We started to embrace them, and that is how we started to understand that red and green policies are closely connected. When I first met with representatives of the European Greens, we started to discuss green policies and social justice, and very soon we saw the commonalities in feminism, human rights, and community building. I believe it should be clear to social democrats by now: to achieve social justice, we need a green transition and action against climate change. This is how we started to advocate the values that connect us together – both inside and outside of the party.

You mentioned that most of you did not have political experience. How have you adjusted to the new responsibilities?

In the beginning, the competition tried to portray us as young girls who knew nothing about politics. But we worked very hard to prove ourselves and we made this work. You can normally keep your old job if you are elected a councillor, but most of us decided to work here full-time and focus on being councillors. We took two committees: the environmental and the housing and social committees. And convened a working group to discuss and build new policies. We are steadily pushing for issues we care about to become part of the policymaking agenda. Luckily, our partners are willing to play along.

We came to Riga to introduce a different political culture.

After a year and a half in power, the mayor left his party (Movement For!), due to their ties with Latvian Development, the other liberal party, known for their lack of transparency. Now the mayor is independent and we still support him, along with other Movement For! councillors and independents in our faction.

Of course, we also have to be very convincing when it comes to Green policies – bicycle lanes, air quality, restricting cars, etc. – as no other party is taking them on. So far, our experience has demonstrated that we can compromise and the expertise of our councillors enables us to successfully influence the political agenda. One of our councillors is a leader of the zero-waste movement, for example. This expertise and track record makes her a convincing policymaker. She worked with recycling and waste management companies, and mostly by herself brought the unified system of recycling to Riga.

At the same time, the realities on the ground also seem to prove that we have the right ideas. Our former co-chair, Edmunds Ceperītis wrote a bill almost by himself on reducing air pollution to cut gas and heating starting from 2030. There was some backlash in December when the public realised that the restriction would start from 2025 – meaning that people cannot install new gas heating in an apartment where they would have access to an alternative. Despite the pushback, a couple of months later, when Russia invaded Ukraine, there was a new conversation about getting rid of gas. Suddenly, this policy was not so scandalous anymore.

Have conservative social attitudes in Latvia been an obstacle for the party's advancement?

This was another reason to get closer to the Greens because the social democrats were associated with communism, which can be quite damaging for a party in Latvia given the history of Soviet Union occupation and deportations. Being put in the wrong box by voters can be fatal for a party given that there are at least 65 parties registered in Latvia. But in the parliament, there are only seven parties – largely due to the threshold of 5 per cent.

There is a stigma associated with being a member of a party, also due to the period of Soviet occupation. However, we can see a changing mindset, the core members and voters of the party – those who lived abroad in Europe – are less likely to be affected by communist-era beliefs, they are more willing to associate parties and see the left as a source of socially just policies, Green action, and LGBTQIA+ rights as human rights.

Gender parity is a core issue for the party. In terms of social rights on gender or sexual minorities, have you felt able to get the message across in society?

Often it means leading by example: in 2018 we selected five female candidates for the national elections, which encouraged other parties to do the same. The result was twice as many female representatives in parliament than in the previous election. We take credit for this!

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From the very beginning, we were labelled as the “gay” party – one of our previous chairs was openly gay. As a public figure, for him it was a great challenge that his sexual orientation was all over the newspapers – often diverting attention from policies we advocated for. So there is huge resistance. But, at least, we introduced it as a topic at the highest political level, because the party talks about it. And we do not just talk about it, we actively campaign for it. We go to Pride, and this year, for the first time, the mayor of Riga attended. So, it is not seen as so radical anymore to support the LGBTQIA+ community.

Considering diversity in the country, we try not to call ourselves a Latvian party. We prefer being known as the progressive party to signal that we’re not about nationality or orientation; it’s just about the policies we promote. We unite people and we work really hard on diversity inside the party and among our members. We also have disability representation on the list, which is not the case for other parties. But this doesn’t come without problems. We’ve noticed that as soon as we are more vocal and fearless, the backlash increases. There is a well-funded campaign against LGBTQIA+ rights, influenced by Russian homophobic rhetoric.

In Latvia there are significant minority populations from the former Soviet Union, and something that is important for your party is building a cohesive society. Can you talk about this ethnic gap?

Latvia, compared to all other European countries and Baltic states, has the biggest Russian-speaking minority, and the country has long struggled to provide such a large community with rights. To some extent, the politicians of the past decades have failed to help the Russian-speaking minority become and feel Latvian. From our own survey, we found that a big part of the Russian-speaking minority felt European, and not Latvian. Personally, I see myself as Latvian even though I speak Russian at home with my kids and husband. However, many people don’t recognise me as part of Latvian society.

This attitude towards the minority encourages radicalisation; if they are not seen as a legitimate part of society, the Russian-speaking minority can be influenced by Putin and his propaganda even though Russian channels are forbidden in Latvia. With Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine, the identity of the Russian-speaking community is complicated further by the fact that at least every second or third member has relatives in Ukraine. As a party, it was very important that we took a very strong position in support of Ukraine straightaway.

Latvia also has Belarusian, Ukrainian, Armenian, and Jewish communities. Against this background, our party is trying to overcome voting based on ethnic motivations. We have various minorities in our membership – including Russian-speaking – which helps us reach these voters.

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Currently, we are also in the midst of a cost of living and energy crisis. What do you see as the main challenges?

When you are struggling to feed yourself, you are not going to think about European values, or you will not understand why symbolic gestures, such as waiving Ukrainian flags, are important. One of the failures of the last three decades of neoliberal policies has been the neglect of social welfare and safety nets. The population, by and large, does not believe that the government would help them if they were to experience a crisis. We have the lowest trust in parliament and ministers. Only 5 per cent of the population trusts parties, so this is also why Progressive tries to show people that politics is not a bad thing. It's hard to build trust if, in every crisis, it is the regular people who suffer pay and welfare cuts, and not the financial sector or big companies.

Life is getting more expensive and the winter will be extremely cold. We must address this crisis but not through cuts to healthcare and education as it was done before. The burden must be light on the shoulders of the most vulnerable, especially knowing that the 2009 austerity left us with a weak social system. Instead, our response must be a Green Deal that supports small farmers, invests in alternative energies, and in energy-efficient housing. It will be a challenge to explain this proposal to people, but we hope that through the examples in Riga, we will succeed.

What are the main objectives and your hopes about the next steps for the party?

I would say that our main goal would be to get into parliament [at the October 2022 parliamentary elections] and be part of a governing coalition. But the threshold makes it tricky. We don't have the kind of money that would allow us to run an aggressive campaign. That might put us at a disadvantage. At the same time, it would also be crucial to keep governing in Riga and try to win another term. Our party represents a new political culture in Latvia, and it would be very important to continue enriching the country with our approach, even if our representatives aren't in the highest offices.



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