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Harmony expired: Why did the main mouthpiece of Latvia's minorities fail during the 2022 parliamentary election?

Intersections. EEJSP

10(3): 136–153.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i3.1283>

<https://intersections.tk.hu>

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Abstract

Latvia is a small European state with a significant minority constituency. Minorities comprise a significant part of its political landscape, marked by a cleavage between ethnic Latvians and so-called Russophones. For over a decade, the political representation of Latvia's minorities was dominated by Harmony, an integrationist social-democratic political party that mobilized voters beyond ethnic lines. This study analyzes Harmony's campaign messages delivered by the party's key figures during the 2022 parliamentary election to identify the reasons for their failure. It argues that Harmony's strategies overlooked the challenges posed by political rivals, including those with similar constituency characteristics. The analysis of Harmony's electoral sustainability includes a comparison of the party's performance in all campaigns from the 2006 to 2022 parliamentary elections, with a specific focus on Riga and Latgale, the party's electoral strongholds. These findings suggest that integrationist parties are increasingly vulnerable to shifts in the political environment caused by changing domestic and international political contexts.

Keywords: Latvia; national minorities; elections; political communication; integrationist parties

1 Introduction

On October 1, 2022, a parliamentary election was held in Latvia. One of its major outcomes was the electoral failure of the 'Harmony' Social Democratic Party (Latvian: *'Saskaņa' Sociāldemokrātiskā partija*, Russian: *Sotsial-demokraticeskaya partiya 'Soglasie'*, hereinafter: Harmony). The most popular political group in the three previous parliamentary elections held in 2011, 2014, and 2018 received only 4.81 per cent of the votes.¹ As a result, it did not reach the five-percent threshold needed to secure its re-election to the *Saeima*.²

¹ All electoral data, rules, and other relevant information used in this text were retrieved from the website of the Central Election Commission of Latvia (<https://www.cvk.lv>, accessed: 29 November 2022) and via email communication with the Central Election Commission (2 December 2022). All subsequent calculations were made based on these data.

² The *Saeima* is the name of the parliament of Latvia.

For many years, Harmony was a stable element in Latvia's volatile party system (Nakai, 2018, p. 206). The most important aspect of Harmony's electoral failure pertains to the characteristics of its electoral constituency, primarily consisting of Latvia's national minorities. Harmony is essentially an integrationist party, that is, a political formation that 'promotes cooperation between minority and majority groups, and uses this feature to appeal to voters outside that group' (Nedelcu & DeBardeleben, 2016, p. 388). Although it was formed by politicians of both majority and minority backgrounds, the minority electorate has always formed its core, and people of minority backgrounds prevailed among its elected representatives at various levels. Being relatively large, Latvia's minority constituency can afford the existence of several political groups that claim to represent it (cf. Zhdanok & Mitrofanov, 2017). In 2006, Harmony Centre (Latvian: *Saskaņas Centrs*, Russian: *Tsentri Soglasīya*), the party's formal predecessor, became the most popular political group in Latvia's minority constituency, and subsequently started dominating or even *quasi-monopolizing* the parliamentary representation of this segment of the electorate (Németh & Dövényi, 2019, p. 798). Thus, its electoral failure in 2022 marked the end of this agency at the national level.

Pre-election opinion polls indicated a decline in Harmony's popularity (Factum, 2022). However, they all suggested that Harmony would be capable of entering the *Saeima*, as its rankings substantially exceeded the five-percent threshold. In an interview with LTV1 broadcast immediately after the election, Jānis Urbanovičs, Harmony's board chairman, explained the electoral failure as a combination of several factors. Specifically, the start of the party's decline coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic when Harmony advocated for vaccination. This was followed by the party's condemnation of Russia as an aggressor in its war against Ukraine, as well as some other activities of Harmony that allowed opponents to conduct an essentially negative campaign against the party (Rīta Panorāma, 2022). Some commentators also claimed that Harmony was quite passive and barely visible compared to its main political rivals, who campaigned more aggressively to attract the votes of Latvia's minority electorate (TĶK, 2022).

This article aims to explain the electoral decline of Harmony, the political party that dominated the minority constituency in Latvia for one and a half decades. To this end, it analyzes the party's campaign rhetoric, focusing on the reasons for electoral failure. The rationale behind this effort is twofold. On the one hand, the study defines and assesses domestic and external drivers that contributed to Harmony's electoral failure. On the other hand, it analyzes Harmony's electoral capacity and identifies the dynamics of its core electorate. This study demonstrates that integrationist parties in ethnic democracies are more vulnerable to crises driven by domestic and foreign policy factors.

The 2022 electoral campaign was dominated by four thematic issues: 'the pandemic, war in Ukraine, [the] energy crisis, and LGBTQ+ rights' (Hofmane, 2022, para. 2). Three of these had already emerged after the previous parliamentary election held in 2018. The war in Ukraine has significantly impacted Latvian society and the country's minorities beyond electoral contexts. The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities notes in its Opinion on Latvia that 'public discourse [in Latvia] does not always distinguish between the actions of the Russian Federation and the domestic concerns of persons belonging to the Russian national minority, which is highly

diverse' (Fourth Opinion, 2024, p. 4). This confirms the observation that different issues, lists of contenders, and voters' readiness to embrace their campaign messages make every election unique (Guber, 1997, p. VII). It also explains why this study analyzes the context of a specific electoral campaign.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, it introduces the specifics of Latvia's society and domestic political configurations pertinent to majority-minority relations. It then discusses the main concepts and techniques used to designate and explain Harmony's electoral decline and assess its core constituency. Finally, the empirical section explores Harmony's campaign communication during the 2022 parliamentary election and analyzes the party's electoral capacities to measure the sustainability of its electorate compared to other political groups with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies.

2 Relevant contexts and actors associated with Latvian politics

Latvia has a significant percentage of national minorities. According to the 2021 population census, ethnic Latvians made up 62.74 percent of the population, followed by Russians (24.49 per cent), Belarusians (3.10 per cent), Ukrainians (2.23 per cent), Poles (1.97 per cent), and Lithuanians (1.14 per cent) (National Statistical System of Latvia, n.d.). These figures include both citizens and non-citizens. In Latvian law, the concept of non-citizens refers to former Soviet citizens who were not automatically granted Latvian citizenship after independence and have not obtained any other citizenship since. As of 2021, non-citizens comprised 10.06 per cent of Latvia's population, a number that is gradually decreasing. This group almost entirely consists of national minorities. The main electoral characteristic of Latvia's non-citizens is their inability to vote or run for office. As of 2021, national minorities comprised 27.6 per cent of Latvia's electorate (Buzayev, 2021), offering them considerable potential for adequate electoral representation through various competing alternatives (Duvold et al., 2020, p. 86).

The division of Latvia's society along ethnic and linguistic lines is crucial for understanding the country's political landscape. As Auers (2013, p. 87) summarizes, 'the central characteristic of the Latvian party system is the deep and continuing cleavage between ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers.' This setting drives domestic nationalizing policies in Latvia. Being mobilized by internal or external threats, the dominant ethnic group claims its ownership over the state and 'make[s] it a tool for advancing their national security, demography, public space, culture, and interests' (Smootha, 2002, p. 475). Nevertheless, Latvia meets the formal criteria of a democracy, as it ensures equal rights for individuals, including the possibility to participate in elections and other political activities.

This approach aligns with Latvia's state identity as reflected in the country's Constitution and several judgments of the Constitutional Court. This official interpretation defines the Latvian language as a constitutional value that ties Latvia's current ethnolinguistic composition to the consequences of the Russification policy during the Soviet occupation, views the country's Russian-speaking residents as 'an artificial product of this policy,' and asserts that 'limiting the scope of the use of the Latvian language in Latvia

should be viewed as a threat to the country's democratic system' (Kascian, 2019). Meanwhile, the reactions of minorities to these policies are essentially shaped by 'the same tools of ethnicity and ethnically shaped memories [that] are developed and used by ethnic Latvians in the media and parliamentary discourse' (Hanovs, 2016, p. 134). Empirical evidence from Latvia shows that 'a[n ethnically] Latvian voter [typically] chooses among [ethnically] Latvian candidates' (Kolstø & Tsilevich,³ 1997, p. 389). Similar patterns of electoral behavior are observed among Latvia's minority electorate. However, voting for a left-wing party usually conflicts with being seen as a 'patriotic Latvian' due to persistent ethno-political issues, prompting Latvia's minorities to vote based on their group interests (Duvold et al., 2020, p. 75). Latvia's ethnic cleavage is further illustrated by the fact that no party claiming to represent the country's minorities has ever been a part of the national governmental coalition. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine strengthened the old cleavages in Latvia's society. Latvia's ethnic Russians and, more broadly, Russian-speaking residents were trapped between their belonging to Latvia and attachment to the Russian cultural and linguistic identities, as the issues related to the use of the Russian language in public life became an important part of Latvia's domestic discourse that was synchronous with the 2022 electoral campaign (Dembovska, 2022).

Sensu stricto, Harmony was formally registered on February 10, 2010 (Register of Enterprises, no date). However, this was merely a legal reframing of previous political collaborations. The People's Harmony Party (Latvian: *Tautas saskaņas partija*, Russian: *Partiya narodnogo soglasiya*, hereinafter: TSP) was formed in 1994, although its founders were part of the electoral list 'Harmony for Latvia – revival of the national economy' (Latvian: *Saskaņa Latvijai – atdzimšana tautsaimniecībai*) during the 1993 parliamentary election. Since then, it has successfully participated in parliamentary elections with its own candidate list or as a part of an electoral alliance (Harmony, n.d.; Zhdanok & Mitrofanov, 2017). In 2006, it was part of a successful electoral collaboration called Harmony Centre. This political collaboration aimed to merge its members, which officially occurred in 2010, and by that time, TSP was a dominant element within Harmony Centre. It branded itself not as a party of Latvia's Russians or all national minorities but as a minority-friendly social democratic political group appealing to the electorate beyond ethnic lines and striving to establish itself as the country's major center-left party, though being more left-leaning than the other mainstream parties (Agarin and Nakai, 2021, pp. 524, 538; Bloom, 2011, pp. 381–382; Duvold et al., 2020, p. 84; Spirova, 2012, pp. 82, 88; Waterbury, 2016, p. 398). However, Latvian mainstream parties ensured that at the national level, Harmony 'remain[ed] a pariah without government experience' (Duvold et al., 2020, pp. 61, 84). Harmony's result in the 2022 parliamentary election was the first electoral failure of this political group at the national level since its formation, regardless of how its incorporation date is counted. This brief historical insight also explains why this study uses the 2006 parliamentary election as the starting point of the comparative analysis of Harmony's performance and equates the Harmony Centre and Harmony for this purpose (cf. Harmony, n.d.).

³ Apart from this note, elsewhere in the text, he is referred to as Boriss Cilevičs.

Finally, parliamentary electoral rules in Latvia establish that 100 members of the Saeima elections are elected in five plurinominal electoral constituencies: Kurzeme, Latgale, Riga, Vidzeme, and Zemgale. These are shown on the map. The exact distribution of votes between these constituencies is adjusted before each election based on data from the Register of Natural Persons (Latvian: *Fizisko personu reģistrs*) and thus complies with the demographic trends in Latvia.



From 2006 to 2022, the number of MP seats allocated to the Riga constituency increased from 29 in 2006 to 36 in 2022. In Vidzeme, it remained unchanged, with 26 MP seats at stake. Kurzeme and Zemgale each lost two MP seats, leaving them with 12 and 13 mandates, respectively, while Latgale saw a decrease of three MP seats, resulting in 13 MP seats in the 2022 Saeima election. Riga and Latgale were traditionally considered Harmony's strongholds, yet the party was also quite popular in the other three regions. Although voters residing in Latvia's capital and Latvians living abroad jointly constitute the Riga regional electoral constituency, the analysis below separates these data. The reasons for this split are the somewhat different electoral preferences of these two segments of one constituency, as well as the possibility of a more precise analysis of the electoral dynamics in Latvia's capital, which has a significant minority constituency.

3 Conceptual framework

A seminal work on political representation by Pitkin (1972) distinguishes several types of representations, which this paper adheres to. As for Latvia's minority constituency, it is impossible to speak about its mirror representation because none of the parties claiming

to represent its interests relies exclusively on the minority electorate.⁴ In the context of Harmony's case, this implies the party's responsiveness towards the predefined interests of the group it claims to represent (Garboni, 2015, p. 86), which typically stem 'from the structural position of minorities in society or preservation of minority culture' (Lončar, 2016, p. 704). Thus, Harmony's relationship with its predominantly minority constituency can be classified as substantive representation. The persistently dominant role of Harmony among Latvia's minority constituency, their ongoing decline in popularity in opinion polls, and different political contexts suggested that the party had to maintain responsive to its potential electorate's needs to sustain itself as the latter's representative at the national level against other political actors' attempts to attract Harmony's typical voters. The case of an integrationist party like Harmony has two interlinked implications for the design of the empirical section of this study.

3.1 Assessment of Harmony's campaign communication

The first implication is the party's communication during the electoral campaign. Previously, Harmony always took a pragmatic consensual approach, using inclusive language and opting for 'accommodation over conflict' (Cianetti, 2014, p. 996). However, in 2022, this approach was no longer possible due to 'a severe polarization across society' caused by public attitudes towards Russia's aggression in Ukraine (Hofmane, 2022). This polarization coincided with government efforts to accelerate minority education reforms, marginalize the public use of the Russian language, and remove all monuments related to the Soviet period (Auers, 2022). Consequently, the main challenge for Harmony's strategists was to persuade its once large minority constituency to come and vote for them again.

Since '[a]ds are one of the few forms of communication over which political actors have complete control' (Türksoy, 2020, p. 23), this paper first focuses on Harmony's offer to the electorate and the content of its campaign messages. Based on the premise that political ads are primarily tools used to persuade political consumers (McNair, 2003, p. 96), the analysis uses Harold Lasswell's (1948) famous 5W linear communication model – 'who (says) what (to) whom (in) which channel (with) what effect' – to explore the party's campaign messages. Specifically, it reviews Harmony's 2022 electoral program and campaign materials published on the party's official social media communication channels and use them as data items. Since Harmony was most active on its official Facebook page, the main data source is the party's short electoral videos available there.⁵ The analysis includes 48 electoral videos in Latvian and Russian posted between August 28 and September 27, 2022.

⁴ Although it prioritizes the interests of Latvia's 'Russian cultural and linguistic community,' the Latvian Russian Union describes itself as a party 'open to all people of goodwill' aiming to serve the needs of all Latvian residents, irrespective of their ethnicity and citizenship (<https://rusojuz.lv>, accessed: 12 January 2023).

⁵ All relevant data were retrieved from Harmony's official Facebook page (<https://facebook.com/saskana>, accessed: 12 January 2023).

Vesnic-Alujevic and Van Bauwel (2014, p. 200) summarized the similarities between various classifications of political video ads proposed by different scholars. These classifications assume three different functions: acclaim (when candidates emphasize their own qualities), attack (when they target opponents' advantages), and defense (when they respond to opponents' strategies). Benoit et al. (2000, pp. 63–66) show that both acclaim and attack encompass two broad topics: policy issues and personal character. Policy acclaims and attacks cover past actions, future plans, and general goals. Character acclaims and attacks highlight personal qualities, leadership abilities, and ideals. This approach appeals to voters who prioritize specific issues as well as those who merely focus on the candidates' images (Benoit et al., 2000, pp. 63–66). Thus, Lasswell's 5 W linear communication model was employed across these three categories to reveal how Harmony tried to persuade its potential electoral constituency and its specific segments to vote for it (again) in the changed political environment of the 2022 *Saeima* election.

3.2 Assessment of Harmony's electoral constituency

The second element of the puzzle is associated with Harmony's longstanding dominance among Latvia's minority constituency and its stance vis-à-vis this electoral segment under changed political circumstances. As Bolleyer (2013, p. 76) demonstrates, the party's sustainability at the national level is achieved when it is capable of gaining repeated re-election. A proportional electoral system reflects the party's ability to sustain and consolidate its initial constituency, at least to meet the electoral threshold. Harmony did this prominently in the 2011 election, achieving its best-ever result at 28.36 per cent and becoming the most supported political group in the country for the first time.

Bolleyer and Bytzek (2017) offer a formula $(VoteElect2 - VoteElect1) / (VoteElect1)$ for analyzing the performance of political newcomers. In this context, *VoteElect1* describes the percentage of national votes cast for a new political group in its first successful parliamentary election. *VoteElect2* specifies the share of votes collected by a party in the subsequent election. This formula can be extended to measure the dynamics of the party's electoral constituency over longer periods of time, including a comparison of key milestones such as the party's first-ever election, the election when it achieved national sustainability, and its first-ever electoral failure. For ethnic or integrationist parties, it can also provide insights into their performance in specific regions of the country with significant minority electorates.

Thus, the second part of the empirical section analyzes these dynamics, both nationwide and in individual electoral constituencies, separating votes cast in Riga and abroad, as explained above. For an in-depth analysis of Harmony's performance in its strongholds, Riga and Latgale, the article also examines the party's dynamics during the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections in these regions vis-à-vis other political groups with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies. In 2018, this included Harmony and the Latvian Russian Union (Latvian: *Latvijas Krievu savienība*, Russian: *Russkiy soyuz Latvij*, hereinafter LRU). This approach is backed by the history of electoral collaboration between the legal predecessors of these two political entities (Zhdanok & Mitrofanov, 2017, pp. 151–227). In 2022, these two political groups were supplemented by For Stability! (Latvian: *Stabilitātei!*, Russian: *Stabilnost!*, hereinafter: S!) and Sovereign Power (Latvian:

Suverēnā vara, Russian: *Suverennaya vlast*, hereinafter, SP). Key figures on S! and SP electoral lists were previously active in Harmony, providing additional justification for the comparison of these four political groups.

This approach has three limitations. First, it involves a list of relevant political groups. In 2022, several other parties competed for the votes of Latvia's minorities, including the Progressives (Latvian: *Progresīvie*), Latvia First (Latvian: *Latvija pirmajā vietā*) or For Each and Every One (Latvian: *Katram un katrai*) (Dembovska, 2022). The Progressives, a well-established social democratic party, challenged Harmony in terms of economic policy, whereas the 'Trumpian-style populism' (Hofmane, 2022) of Latvia First also attracted some segments of the country's minority constituency. However, evidence from the 2022 election suggests these political groups could hardly be designated as having predominantly or overwhelmingly minority electorates. Therefore, they were not included in this research puzzle. Second, the study focuses solely on the approval ratings rather than the absolute number of votes. On the one hand, it deals with the negative demographic developments in Latvia, which are embodied in population decline. On the other hand, this stems from the electoral threshold established as five percent of the total number of votes cast in all constituencies. Third, the focus on Riga and Latgale as single units overlooks internal discrepancies, such as Harmony's stronger performance in Latgale's urban areas compared to rural areas. However, this does not affect the fact that the seats in Saeima from each constituency were calculated based on the party's results.

4 Harmony's offer to voters during the 2022 election

During the 2022 *Saeima* election, Harmony was listed as seventh on the electoral ballot. However, the party did not capitalize on the 'magic' of this number in its campaign materials. Its electoral program outlined the recent upheavals Latvia had faced, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, energy crisis, and geopolitical threats. These were portrayed as weaknesses created by Latvia's authorities, who had failed to prevent the increase in the country's external debt, the rise of fear and aggression in society, and the erosion of trust in governmental institutions. Thus, the program called for immediate and decisive action, embodied in the slogan: 'Latvia needs a restart!' (Latvian: *Latvijai ir nepieciešams restarts!*, Russian: *Latviya nuzhdaetsya v perezagruzke!*). This strategy included implicit patterns of attack and defense, with the former targeting the negative assessment of the governmental coalition's activities and the latter suggesting a need for rebooting the country.

Overall, the contents of the program confirmed Harmony's characteristic as a minority-friendly social democratic party that addressed all segments of society while paying considerable attention to the needs of minority constituencies. Harmony specifically advocated for voting rights for Latvia's non-citizens in local elections by 2025. It also called for broader options concerning the choice of language of instruction in educational institutions at all levels. According to the party's strategists, these policies needed to resonate with the current challenges, labor market needs, and the wishes of students and their parents. Summarizing its program, Harmony portrayed itself as the only political group in Latvia capable of offering both changes and reforms while having sufficient public support

to implement and manage these initiatives. This approach was associated with clear patterns of acclaim and defense. The latter derived from Harmony's reliance on broad public support, and the former stemmed from emphasizing the party's unique position in Latvia's political landscape.

A similar approach can be found in the party's video ads. The first campaign video posted on Harmony's Facebook page on August 28, 2022, was the only ad featuring more than one candidate. Three persons appeared there, including the party's board members Regīna Ločmele and Anna Vladova. They attacked Latvia's government for failing to tackle the crisis again and emphasized that the time had come to make important decisions. Harmony's candidates invited the potential electorate to attend the party's meetings across all regions of Latvia, stressing the importance of this with phrases like 'it can't go on this way' and 'we are waiting for you.' Elements of acclaim can be found in their declaration of readiness for frank discussions in which voters' questions, complaints, grievances, and suggestions would be heard and solutions jointly found. On behalf of Harmony, they urged people not to stay disinterested but to come to the electoral ballots on election day.

The analysis of individual campaign ads can be based on their structure and the thematic issues raised by candidates. Structurally, the ads employed the dichotomy 'attack-acclaim,' illustrated by examples involving Harmony's board members. Some of the ads began with attacks on the ruling parties' failures in various policy domains, followed by the acclamation of Harmony's strengths and an appeal to the electorate to cast their votes. For instance, two addresses (in Latvian and Russian) by Harmony's board chairman, Jānis Urbanovičs, published on September 1, 2022, conveyed the same message. Urbanovičs argued that Latvia faced increasing societal division and that the ruling parties were using the situation in Ukraine as a tool for oppression. He warned that this growing division and lack of mutual respect could lead to great trouble, making Harmony more needed than ever. Urbanovičs emphasized that the party's team, comprising both experienced and young politicians, had all the capacity required to overcome the country's negative direction. He urged citizens to come and vote, asserting that all societal misfortunes derive from the silence and inactivity of its members.

Two short addresses by Boriss Cilevičs, published on September 15, took the reverse approach. In one ad, he presented his personal and professional history, underlining his active involvement in promoting human rights and ensuring equality in Latvia's diverse society. In another ad, Cilevičs claimed that Harmony was the only political party in Latvia that prioritized solidarity and mutual respect while rejecting nationalism. He then emphasized that the state must support those who need help, as everyone has the right to equal opportunities irrespective of ethnicity and other distinctive factors. Cilevičs's speech then shifted to attack mode, criticizing Latvia for lagging far behind in creating a European social model on its soil and failing to ensure equal opportunities for the younger generation. Both his ads concluded with the phrase 'I want,' demonstrating the politician's determination to continue working towards positive changes based on his experience.

Thematic issues can be categorized into sectoral and region-specific contexts and illustrated by the cases of Harmony's board members. The sectoral context is best revealed by the domain of education, stemming from Harmony's electoral program discussed above. This is exemplified by four videos by Anna Vladova, all published on September 12, 2022.

These contextually interconnected ads also employed the dichotomy ‘attack–acclaim.’ In the first video, Vladova underlined her longstanding loyalty and belonging to Harmony’s team, explicitly stressing that only Harmony could get Latvia out of the protracted crisis caused by the ruling coalition. In her second video, she chose an attack approach and referred to her background as a school principal and a member of the Riga City Council. Vladova underlined that in these capacities, she could not solve the catastrophic situation in education because the authorities did not want to listen. In her capacity as MP, she planned to call the education minister to account, demanding she provide real answers instead of incomprehensible data presented in Excel tables. The third ad was an extended version of the second video. Vladova underlined the negative consequences of COVID-19 for schools. She claimed that the Ministry’s reaction was chaotic, multiplied by the total neglect of teachers’ needs and requests. Vladova described the staff shortage in schools as catastrophic and mentioned that the minister had publicly accused teachers of lying and hysteria. She illustrated the ministry’s approach with the analogy of calculating the average temperature of ten hospital patients, five of whom were at death’s door with a body temperature of 33 °C and the other five also at death’s door with a temperature of 42 °C. Vladova concluded that the summary table would reveal a seemingly normal average temperature of 37.5 °C, although everyone was dying. She also stressed that all reforms must be stopped until Latvia had sufficient teaching staff and adequate educational materials. She warned that without these measures, the collapse of the country’s education system would be unavoidable, leaving Latvia with no future if it could not teach its children. Vladova’s fourth advertisement centered around acclamation. She said that the money for education and other community needs could be accumulated by proportionally reducing the number of civil servants in these areas, whose salaries were significantly higher than those of school workers. Vladova’s main message to the potential electorate was embodied in the combination of the two final phrases of her first and second video ads: ‘Only Harmony!’ and ‘I will be the voice of teachers, schools, and children!’ On the one hand, she underlined her extensive experience in the education sphere. On the other hand, she demonstrated readiness to implement her ideas as a part of Harmony’s team.

The region-specific context can be illustrated by Harmony’s appeal to the electorate from Latgale, one of the party’s electoral strongholds. This is exemplified by the addresses of Aleksandrs Bartaševičs and Regīna Ločmele, two of Harmony’s board members. All the advertisements were posted on September 12, 2022. Two addresses in Latvian and Russian by Bartaševičs, mayor of Rēzekne, Latgale’s second-largest city, with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, conveyed the same message. He used us-versus-them rhetoric and the ‘acclaim-attack’ dichotomy. Bartaševičs reminded voters that Harmony had successfully governed Rēzekne since 2009. He designated the city’s ethnic and religious diversity as a precious asset that Latgalians were proud to share. In contrast, he claimed that ‘Riga does not like us’ because, as he believed, central authorities thought that Latvia should be a monoethnic country. However, Latgalians had learned to rely only on themselves. Bartaševičs assured voters that Harmony’s electoral list in Latgale, led by Ločmele, was capable of solving the problems Latvia’s government had failed to notice, such as inflation, low wages, and the poor quality of education and medical care. Bartaševičs identi-

fied indifference as the main reason for Latvia's failures and urged people to vote for Harmony, emphasizing the importance of each individual's vote to break the 30-year trend of Latvia returning the same government.

The same rhetoric and approach can be found in six video advertisements featuring Regīna Ločmele, the leader of Harmony's list in the Latgale electoral constituency. These were all published on September 12, 2022. Three of them were in Latvian and three others in Russian, with the longest videos in each language compiled of two shorter ones. Both language versions contained the same message, although the Russian ad, after a short introduction, contained a detailed overview of Ločmele's competencies and achievements as an MP. She underlined that her primary goal in politics was to help people, because without them, 'the state is a fiction, a beautiful but dead shell.' Further content in the ads in both languages focused on Latgale, which, in Ločmele's view, did not have to be an orphan in Latvia's backyard. She specified her connection to Latgale as the land of her ancestors and her desire to protect its people. This brought together the elements of an 'attack' and directed them in a region-specific context. Ločmele designated those people from whom she wanted to protect her fellow lands as enemies. Although she did not explicitly reveal the enemies' identity, the fact that this was the government coalition was easily guessable from her words. She accused these enemies of plundering the country, driving people into poverty, forcing them to become migrant workers, closing schools, forbidding speaking the native language, and 'making people forget and betray their family histories.' Finally, Ločmele encouraged people to vote for Harmony. She utilized the us-versus-them formula, arguing that otherwise, 'they will just decide that there are no us here.' She reinforced her belonging to the region and commitment to act on behalf of its residents with the phrase 'my country, my Latgale, my vote.'

Harmony's campaign video advertisements were an attempt to (re-)gain the support of its electoral constituency, with Latvia's national minorities as its core. Emphasizing the need for a restart for Latvia, Harmony used the 'attack-acclaim' dichotomy in its electoral video ads. On the one hand, the party's tactics focused on revealing and criticizing government failures while calling for immediate and decisive action to change that path. On the other hand, its candidates highlighted their individual and party qualities, experiences, and accomplishments, demonstrating their determination to achieve positive changes in the country. While focusing on sectoral and region-specific contexts, the party used the same attack and acclaim tools wrapped in us-versus-them rhetoric to persuade defined groups of its potential electorate that Harmony was the only political group capable of serving their needs and interests at the parliamentary level. While attacking the governmental coalition and its policies across various domains, Harmony maintained a self-centric and self-confident stance. In their ads, the party's candidates focused solely on portraying the ruling parties as a disaster for Latvia and proposing themselves as a viable solution. However, the candidates failed to explain why Harmony's potential electoral constituency with national minorities as its core should (again) choose this party over other minority-friendly political groups with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies. This flaw in Harmony's strategies prompts the need to assess the sustainability of Harmony's electoral support in general and compare it to that of other minority-focused political groups.

5 How sustainable is Harmony's electoral support?

The success of a political party's electoral campaign is measured by its results in a specific election. Harmony, the most popular political group in Latvia over the past three parliamentary elections, received only 4.81% of popular support in the 2022 Saeima election, ranking ninth.

Table 1 Harmony's Results in the Saeima Elections

	Kurzeme, %/place	Latgale, %/place	Vidzeme, %/place	Zemgale, %/place	Riga, %/ place	Abroad, %/ place	Total, %/ place
2006	5.30 /6	27.59 /1	6.36 /6	5.28 /6	24.16 /1	5.68 /6	14.42 /4
2010	12.51 /3	45.59 /1	14.33 /3	14.79 /3	40.13 /1	12.86 /2	26.04 /2
2011	12.84 /5	52.09 /1	16.27 /4	17.23 /3	42.97 /1	14.32 /4	28.36 /1
2014	8.88 /4	39.54 /1	12.43 /4	11.31 /4	38.14 /1	9.88 /4	23.00 /1
2018	8.56 /6	35.73 /1	10.94 /6	9.91 /6	32.94 /1	6.45 /6	19.80 /1
2022	2.03 /11	11.47 /3	2.38 /11	2.26 /13	7.01 /6	2.66 /11	4.81 /9

Table 1 provides an overview of Harmony's electoral performance in *Saeima* elections, both nationwide and in plurinominal regional constituencies, including separate figures for the city of Riga and votes cast by Latvian citizens living abroad. The table demonstrates that Harmony consistently surpassed five percent in all regional constituencies except in the 2022 election. Riga and Latgale have always been its strongholds, where it was the most popular political group in all parliamentary elections from 2006 to 2018. In 2022, votes for Harmony only exceeded five percent in these two constituencies.

Table 2 Nationwide and Regional Dynamics of Harmony's Electoral Performance

	2010/06	2011/10	2014/11	2018/14	2022/18	2011/06	2022/06	2022/11
Kurzeme	1.360	0.026	-0.308	-0.036	-0.763	1.423	-0.617	-0.842
Latgale	0.652	0.143	-0.241	-0.096	-0.679	0.888	-0.584	-0.780
Vidzeme	1.253	0.135	-0.236	-0.120	-0.782	1.558	-0.626	-0.854
Zemgale	1.801	0.165	-0.344	-0.124	-0.772	2.263	-0.572	-0.869
Riga	0.661	0.071	-0.112	-0.136	-0.787	0.779	-0.710	-0.837
Abroad	1.264	0.114	-0.310	-0.347	-0.588	1.521	-0.532	-0.814
Total	0.806	0.089	-0.189	-0.139	-0.757	0.967	-0.666	-0.830

Table 2 is based on the data from Table 1 and reveals the dynamics of Harmony's electoral performance using the formula proposed by Bolleyer and Bytzeck (2017). It also compares the party's performance in three non-successive parliamentary elections: 2006 (its first

campaign as Harmony Centre), 2011 (when it achieved sustainability at the national level), and 2022 (its first failure). In general, the table's analysis suggests three key observations.

First, in 2022, Harmony lost just over three-quarters of its constituency compared to the previous parliamentary election. Within Latvia, only in Latgale was the decline in the share of votes less than the nationwide average. In all other regions, it slightly exceeded Harmony's nationwide failure rate.

Second, the city of Riga and the region of Latgale have always provided Harmony with over two-thirds of its electorate in the parliamentary elections, as shown in Table 3. In 2006, this figure peaked at 77.47 per cent, while in 2011, it was the lowest at 68.23 per cent. This confirms that Harmony effectively expanded its electoral base to other regions in Latvia while securing its sustainability at the national level. From 2006 to 2011, Harmony more than doubled its support in Kurzeme, Vidzeme and Zemgale. However, it never became the most popular political party in these regions.

Third, Harmony's achievement of sustainability at the national level in 2011 coincided with its best electoral result. In 2022, it won only one out of every six of the votes it had won in 2011 nationwide. Among the votes cast within Latvia in all regions, except for Latgale, these figures were comparable or slightly above the national average. In Latgale, Harmony retained 22 per cent of its electorate compared to its peak popularity. Comparison between the 2006 and 2022 elections reveals another trend. The party lost two-thirds of its initial constituency nationwide. This figure was above the national average only in Riga, where Harmony retained just 29 per cent of its initial electoral base. This explains the need to analyze the regional dynamics of votes cast for Harmony, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Regional Structure of Harmony's Constituency according to the Saeima Election

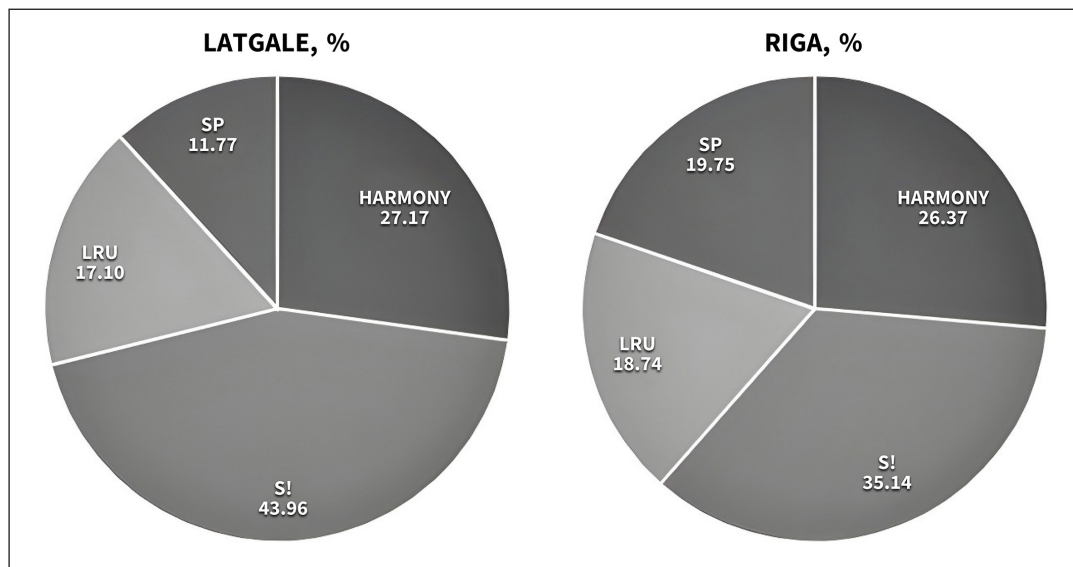
	Kurzeme, %	Latgale, %	Vidzeme, %	Zemgale, %	Riga, %	Abroad, %
2006	4.88	28.16	12.04	5.28	49.31	0.33
2010	6.18	23.58	15.46	8.21	45.91	0.66
2011	5.90	23.38	16.46	8.83	44.65	0.78
2014	4.91	19.94	14.97	6.87	52.22	1.09
2018	5.36	19.24	15.64	6.94	51.59	1.23
2022	5.30	29.01	14.19	6.64	43.34	1.52

The regional breakdown of all votes cast for Harmony during parliamentary elections from 2006 to 2022 should be adjusted for the aforementioned demographic changes and population mobility in Latvia, which led to the redistribution of mandates between the plurinominal constituencies. Combined with the data provided in Table 2, the interpretation of these figures results in three main conclusions. First, the share of Harmony's electorate from Riga dropped from 51.59 per cent in 2018 to 43.34 per cent in 2022, the lowest figure during the period analyzed in this study. For many years, Harmony enjoyed a position of power in Riga, being 'able to impose the Russophone voice as a necessary inter-

locutor for the national elite' (Cianetti, 2014, p. 997). However, the situation changed significantly over the intervening four years. Amid corruption scandals, Harmony lost control over Riga and a part of its electorate in the capital (Dembovska, 2022). The calculations suggest that if Harmony's decline in Riga in 2022 compared with 2018 had mirrored the situation in Latgale, the party could have secured parliamentary re-election. This implies that Harmony's electoral collapse in Riga, which has always provided nearly half of the party's electorate, was the key factor in its failure in the 2022 parliamentary election.

Second, the significant increase in the share of Latgalian votes in Harmony's 2022 results compared to the 2018 election (29.01 per cent and 19.24 per cent) demonstrates that the local electorate remained most loyal to Harmony. Latgale, a multiethnic and economically depressed region, has always provided Harmony with a larger proportion of supporters than other plurinominal constituencies. Moreover, the local politics in Latgale have always been 'characterised by a strong pragmatism prompted by the need to deal with real concrete problems,' and Harmony 'acted centripetally' to communicate these region-specific issues (Pridham, 2018, p. 203). As demonstrated in the previous section, Harmony's 2022 electoral campaign messages aimed to position the party as the region's primary mouthpiece at the national level.

Third, the discrepancy between Riga and Latgale, Harmony's two largest support bases, reveals the heterogeneity of Latvia's minority constituency. This divergence between Riga and Latgale is also evident from analyzing votes for parties with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies identified in the *Conceptual Framework* section above. An examination of aggregated votes cast for Harmony and LRU in the 2018 election shows that 77.09 per cent of the voters in Latgale opted for Harmony, while 22.91 per cent decided for LRU. In Riga, these figures were 88.88 per cent and 11.12 per cent, respectively. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of aggregated votes in Latgale and Riga for the 2022 election.



These figures again confirm the differences between minority constituencies in Riga and Latgale, backed by Harmony's greater decline in Riga and opposite trends in LRU's performance in the two regions. Additionally, the aggregate electoral support for political parties with predominantly minority constituencies, calculated using the Bolleyer and Bytzek (2017) formula, shrunk to -0.089 in Latgale and to -0.283 in Riga. This confirms that Riga's minority electorate demonstrated greater vulnerability and electoral diversity than Latgale's minority constituency, predetermined by the local contexts described above.

6 Conclusions

This study has analyzed a single campaign case study of Harmony in Latvia. The evidence suggests that its normative characteristics and dominant role in its potential electoral constituency made this integrationist political group more vulnerable in a changing political environment, even if it had been a stable element of a volatile domestic party system for over a decade. As the article has demonstrated, in its 2022 electoral campaign, Harmony was predominantly focused on emphasizing the need for a restart in Latvia due to the faults and flaws of the ruling government coalition. It employed an 'attack-acclamation' strategy, targeting the policies of the Latvian government and highlighting the qualities, accomplishments, and advantages of Harmony's team and its individual candidates. The contents of its sectoral and region-specific messages suggest that it used us-versus-them rhetoric to stress the party's commitment to the people's needs and interests compared to those of political groups whose representatives had made unpopular government decisions in the altered political environment, which included responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. These circumstances accelerated policies aimed at marginalizing the public use of the Russian language in Latvia, including in education.

However, the party's longstanding dominant role in representing Latvia's minority constituency in parliament led to virtually no effort to explain to potential voters why they should support Harmony over other minority-friendly political groups with predominantly or overwhelmingly minority constituencies. The article has also demonstrated that the end of Harmony's dominance in Latvia's minority constituency had different contexts in Riga and Latgale, two former party strongholds. On the one hand, this confirms that Latvia's minority constituency is not homogenous. On the other hand, it shows that region-specific drivers might be important in the electoral performance of an integrationist party. Overall, the article reveals that integrationist political groups, being the major voice of a composite minority constituency, are potentially more sensitive to changes in the national political environment caused by external circumstances. It also demonstrates that their electoral strategies should adapt to the challenges of political rivals who target political consumers with similar or even the same characteristics.

The evidence from this case study and the general Latvian minority-related context during the 2022 parliamentary election may also be relevant for further case-focused and comparative studies dealing with minority and integrationist parties in the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe in changing political settings.

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