European Elections monitor

# Raimonds Vejonis succeeds Andris Berzins as President of the Republic of Latvia

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Results

**Abstract:**
The co-Chair of the Green Party (LZP) and Chairman of the Green and Famers' Union (ZZS), Raimond Vejonis, Defence Minister was elected President of the Republic of Latvia by members of the Saeima (Parliament) during the fifth round of voting on 3rd June. He won 55 votes, i.e. the absolute majority. 42 MPs voted against, 1 voting slip was declared invalid.

## THE ELECTION

Four candidates were running at the start of voting: Raimonds Vejonis; Sergejs Dolgopolovs, a Harmony Centre MP (SC); Egils Levits, a judge at the European Court of Justice, supported by the National Alliane (All for Latvia (VL) and the Fatherland and Freedom Union (TB/LNNK) and Martin Bondars (Regions Alliance, Latvijas Regionu Apvieniba, LRA).

Martin Bondars withdrew from the race after the second round since he only won 7 votes during each of the first two rounds. Sergejs Dolgopolovs withdrew after the third round in which he won 23 votes whilst Raimonds Vejonis won 35 votes and Egils Levits 26. As of the third round the number of candidates gradually decreased until there was only one candidate who won the majority of votes.
Raimonds Vejonis, won 46 votes in the 4th round (against 26 for Egils Levits), was therefore the only candidate in the 5th round.

"*I am very happy with the election of Raimonds Vejonis,*" declared Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma (Unity, Vienotiba, V) after the President election, maintaining that the departure of the Defence Minister would not weaken the government.

"*I am going to do everything I can to continue work to strengthen Latvia's security and improve the country's well-being. We are right to be optimistic about our future and we are proud of what we have achieved. I shall do everything so that Latvians, the political parties and the parliament work together to take decisions that will make Latvia more prosperous. Serving the country is an honour for me,*" declared the President elect in his speech to the members of the Saeima.

"*Without a doubt my priority will be national security, the strengthening of our armed forces and our borders,*" stressed Raimonds Vejonis, indicating that he wants to improve relations with Moscow. "*Latvia and its partners are prepared to undertake constructive dialogue with Russia but as long as Russian missiles and heavy weapons are being deployed in Ukraine this is not really possible,*" he said.

Like Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia wants NATO to deploy several thousand soldiers on a permanent basis on its territory to counter the Russian threat.

"*Moreover as President of the Republic I shall have the opportunity of discussing ecologist ideas more widely and to work towards Latvia becoming truly a green country,*" he maintained.

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## THE NEW PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC

Raimonds Vejonis was born on 15th June 1966 of a Latvian father and a Russian mother in the region of Pskov (Western Russia) where his father was serving in the Soviet army. He is a graduate in biology and chemistry from the University of Latvia.
From 1989 to 1996, he worked as Deputy Director of the Regional Environment Council of the town of Madona (Vidzme) before becoming Director of the Regional Environmental department of Riga (1996-2002).
Raimonds Vejonis started his political career in 1990 as town councillor in Madona. He was appointed Environment Minister in 2002, a portfolio he maintained under five successive Prime Ministers until 2011. In January 2014 he was appointed Defence Minister as part of Laimdota Straujuma's government.

On 3rd June, Raimonds Vejonis became the first ecologist President in the European Union (and the first minister to be elected to this post in Latvia). "*However he shares little with the majority of European greens who are generally positioned to the left of the political scale,*" indicates Iveta Kazoka, a political analyst who adds, "*his membership of the Green Party is more to do with political opportunity, a choice that is motivated more by career than by sound ideological beliefs.*"

In May Raimonds Vejonis said to the daily *Diena* that his interest in ecology was strengthened when he learned that his grandfather had become blind after having used certain chemical products on a Soviet collective farm.

However the election of the new head of State is, in the opinion of Juris Rozenvalds, a professor in Political Science at the University of Latvia, beneficial for the Russian speaking community of Latvia. "*Raimonds Vejonis is the President of the Republic of a NATO country (after having been an acknowledged and well-like Defence Minister) and has Russian roots. His mother is Russian, he was born in the region of Pskov and incidentally he chose to grant his first interview to the Latvian Russian-speaking TV channel,*" he stressed.

Raimonds Vejonis will officially take over from Andris Brezins as head of the country on 7th July next.

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