

State of the Discipline

Academic Political Science in Latvia: The First Steps

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Introduction

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The university authorities received a number of complaints from students and faculty alike, particularly from within the natural sciences.¹ This marked the symbolic end of totalitarian education within the social sciences; the social scientists had lost whatever legitimacy they had previously enjoyed. The discussion about the new role and structure of social sciences started at the University of Latvia and other institutions of higher learning covered the whole range of social sciences and humanities. The situation was quite complicated and uncertain. Everybody in the social science community realized that it would take great efforts to make up for the prestige already

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lost and to to gain a position on a par with that of other scientific disciplines in Latvia.

In a political sense, the historians played a crucial role in the public debate on this issue by focusing on the “psychological background” of the process of transition, including the transformation of the educational system in Latvia. It was part and parcel of the “re-evaluation” of the historical past, an issue of foremost importance in the political debate considering the fact that the restoration of Latvian independence and statehood enjoyed top priority on the political agenda. Somehow – and in some way – this discussion helped restore the prestige of social sciences and humanities.

Pre-history

The discussions about the development of political science in Latvia were going in different directions. Where should it be located; within the framework of what sciences should it be developed? What was to be the orientation and name of the academic institutions where political science was to be taught as an academic discipline? The answer to the first set of questions was in a sense given by life itself (there was no central coordination in the wider sense of that word at that particular point in time) and it was very similar to the solution worked out in other transitional countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Political science was launched in the faculty of Law of the University of Latvia under the guidance of Professor Edgars Melkisis as one of the disciplines for students of Law. A separate Institute of International Relations was established at the University of Latvia under the leadership of Professor Juris Bojars. The Faculty of Management of the same university in fact started to address itself to different questions of public administration (for example, studies of local government, where the role of Professor Edvins Vanags is very important). A department of political science was established at the Faculty of History and Philosophy for the purpose of teaching political science as a major subject (bachelor, master and doctoral studies in political science), where the first head was the author of this article. Today it is known as the Section of Politics and International Relations (since June 1993). It consists of two departments, the Department of Political Science chaired by Professor Andris Runcis, and the Department of International Relations chaired by Professor Karlis Daukshts. Political science departments were also established in other major higher educational establishments, where this discipline is taught as liberal arts.

There were lengthy discussions and a number of proposals under what name to market the new discipline, originally introduced under the German label – *Politologie*. At the time there were no scientists with academic

degrees in political science in Latvia. There was no consensus on how to define the discipline and on a rather wide range of ideas about what to include in the political science programme. There were proposals to establish social science departments,² departments of social and political theory or even departments of philosophy of history and last, but not least, departments of politology. The transition from politology to political science took place in 1990, when the first guest lecturers in this field from the Western countries started visiting the University of Latvia and an internationally recognized version of political science with an adequate translation into Latvian (*Politikas zinātne*) was finally introduced.

This marked the beginning of a period of hard, but very interesting and promising work. I am now going to describe the major features of the development of the Department of Political Science within the Faculty of History and Philosophy at the University of Latvia (now known as the Section of Politics and International Relations). I was the Head of this department from the very outset (15 September 1989) until 1993 and I am, therefore, in a position to evaluate the complicated but interesting development of this academic discipline from the inside. It was not – and it is not – the only department in Latvia, where political science is taught, but it is the only department with the full range of academic programmes (BA, MA and doctoral).

Resources

Latvia did not have any political science at all even before World War II.³ The work literally started from scratch and a wide set of problems had to be addressed. The major problems were where to find the necessary resources for training the staff and building a library, with all that entails in terms of information networks and infrastructure and what teaching and research strategies to opt for. The sceptical and critical attitudes towards the social sciences in Latvia made this into an up-hill battle and political science probably never would have achieved an appropriate position within the academic community if it had not been for the active support of sister universities abroad. We usually say that Latvian political science started and got its roots at the University of Oslo (Norway).⁴ The support of the University of Aarhus (Denmark) has also been a tremendous asset.⁵ It was, therefore, only appropriate that the first honorary doctorates ever to be awarded in the field of political science by the University of Latvia were offered to Professors Tore Hansen of Oslo and Ole Nørgaard of Aarhus. They received the degrees in September 1993 for the important role played in the creation of academic political science at the University of Latvia and the development of Baltic Studies in the Nordic countries. The University

College of Swansea in Wales, which enjoys the active support of the British Council, also plays a leading role when it comes to training the new generation of political scientists in Latvia, and not only academics, but professional politicians as well.⁶ On the whole, I must say that it is impossible to develop this branch of social science without the help of Western colleagues. During the past few years important contributions have been coming from the Universities of Umeå⁷ and Gothenburg in Sweden,⁸ and the Free University of Berlin.⁹ The Soros Foundation is sponsoring a number of highly salient projects, as is the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Germany. Important help is coming from the United States Information Agency in Riga, and from the Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and German embassies in Riga. We are also greatly indebted to our Latvian colleagues from abroad such as Professors Rita Peters and Rasma Shilde-Karklinja from the US.

The difficult economic situation in Latvia which accompanied the transition from command to market economy left the new discipline competing for extremely scarce resources. The Senate of the University, the Rector – Professor Juris Zakes – the Dean of the Faculty of History and Philosophy – Professor Vija Daukshte – and the Faculty Council did, however, do their utmost to support the new discipline in its efforts to recruit a new team, starting from scratch.

The Staff

The Department was formed by social scientists with degrees in philosophy, history and law. At the time there were no other options, because of the complete lack of lecturers with degrees in political science.¹⁰ The main idea was to “re-educate” Latvian lecturers by sending them abroad in order to create and maintain international links and networks. The major objective was for them to catch up with recent developments in the Western political science and to “import” relevant terminology and concepts from the West in their full diversity. But the academic background of the social scientists, who applied for political science, made this transfer of know-how into a rather complicated and drawn-out process. The majority of them were competent generalists and theoreticians but with limited exposure to “middle-level” theories and interdisciplinary approaches. The same could be said of the other former Socialist countries,¹¹ and, like them, Latvia will have to approach the task of catching up with the West as a permanent and continuous process.

In 1989–92 the vast majority of the lecturers at Latvia University improved their level of competence by taking advantage of a number of scholarships, grants and awards at Oslo, Aarhus, Swansea (the University

of Wales), the London School of Economics and the University of Gothenburg. The crucial role was played by the University of Oslo. Today this process is continuing mainly within the framework of the TEMPUS programme, the Baltic Centre in the Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo, the Essex Summer School of the ECPR, the Salzburg Seminar, the Swedish Institute of International Relations, the Royal Institute of International Relations and the seminars of the Hansard Society (Great Britain) and last, but not least, the scholarships of the IREX, where lecturers have an opportunity to develop their professional skills in the direction of a more profound specialization.

Guest lecturers and visiting professors also play an important role in the promotion of modern political science in Latvia. Since 1992 the Soros Foundation has sponsored the permanent stay of three US lecturers on a yearly basis. Rita Peters and Rasma Karklinja are currently permanently affiliated with the department, giving courses and counselling students. Many "crash courses" are offered at the department by the best teachers from Aarhus and Umeå within the framework of the TEMPUS programme. A very valuable course on electoral campaigns was conducted by Brian Loyd of the John Kennedy School (the US) by courtesy of the USIA office in Riga, shortly before the recent Latvian elections.

Among the various activities of the department, the doctoral programme has top priority. It currently counts five doctoral students, all of whom have advisors from our sister universities where they complete the bulk of their studies. The department has established a council of experts from Oslo, Aarhus, Umeå and Wales chaired by Tore Hansen for the purpose of seeing to it that the doctoral dissertations to be defended at Riga live up to international standards of excellence. The dissertations are to be written and defended in English, and the international council is to hold its first session in spring of 1994 when Valdis Bergs will defend his dissertation on the transition of political ideologies in Latvia.

By now the entire staff (14 people) and the five doctoral students have obtained the necessary basic qualifications from abroad. In the process the department established links and contacts with a number of foreign universities, foundations and other institutions; and in 1992 the University of Latvia felt ready to introduce bachelor's and master's programmes. They were of the first of their kind in the Baltic states.¹²

Teaching Strategy

The bachelor's and master's programmes set out to apply modern Western political science to the specific conditions prevailing in a transitional country such as Latvia. The department went through an impressive collection of

study programmes from abroad and conferred with a number of distinguished foreign colleagues. The final versions of the study programmes were sent for comments to Aarhus, Oslo and Wales and the programmes were subsequently evaluated by a special commission of the Danish Research Council.¹³

According to the regulations of the University of Latvia, the bachelor's and master's programmes have a duration of four and two years respectively. They cover all the five basic fields of political science – political theory, comparative politics, public policy and public administration, international relations and research methods. They also include courses in liberal arts closely related to the basic subjects of political science. On the whole it is a mixture of the Scandinavian and American way of teaching social sciences. During the first two years of undergraduate studies the students are free to take courses within all fields of political science. But there are basically two kinds of specialization – general political science and international relations. The more advanced the student is and the closer he is to getting his degree, the more likely he is to benefit from courses in other faculties within or outside the university. Applications to this effect are generally approved on the assumption that it will improve the students' career possibilities.¹⁴

Today's master's programme is somewhat of a "joint degree programme" for the simple reason that we do not have any students who have obtained their bachelor's degrees (the first bachelor's degrees will be awarded in 1995). Students with degrees in law, history and philosophy are currently taking this programme, and it is in a sense an experimental programme. It basically serves two purposes – to improve the students' odds on a market which most of them have already entered (the majority of the students specializing in international relations are in fact already employed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and to prepare the students for the doctoral programme. In many cases the master's theses resemble the kind of professional reports that civil servants are expected to produce. The emphasis is on description rather than on the theory and analyses required within the doctoral programme. The students within the master's programme are encouraged to spend at least one semester of studies abroad. We are currently in the process of adapting the master's programme to the needs of those students who will have a bachelor's degree in political science.

The start has been a success. Political science is a popular discipline in Latvia. In the last entrance exam there were five applicants to every open slot (one of the highest ratings in the entire university). The possibilities for the selection of students were very good. Today there are 95 students for each year of studies (50 of whom are paid for by the state and 45 either by themselves or by some sponsor) in the department. Even today, the top-notch second-year students have well-paid jobs in the parliament, the

major newspapers, the political parties and even in the public relations departments of the private banking system. We have foreign students from Norway, Denmark, Germany and the US as well, because one-third of lectures are in English and they are doing serious field research in Latvia. Student groups from Denmark, Germany and Switzerland are coming for study tours. A similar arrangement is in process of being worked out with the University of Southwest Texas.

The bachelor's and master's programmes cover an average of three to four lectures per day which falls somewhat short of the traditional Latvian norm. The focal point of the Political Science Department is the Library and on the use of modern information retrieval systems. If there is a library, then there is a department as we sometimes say. Each book is in fact of great value to us, and we now have the best political science library in the Baltic states¹⁵ featuring approximately 5000 high quality monographs, many periodicals and the Latvian branch of the European Documentation Centre.

The creation of information networks is one of our crucial tasks today. It is difficult and requires large financial resources. But, on the whole, our students get to work individually with different kinds of literature and information. The requirement that they submit a written (on computer, of course) paper for each basic course is highly helpful! All this would not have been possible had it not been for the University of Oslo, which upgraded our computer environment considerably by donating a full computer classroom of 14 used personal computers. The first copy and fax machines and E-mail facilities have been introduced in the department by courtesy of the TEMPUS programme, which is coordinated by the University of Aarhus.

Research

It is not enough to require insights into international scientific standards. The insights and the know-how should also be applied, in our case, in the form of analyses of the Latvian political system preferably cast in an East European or Central European comparative framework.¹⁶ At a time when Latvia, in the process of returning to Europe, is grappling with an array of transitional problems, it is also vital to promote the study of West European politics and international relations. But the major task for Latvian political science is to analyse and evaluate the recent political developments in Latvia in the light of democratic theory.¹⁷

Most of the research projects at the department address themselves to this issue, but progress is slow and piecemeal due to the heavy teaching load of the individual researchers involved and the limited financial resources available. The recent elections had a truly revitalizing impact on empirical

political research in Latvia. Several new research projects were initiated and a unique set of data was collected. The first empirical results were presented in an international seminar on *Transition Towards Democracy: Latvia and Experience in the World* which was organized by this department in November 1992.¹⁸ It was the first large-scale presentation of department research to a national and international audience. The proceedings of the meeting were published in December 1992.

The publication activities of the department are currently geared towards producing badly needed teaching materials in Latvian. A number of booklets covering the five fields of political science at the Latvian University have already been published by the staff. The lecturers are encouraged to participate in international conferences, meetings and seminars. So there are some international publications as well. A Latvian journal of political science is currently on the agenda. For the time being, however, the Latvian political scientists turn to *Humanities and Social Sciences, Latvia*, a new Latvian English language journal. The second volume is being prepared by this department in cooperation with other scientific institutions.

The recruitment of qualified new teachers and the prevention of a brain-drain are among the most serious problems of the department. University positions in Latvia are not well paid and do not carry a great deal of respect. In this sense the prospects are bleak, but the creation of independent research centres affiliated with the department has proved instrumental in attracting financial resources as well as competence. As a result of the untiring efforts of Ronald Kim, one of our guest lecturers from the US, and of Professor Zaneta Ozolinja, the Soros Foundation provided the funds needed for the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies. It serves as a fertile environment for students and faculty alike in their efforts to improve their theoretical insights and methodological skills in this important field of research. An important role is also played by the Latvian Institute of International Studies and its director Atis Lejinjs. Many of the lecturers and doctoral students are taking part in the very interesting research activities which are carried out by this institute. It helps to preserve the staff and to attract young and talented people for the new political science in Latvia.

Socialization

Generally speaking, political science nowadays carries a great deal of weight at the university and within the academic community as a whole. But it still remains to make the new discipline into an integral part of society, to “socialize” it as it were. To that end, the department has produced the first political science textbook for the public school system in

the entire history of Latvia entitled *The Foundations of Democracy*.¹⁹ The complete lack of experience in this field made this into a rather complicated project, but – all things considered – it was an important step in the development of a democratic civic culture in Latvia. The department is also organizing training programmes for civic teachers, sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway. Staff and students alike are playing an increasingly active role in the media, and the department is beginning to come to public attention. The most recent project is a televised session within the framework of the *Baltic University*, an international educational programme, run by the University of Uppsala, and involving all the countries in the Baltic region. Together, these activities – the conferences, the seminars, the research projects, the electoral analyses and the visits by foreign students²⁰ – all contribute towards positioning the department in transitional Latvia.

The department is a member of IPSA and ECPR,²¹ which is a prerequisite for gaining access to international networks and for international recognition. The TEMPUS programme, which includes the Universities of Aarhus, Umea, Wales, Groningen (Holland), Tartu, Vilnius and Riga, should also be mentioned in this context. It has helped shape our scientific environment in a highly positive way.

Perspectives and Problems

There are several things that must be implemented in the future. The involvement of young lecturers who have finished their doctoral studies and received their internationally recognized degrees should be intensified. They will form a second – well-educated and highly specialized – generation of political scientists. The first generation of political scientists consists of scholars, who are well established within other social sciences; and as such they are in fact “transitional characters” in political science. There are somewhat neglected areas of teaching such as public policy, quantitative methods and regional studies that need to be upgraded, perhaps in cooperation with the newly established Eurofaculty in Riga. Strategic investments have to be made in the library and other information retrieval systems. The empirical quantitative profile of the department must be strengthened, but this is a commitment that might prove difficult to live up to. Empirical research is very costly, and – as we all know – there is not a lot of money around in Latvia; and to the extent that empirical research is carried out in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, it is done by political sociologists who have gone commercial. Closer contacts between the university and these private companies are clearly called for, but there is no straightforward structural solution to the problem. We must unfortunately

also conclude that the commitment to comparative politics, particularly of the East or Central European variety, largely remains on the drafting board,²² as could be said of the plans for a professional Latvian political science journal.

On the whole, however, political science in Latvia is gradually emerging from its “embryonic” stage of development. It is now much closer than ever before to the balanced Western professional standards and it is clearly about to take a position in its own right within the international political science community.

NOTES

1. Relatively speaking, the natural sciences came out of Soviet occupation unscathed and, therefore, had an advantage over the social sciences during the first few years of transition from communism. As a result many of the crucial positions within the field of education and research were filled by representatives of the natural sciences. It will take years, perhaps decades, for the social sciences to secure an appropriate level of influence on research policy (including finance) in Latvia.
2. By the way, our sister university in Tartu (Estonia) is the intellectual offspring of the School of Social Sciences, chaired by the well-known Estonian–American political scientist Rein Taagapere. The University of Vilnius in fact started with the foundation of the Institute of International Relations.
3. This is not to say that political subjects were not investigated at all. They were covered by representatives of other disciplines such as law, history, economics, demography, statistics and philosophy on a permanent basis but from their viewpoint. During the period of Soviet occupation the social sciences were covered by all the various branches of Marxism–Leninism which was the only authorized approach in education and research. Latvian emigrants, who accumulated Western scientific experience and knowledge about Latvia, played an important role and deserve a separate investigation. All I am saying in this context is that there were no specialized departments, academic programmes, periodicals, professional associations, conferences, workshops, academic degrees in the field of political science in the academic history of Latvia.
4. The role of Professor Tore Hansen, the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Professors Anton Steen, Arne Stokke, Knut Midgaard, Svein Mønnesland and many others cannot be overestimated. They were the first to make a substantial investment in the development of political science in Latvia.
5. The cooperation with Ole Nørgaard, Eric Albek, Nikolaj Petersen, Mette Skak and many other Danish political scientists is very fruitful and important for Latvia.
6. We are particularly indebted to Richard Taylor, Neil Harding and Bruce Haddock.
7. The coordinator in Umeå is Jan Åke Dellenbrant.
8. The initiator here is Rutger Lindahl.
9. Professors Helmut Wagner and Manfred Kerner are carrying out intensive work in this direction.
10. Curious situations arise when different politicians start referring to their professional background and education as “politological”, even if they have no other credentials than a degree from one of the previous party schools.
11. See, for example: Atilla Agh. “The Emergence of the ‘Science of Democracy’ and its Impact on the Democratic Transition in Hungary”, in *Budapest Papers on Democratic Transition*, 1993, No. 44, p. 5.
12. Between 1989 and 1992 political science had been given as a liberal art in other faculties of the university.
13. See: *Latvian Research: An International Evaluation*, Copenhagen, The Danish Research Council, 1992 – 3.19.

14. For example, if a student is planning to apply for a position in the offices of Parliament, he will take the appropriate courses in the Faculty of Law; if he is planning an administrative career in local government, he will attend courses within the Faculty of Management; if he contemplates working in the mass media, it calls for a more complex strategy, including the Department of Mass Communication and specialization in some specific subject areas. A minimum of basic courses is provided by the Section of Politics and International Relations, but the student could also end up taking all the courses or most of them in the Department of Political Science.
15. The main sponsors are the Universities of Aarhus, Oslo, Wales, Gothenburg and Kaiserslautern, the special Foundation of the *Financial Times*, the TEMPUS programme, the German Association for Political Education, most of the embassies in Riga, particularly the USIA office thanks to the important assistance of its director James Kenny, the Soros Foundation, our Latvian colleagues abroad, particularly and foremost Professor Rita Peters.
16. See: Attila Agh, op. cit., pp. 11–12.
17. The major projects within this area are worth mentioning: the joint Nordic–Baltic project *The Baltic states during transition towards democracy*, coordinated by the Universities of Aarhus and Umeå; the joint Norwegian–Latvian projects *The elite of Latvia during transitional period*, coordinators: A. Steen (Oslo) and E. Semanis (Riga) and *Parliamentary Government in the Baltic States*, coordinators: A. Stokke (Oslo) and A. Strupishs (Riga); two department-based projects – *The Electoral Behaviour of the Population in Latvia in National and Local Elections*, coordinator: Dz. Bushs; the joint Norwegian–Baltic project *Environmental Protection and Environmental Resource Management in the Baltic States*, coordinators: P. K. Mydske (Oslo) and P. Ozolinjs (Riga); the joint Norwegian–Latvian project *Political Science as a Subject in Public Schools* (teachers' training and teaching strategy, materials and books), coordinators: H. K. Kuløy, M. Kvernørød (Oslo) and M. Kruminja (Riga); the individual projects (individual grant): *The Political Parties and the Movements in Latvia*, A. Runcis; *Political Participation in Latvia*, I. Ostrovska; *Political Activity in Latvia*, M. Rodin; *Modern Nationalism: The Case of Latvia*, A. Pabriks; *Political Ideologies at the Time of Transition in Latvia*, V. Bergs; *Social Policy in Latvia*, F. Rajevska; *Ethnic Policy in Latvia*, I. Apine; *The Development of Political Culture in Latvia*, A. Freimanis (part-time lecturer); *The Development of the Idea of Independence in the History of Latvia*, D. Bara; *The Development of the Political Regime of Latvia*, E. Semanis; *Latvia and the European Union*, A. Ozolinjs; *The Nordic Countries and the Baltic States*, Z. Ozolinja; *The Relations between Russia and Latvia during Transition Time*, D. Osipovs; *Parliamentary and Electoral Systems*, V. Rajevskis; *Public Administration in the US*, A. Latkovskis; different methodological aspects on social science research, M. Ashmanis. These projects are sponsored by the Nordic Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway, the Norwegian Research Council, the Soros Foundation, IREX, the Universities of Oslo, Aarhus, Umea and Wales, and NATO. A small grant for election studies has also been awarded by the Council of Science of Latvia.
18. The seminar was sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.
19. *Demokratijas pamati: Macibu gramata visparizglitajos skolam*, Riga: Zinatne, 1993. The book was sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway and by IMTEC (the International Learning Cooperative). Hallvard Kåre Kuløy of IMTEC played a very important role in this context.
20. By the way, Crown Prince Frederick of Denmark was one of the Aarhus students who visited the department within the framework of the cooperation between the two universities. It was a big event for the department, a sort of recognition of Latvian political science.
21. The ECPR membership is sponsored by the University of Oslo. Professor Tore Hansen played a very important role in this respect.
22. The second Berlin conference on the prospects of comparative research in Eastern Europe in November 1993 served a very important coordinating function.

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