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Author(s): Aivars Stranga

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The Political System of Karlis Ulmanis' Authoritarian Regime (15.05.1934 – 17.06.1940)

Aivars STRANGA*

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Abstract: *The paper examines the political system of Karlis Ulmanis' authoritarian regime. Although Ulmanis himself underlined that his regime on its merits was revolutionary, in fact in most aspects it was a simple authoritarian, even autocratic regime, in which all the power was in the hands of one person – Ulmanis. He was the head of government, the government in turn having usurped the rights of the parliament; he was also the President and the supreme commander of the armed forces.*

Ulmanis' regime did not want to be only a simple, conservative authoritarian dictatorship but claimed to be “a national revolution”, a dictatorship with features of fascist mass mobilisation and manipulation. During the time the regime existed, Ulmanis and the members of his government, not to mention ideologists and propagandists of the regime, compared it with fascist or even totalitarian regimes. Ulmanis has several times publicly expressed his high evaluation of Italy's fascism and of B. Mussolini personally and called on people in Latvia to learn from Italy. In a speech given in the meeting of Mazpulki (a youth organisation) on 26 April 1935 he laid a special emphasis on the authoritarianism of Italy and on the psychological plane of fascism: fascism as an excited emotional state and enthusiasm that is necessary for the mobilisation of masses.¹ He wanted to see something like that in Latvia, too. The regime's propaganda compared Ulmanis not only to Mussolini, but even to Hitler.² On 3 April, 1938 addressing the Chamber of Labour, Minister of Foreign Affairs V. Munters gave something like a typological definition of authoritarian regimes, Ulmanis' regime included: it belonged to “... one-party or party-less regimes, called also totalitarian or authoritarian...”³ In 1939 when the fifth anniversary of the regime was celebrated, both fascism and totalitarianism were inseparable from the regime's self-definition: at times the regime was deemed as deserving the name of a fascist state;⁴ at times its claim was even more megalomaniac: the well-known statistician J. Bokalders, who served also as the regime's ideologist, described it as “... a politically united and totalitarian state...”⁵ Totalitarian!

The regime of 15 May was a compilation, which tried to borrow several features from dictatorships of various kinds, but it did not make it a fascist, and even less so – a totalitarian, dictatorship, the kind of which in fact did not fully exist even in the policy of

* Dr. habil. hist, Professor, University of Latvia, Riga (stranga@lu.lv).

¹ *Pirmais gads*, [The First Year] 1934, May 15, 1935, 247, 248; Ulmanis' glorification of Italy, in a striking, even unusual manner, is evident in his New Year greetings to the people of Latvia from 5 January 1938: all congratulations are built on references, but not to his own speeches or examples from Latvia, but to Italy (*Rīts*, [Morning] January 5, 1938); see also Ulmanis' message of February of the same year *Duty – the Supreme Law – Sējējs*, [The Sower] 2 (1938): 114.

² See, e.g. A. Alnis, “No parlamentārisma uz autoritāru vadonības valsti,” [From Parliamentarianism to an Authoritarian State] *Sējējs*, 8 (1939): 806.

³ *Ceturtais Gads*, [The Fourth Year], 367.

⁴ A. Alnis, “No parlamentārisma”, 806.

⁵ J. Bokalders, “Saimnieciskā ideoloģija,” [Economic Ideology] *Ekonomists* [Economist], 10 (1939): 700.

the first user of the notion of totalitarianism – in that of Mussolini in Italy. Although after 15 May political repressions were launched on an unprecedented scale – in May and the summer of 1934 at least 1080 persons were arrested and there was not enough place for all of them in state prisons, thus a concentration camp was opened in Liepāja⁶ – a shameful page that ushered in the regime of 15 May – yet the majority of the arrested were released already in 1935 and in the subsequent years political repressions were moderate, not to mention the fact that they never turned bloody (however, one must also remember that thousands of people lost their jobs due to political reasons – for example, by the end of 1934 at least 3982 persons had been dismissed from local authorities⁷). In this sense the regime was not totalitarian at all and at the time of the USSR aggression against Latvia in June 1940 there were only 253 political prisoners in Latvia's prisons (14 other persons had been imprisoned for spying for the USSR), which is a small number not only for totalitarian or fascist regimes – if Ulmanis' regime belonged to this category – but also compared to several simple authoritarian or military dictatorships in Europe. Although control over public life under the regime of 15th May grew on a large scale (it was ensured not only by the political police, but also by the multi-headed Aizsargi organisation (a paramilitary voluntary organisation aimed at enforcing public order): every week Aizsargi commanders of various ranks had to report on the public mood to deputy Minister of Interior, later – to Minister of Public Affairs A. Bērziņš⁸), it was not a totalitarian control but remained within the limits of a police state typical for simpler regimes.

The most striking compilation of features of Fascism and German National Socialism was to be found in the cult of Ulmanis as a leader, accompanied by a compilation from the new liturgies of the two regimes – the mass marches, parades and celebrations, which were to create a picture of the development of a new, “national Latvia” and to give a dynamic form to Ulmanis' authoritarianism. However, unlike the authentic Italian fascism, not to mention Führer's Germany, in Latvia authoritarianism covered only an authoritarian, even with a trend towards autocratic, dictatorship. Another compilation from the clerical fascism⁹ of Italy and Austria – the establishment of chambers – did not turn it into a genuine fascism either. Already on 3 April, 1926 Mussolini had underlined: “Italy is a state, which controls everything that there is in the nature: politics, economics, morals (a claim towards totalitarianism – A.S.). Italy is the corporate state.”¹⁰ The corporate spirit

⁶ V. Ščerbinskis, “Liepājas koncentrācijas nometne un tās režīms. 1934. gada maijs – 1935. gada marts,” [Liepāja Concentration Camp and the Regime There. May 1934 – March 1935] *Latvijas Arhīvi* [Archives of Latvia], ½ (2009): 84.

⁷ Valters Ščerbinskis, “Pašvaldību amatpersonu atlaišanas un iecelšanas pēc 1934. gada 15. maija apvērsuma,” [Appointment and Dismissal of Local Authority Officials after the Coup of 15 May 1934] *Latvijas Arhīvi*, 2 (2007): 61.

⁸ I. Butulis, “Sveiki, Aizsargi!,” *Jumava*, 2011: 73.

⁹ In his notes written in deportation in the USSR in the autumn of 1940 Ulmanis admitted: “Closest of all I followed the changes and the way they were implemented in Vienna.” *Kārlis Ulmanis trimdā un cietumā. Dokumenti un materiāli* [Kārlis Ulmanis in Exile and Prison. Documents and Materials] (Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures Institūta apgāds, 1994), 293; see also positive evaluation in the Latvian press, for example “Austrija – korporatīva valsts,” [Austria – a Corporate State] *Rīts*, November 2, 1934.

¹⁰ S. W. Halperin, *Musolini and Italian Fascism* (London, 1964), 56; see also I. Feldmanis, *Autoritārisma viļņi Eiropā pēc 1. Pasaules kara* [Waves of Authoritarianism in Europe after the First World War] (Apvērsums, 1934). *Gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos* [The Coup. The Events of 15 May 1934 in Sources and

was embodied in the chambers: they were targeted against liberalism in economy and based on the ideological claim of fascism that it would eradicate “the plague” of class controversy and class struggle – democracy and liberalism. In 1938 the chambers were integrated into a council of marionettes who were selected by the government and obedient to it: the Council of FASC and Corporations. However the system of chambers, which, as Mussolini said, embodied the dictatorship of the state over the classes, was only one of the many fascists' claims to a revolution: the capitalist economy, although subjugated to increased control by the state, was not eliminated. A significant feature of Italy was Mussolini's belief that the system of chambers can fully function only when subjugated to a control by the fascist party.¹¹

In Latvia the system of chambers, although borrowed, had specific features. Firstly, unlike Italy and Austria, Ulmanis laid a claim to a larger and truly almost totalitarian control over the public with the help of chambers. There were created not only four economic chambers, but also two chambers that brought together “mental workers” of various kinds: representatives of the free professions, technical intellectuals and representatives of other fields which could not be fitted into the four economic chambers. These were the Chamber of the Writings and Art and the Chamber of Professions (it incorporated even dentists and veterinaries – they, too, could not be left uncontrolled¹²). None of the six chambers had any power: not a single institution was tolerated in Latvia that could even to a minimal extent lessen Ulmanis' absolute power, which “.. must not be limited by any institution..”¹³ The chambers were merely advisory bodies.¹⁴ While the former four claimed to overcome controversies and introduce harmony in economy, what kind of “class controversies” were there, for example, for painters or actors, who found themselves under the care of the Chamber of Writings and Arts, to overcome? Ulmanis' one-person regime, even with the help of the police and Aizsargi, could not control everything, especially in the field of culture and art. The control was also delegated to the Chambers (every resident of Latvia was eventually supposed to become part of one of the professional organisations that were integrated into the system of six Chambers). Each occupation was allowed to have only one association – a requirement which made the respective occupation easy to control – plus an eventual affiliate in the province.¹⁵

Research], eds.: Dr. Hist. Valters Ščerbinskis, Dr. hist. Ēriks Jēkabsons, Latvijas Nacionālais Arhīvs. Latvijas Arhīvistu Biedrība [The National Archives of Latvia. The Archivists' Society of Latvia] (Rīga, 2012), 81, 85.

¹¹ K. Ulmanis carefully studied the system of chambers in Italy, especially after the first session of the fascist corporative chamber, which was to replace the parliament, in March 1939. When reading J. Acerbo's project of the house of chambers, Ulmanis underlined several places in the text, for example, the statement that “All the people is encompassed and disciplined by the fascist party”. See *Ulmanis' notes*, LVVA (State History Archives of Latvia), 5969. f. 1. apr., 281.l., 141. – 145, sheet 437.

¹² “2 kameras un kultūras padome gara darbiniekiem,” [2 Chambers and a Council of Culture for Mental Workers] *Rīts*, March 6, 1938.

¹³ A. Alnis, “No parlamentārisma”, 807.

¹⁴ Even consultations were allowed only on purely non-political issues; for example, the Presidium of the Chamber of Agriculture in its session on 4th January 1938 “... adopted an agenda for exploration and improvement of the quality of bacon.” *Rīts*, January 5, 1938.

¹⁵ For example, in the field of fine arts only one organisation was allowed: The Latvian Society of Fine Arts. – Ilze Konstante. *Mākslinieku Biedrības Latvijā* [Artists' Societies in Latvia] (1934 – 1940). *Jaunākie Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīva materiālu pētījumi* [Latest Studies of the Materials of the State History Archives of Latvia]. – *Māksla un politiskie konteksti* [Art and Political Contexts] (Rīga: Neputns, 2006), 105-108; the same referred

Secondly, like in Italy and Austria, Chambers in Latvia were presented as an alternative to a democratic parliament, however, here the development of the system of chambers was slow and was not finished until the USSR aggression in June 1940. Yet it was not kept secret that, at latest, in 1938 the Chambers were to become the central element of the new constitution of Latvia, that of Ulmanis. The next novelty was the merging of the former four Chambers into the National Council of Economy and of the latter two – into the National Council of Culture. In May 1939 both Councils together had 111 members. Ulmanis ordered them to convene a joint meeting on 12 May 1939 (100 members were present), which was declared to be the first demonstration of “the new people’s representation”. The joint meeting did not pass any decision and did not have the right to do so.

It was a show, which was not supposed to eclipse the main actor – Ulmanis – who was welcomed with a flourish of trumpets. He did not address the joint meeting, not to lessen the significance of his much more important speech, which was to be delivered at the National Theatre on 15th May, on the fifth anniversary of the coup. In the latter speech he pointed out that the Chambers and their Councils and the joint meeting of the Councils that had just taken place were the real constitutional reform: “As we continue down this road, we get closer and closer to a more direct participation of the people’s deputies in the work of the state”.¹⁶ However he also made it clear that “this road” still required much and long walking (contrary to what he had said on 11 January, 1938: “I wish and hope that this moment comes soon.”).

Not even an year later – in the spring of 1940 – “the written Constitution” was not yet ready. Addressing the Chamber of Labour (it was fully subordinated to the Ministry of Public Affairs and Minister A. Bērziņš was Ulmanis’ personal representative in the Chamber; Minister Bērziņš himself in his turn was represented in the Chamber by his secretary K. Veldre; one of the tools, by which the Ministry and Chamber controlled workers’ life were the-so-called shop stewards and collaborators, in fact – supervisors. By April 1940 there had been appointed 221 shop stewards and collaborators in plants and factories – for co-operation with the Chamber¹⁷). On 7 April, 1940 Ulmanis admitted that some kind of merging of the two above-mentioned State Councils was on the agenda: they “... will have to be tried to become organised in one joint summit...” Thus, even if “.. a joint summit...” of the Chambers was organised, that, too, would be “only clearing the way for a more perfect new political system...”¹⁸ On 15th May that year, as the sixth anniversary of the regime was celebrated, it was remarked that the above-mentioned Ulmanis’ speech

also to music: at the time of the occupation of Latvia in 1940 only one society had remained under the Chamber of Writings and Art – The Musical Society, which, pursuant to the regime’s centralisation policy, had approximately 600 members.– *Mūzika okupācijā. Latvijas mūzikas dzīve un jaunrade 1900 – 1945* [Music in Occupation. The Musical Life and Creation in Latvia 1900 – 1945] ed. Dr. Art. Arnolda Klotiņš, (Rīga, 2011).

¹⁶ “Mēs esam strādājuši rītdienai un nākotnei,” [We have Worked for Tomorrow and the Future] *Latvijas Kareivis* [Soldier of Latvia], May 17, 1939.

¹⁷ “Latvijā 76 905 organizēti strādnieki,” [There are 76 905 Organized Workers in Latvia] *Latvijas Kareivis*, April 6, 1939.

¹⁸ “Darbs ir avots spēkam un augšanai,” [Work is the Source of Strength and Growth] *Latvijas Kareivis*, April 9, 1940.

“has announced the prelude of the completion of the creation of the new constitution.”¹⁹ Only “the beginning of the end”!

The third feature that differed Latvia from Italy with regard to chambers was the absence of the above-mentioned control of a fascist party over the chambers in Latvia, because after 15 May no parties existed here: not only an authentic mass fascist party was missing, there was not even an Ulmanis' pocket party created from above here. It was an essential difference: although in his rhetoric as part of the leader's cult Ulmanis tried to model his dictatorship after Italy's example with the help of some institutions, his dictatorship did not become an authentic fascism and on 5 February 1936 the Ambassador of Italy in Latvia F. Mameli admitted: “Latvia's Government is no longer a fascist government, but a degenerate police state.”²⁰ In 1939, however, Ulmanis planned to found a new party, which might have considerably changed the autocratic nature of his regime, but would have given the regime a more mass-scale character and provided him with a new tool for the mobilisation of and control over the public. Until 1939 the regime did not have its own institutional structure or system: the regime was built on Ulmanis' cult, but Ulmanis in his turn built on control by police and on loyalty of the army and civil servants. The large Aizsargi organisation performed the functions of some kind of a party, but it itself was under strict control by the Ministry of Interior and later – also that of Public Affairs.

Ulmanis never made public his intention from above and in an artificial way to form a one and single party of the state. In May 1939 he still had doubts about the necessity of such party. On the fifth anniversary of 15 May the party system was again completely rejected in public: Minister of Interior H. Apsītis underlined that Latvia had “a strong, non-party government”.²¹ However, in all authoritarian states in Europe, neighbours Lithuania and Estonia included, there were parties created or supported by the dictators, but in Latvia the official view about such parties was still negative. Ulmanis' speech at the National Opera House on 15 May could have become an opportunity to announce his new plan to the public, but doubts about it had not been overcome yet and thus Ulmanis declared instead that the state would not return “.. to the discarded order and customs of the times of the old parties...”²² It was true: he had not the least wish to return to the system of “the old parties”, i.e. to parliamentary democracy, however the plans of forming a party subjugated to the leader matured and doubts were overcome. It was decided to establish, as Ulmanis himself called it, “...a comprehensive political organisation... in the shape of a centralised political party.” Along with the political party, a youth alliance was also to be founded.²³ (A. Bērziņš in turn wrote in exile in 1963: Ulmanis “... envisaged to establish a strong party of the state, encompassing in it both the countryside and the city. In Ulmanis' vision it was to be a party headed by himself”²⁴).

¹⁹ “Mēs stāvam uz cieša un stingra pamata,” [We are Standing on a Firm and Strong Foundation] *Latvijas Kareivis*, May 15 1940.

²⁰ E. Andersons, *Latvijas Vēsture. 1920–1940. Ārpolitika*, [The History of Latvia. 1920 – 1940. Foreign Policy], I, (Riga: Daugava, 1982), 630.

²¹ “Tieslietu Ministrijas Mēnešraksts,” [Monthly of the Ministry of Justice], 4 (1939), 868.

²² *Latvijas Kareivis*, May 17, 1939.

²³ *Kārlis Ulmanis trimdā un cietumā* [Kārlis Ulmanis in Exile and Prison], 323.

²⁴ A. Bērziņš, “Labiē gadi. Pirms un pēc 15. maija” [The Good Years. Before and after 15 May] *Grāmatu Draugs*, 1963, 245.

As we can see, the idea implied not only a centralized political party formed from above, but also a youth organisation subordinated to the party. The party was to be named The Party of People's Unity; a white hawk on a green field was chosen as its symbol and each member was supposed to wear the Namejs' ring.²⁵ The party would indeed become a mass organisation, but it would not have turned into a real mass fascist party. Mass-scale was to be ensured also from above: as A. Bērziņš admitted in 1969, "... Aizsargi organisation with its large family of members was to be integrated into the work of the new Party of People's Unity."²⁶ If the enrolment of Aizsargi into the Party was the base of the Party, the Party's youth organisation would develop in the same way: by including in it the Mazpulki, founded by Ulmanis in 1929, and making it the only youth organisation in the country: on 8 January, 1938, when addressing the Mazpulki in Riga, Ulmanis declared that on that year "... the work of uniting the youth..." must be completed "... and the youth must be given a single leadership".²⁷ (the task of installing "a single leadership" was reiterated at the end of the year,²⁸ but eventually remained unfulfilled). Ulmanis did not have time to establish the party: the autumn of 1939 came with completely unexpected developments. Even if the party was founded, the regime would have only externally acquired the face of a pro-totalitarian, mobilizing regime, in practice still remaining Ulmanis' monocacy adorned with an organisation created by the leader himself and fully subjugated to him, organisation, which would have probably increased the leader's possibilities of controlling the public, anyway.

In 1939 another idea occurred to Ulmanis: on 21 July the Cabinet of Ministers listened to and approved his proposal "... to create a position of a region's chairperson, one per each of the country's four regions..."²⁹ The motivation behind this idea was unclear, however the introduction of a new administrative structure – regions and regions' chairpersons – probably testified to a wish to subject the country to even firmer control, already on the level of regional centres. This intention, however, could have hidden also threat to Ulmanis' monocacy, if regional chairpersons became a kind of regional leaders. Same as the foundation of the party, Ulmanis did not manage to implement this plan before June 1940. At the time when the state perished, the regime looked the way it was in 1934: Ulmanis' one-person's authoritarian, even autocratic, dictatorship, which probably was the most authoritarian and yet – the simplest – of the kind in all of Europe (which does not mean that it was the most repressive), because, unlike in other anti-democratic regimes, no parliament of any kind existed in Latvia, not even a decorative one³⁰ – all other dictatorships had it – and there was not even one party, subjugated to the dictator.

²⁵ See A. Bērziņš' memoirs – "Latvija Amerikā" [Latvia in America], 23rd November, 1966; the picture of the hawk was used already in November 1938 during the celebrations of the 29th anniversary of Latvia's independence, when "The Leader's Badge" was made. D. Hanovs, V. Tēraudkalns, Telpa Laiks, *Vadonis: autoritārisma kultūra Latvijā* [Time, Space, Leader: the Culture of Authoritarianism in Latvia] 1934 – 1940 (Rīga: Zinātne, 2012), 225.

²⁶ Butulis, "Sveiki, Aizsargi!," 75.

²⁷ "Vienotu vadību jaunatnei," [A Single Leadership for the Youth] *Rīts*, January 9, 1938.

²⁸ In November 1938 the regime's official newspaper *Sējējs* wrote that all other youth organisations, with the exception of Mazpulki, "... will not be tolerated much longer." A. Baumanis, "Tautas vadonis Kārlis Ulmanis," [Leader of the People Kārlis Ulmanis] *Sējējs*, 11 (1938), 1128.

²⁹ LVVA, f. 1313.f., 1. apr., 140. l., sheet 169.

³⁰ Lawyer A. Alnis emphasised that Ulmanis' regime was superior to the National Socialists regime in Germany, because in Latvia there was not even the Germany's type of a formal parliament – Reichstag – and Ulmanis' power was not limited – even in a purely decorative way – by anything: it was indivisible and unlimited. A. Alnis, "No parlamentārisma", 807.