

Estonia

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Riigikogu Elections

Estonia's party system streamlined following the Riigikogu elections on 6 March. Only four political parties remained represented in parliament, bringing the effective number of parties down to 3.8 (from 4.4 at the start of the previous parliament). The combined vote share of the ruling coalition, comprising of the market-liberal Reform Party (RE) and the conservative Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL), increased slightly (by 3.4 percentage points) and it returned to power with a reinforced majority. Apart from the Estonian Greens and the People's Union that were left out of the parliament after suffering from internal conflicts and corruption scandals respectively (see Sikk 2011: 962), the Centre Party (KE) lost most votes while the Social Democrats (SDE) saw the biggest increase in support. The overall volatility was moderate at 12.9 per cent and turnout increased marginally compared to previous parliamentary elections.

Internet voting was used for the fifth time in nationwide elections and for the second time in parliamentary elections, and saw a striking increase in popularity. Almost a quarter (24.3 per cent) of valid votes were cast online, compared to 5.5 per cent in previous parliamentary elections and 15.8 per cent in 2009 local elections. For the first time, internet voting was challenged in the Supreme Court by a major party – KE, which share of internet votes lagged far behind its overall support. It filed an appeal to annul election results arguing that internet voting is unreliable and based on different standards than paper ballot voting. The court rejected the appeal, as well as a later appeal by Tallinn city council (led by KE) to abolish internet voting in municipal elections.

The coalition had been very stable over two years – no minister had left after the parting of SDE in June 2009. In their campaigns, RE and IRL tried to capitalize on their successful record in the government, especially managing the recession reasonably well, joining the Eurozone in 2011 and returning the country to robust growth at the end of 2010. This was most clearly the case with the Reform Party that campaigned on the popular appeal of Prime

Minister Andrus Ansip and the party's image as an experienced safe pair of hands and a reliable safeguard against the allegedly populist policies of KE. IRL put forward more novel ideas, such as the abolition of university tuition fees and top up pensions for parents of children. Even though the party managed to increase its vote share, it was mired in an open conflict between factions based on its constituent parts at the time of merger in 2006, with (the less conservative and more pragmatic) Res Publica wing gaining an upper hand to the dismay of many long-standing activists and MPs from the national-conservative Pro Patria wing. Around two thirds of national and district top candidates had formerly been affiliated to Res Publica. In an unrelated development, the long time party leader and twice former prime minister Mart Laar surprisingly declared in September his intention to step down after the party congress in early 2012.

The relatively poor performance of KE can partly be blamed on a scandal surrounding Edgar Savisaar, the party's long-time leader and the mayor of Tallinn. In January, the Estonian Security Police confirmed to the government security committee that Savisaar had secretly asked Russian officials for donations and was hence considered to be a Russian 'agent of influence'. Savisaar argued that he had only sought funding from Russian Railways for the building of a new Russian Orthodox Church in Tallinn but according to the Security Police, he had also solicited money for his party. The scandal mostly hurt the party's fortunes amongst ethnic Estonians, and less so amongst Russian-speakers, amongst whom KE has been by far the most popular party. Criticism of Savisaar started to mount within the party after he failed for the third time to form a government following elections. At the party congress in August, he faced a serious leadership challenge from Jüri Ratas, once his protégé and the mayor of Tallinn while Savisaar was a cabinet minister. Ratas gathered 41 per cent of votes in the congress, highlighting tensions within the party known for its dominant leader.

While the increasing popularity of SDE may partly be explained by the waning fortunes of KE, perhaps more important was the successful leadership change in October 2011 (Sikk 2011: 961-2). Sven Mikser, a former Minister of Defence and a defector from KE in 2005, managed to capitalize on the weakening public image of Savisaar as an opposition leader with genuine prospects of forming a government. Somewhat bookish in looks but surprisingly charismatic, Mikser also solidified SDE's image as a European social democratic party, finalizing the transition from the former vaguely centrist "Moderates".

The coalition talks proceeded fast and the new government entered office exactly one month after elections. Although RE also had a meeting with SDE shortly after elections, real negotiations only took place between RE and IRL. The composition of the cabinet changed little – out of 13 cabinet ministers, only four were new appointments with further two ministers changing responsibilities; no portfolio changed hands between the two governing parties.

Table 1. Elections for the *lower chamber/upper chamber*⁷

Date of election:	6 March 2011					
Total number of seats	101					
Electorate:	913 346					
Total votes cast:	580 264 (63.5%)					
Total valid votes:	575 133 (99.1%)					
Party	Votes		Change since 2007	Seats		Change since 2007
	N	%		N	%	
<i>Reformierakond</i> / Reform Party (RE)	164 255	28.6	+0.8	33	32.7	+2
<i>Keskerakond</i> / Centre Party (KE)	134 124	23.3	-2.8	26	25.7	-3
<i>Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit</i> / Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL)	118 023	20.5	+2.6	23	22.8	+4
<i>Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond</i> / Social Democratic Party (SDE)	98 307	17.1	+6.5	19	18.8	+9
<i>Eestimaa Rohelised</i> / Estonian Greens (ER)	21 824	3.8	-3.3	0		-6
<i>Rahvaliit</i> / People's Union (RL)	12 184	2.1	-5.0	0		-6
<i>Vene Erakond Eestis</i> / Russian Party of Estonia (VEE)	5 029	0.9	+0.7	0		0
<i>Eesti Kristlikud Demokraadid</i> / Estonian Christian Democrats (EKD)	2 934	0.5	-1.2	0		0
<i>Iseseisvuspartei</i> / Independence Party (IP)	2 571	0.4	+0.2	0		0
Individual candidates	15 882	2.8	+2.7	0		0

Presidential elections

For the first time since 1992, a presidential candidate managed to gather enough support in Riigikogu to avoid convoking an Electoral College. No candidate had garnered the support of two thirds of MPs in three rounds of voting in the parliament in 1996, 2001 and 2006, while the first post-independence presidential election in 1992 saw a popular vote followed by a decisive vote in the parliament between two front runners. RE, IRL and SDE had declared support for the re-election bid of the incumbent, Toomas Hendrik Ilves and given their parliamentary strength, the result was essentially a foregone conclusion. Yet, in a surprising move, KE nominated Indrek Tarand, a maverick independent MEP, elected in a sweeping show of force in 2009 (see Pettai 2010). The nomination was puzzling as Tarand was not only unaffiliated with KE, but in the past had been openly unsympathetic to the party. His candidacy did trigger some debates between the two candidates, but these failed to bring about surprises in the final outcome: on 29 August Ilves defeated Tarand in a single round of voting, with 73 votes against 25.

Table 2. Cabinet composition of Ansip III

For the composition of Ansip III on 1 January 2011, see Sikk (2011: 960).

Table 3. Cabinet composition of Ansip IV

A. The party composition of Ansip IV

Date of investiture: 6 April 2011

Party ¹	Number and percentage of parliamentary seats		Number and percentage of cabinet posts	
<i>Reformierakond</i> / Reform Party (RE)	33	32.7	7	53.8
<i>Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit</i> / Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL)	23	22.8	6	46.2

B. Cabinet members of Ansip IV ²

Prime Minister / *Peaminister*: Andrus Ansip (1956 male, RE)

Minister of Justice / *Justiitsminister*: Kristen Michal (1975 male, RE)

Minister of Foreign Affairs / *Välisminister*: Urmas Paet (1974 male, RE)

Minister of Defence / *Kaitseminister*: Mart Laar (1960 male, IRL)

Minister of Internal Affairs / *Siseminister*: Ken-Marti Vaher (1974 male, IRL)

Minister of Finance / *Rahandusminister*: Jürgen Ligi (1959 male, RE)
Minister of Economic Affairs and Communications / *Majandus- ja kommunikatsiooniminister*:
Juhan Parts (1966 male, IRL)
Minister of Education and Research / *Haridus- ja teadusminister*: Jaak Aaviksoo (1954 male,
IRL)
Minister of Culture / *Kultuuriminister* : Rein Lang (1957 male, RE)
Minister of Social Affairs / *Sotsiaalminister*: Hanno Pevkur (1977 male, RE)
Minister of Environment / *Keskkonnaminister*: Keit Pentus (1976 female, RE)
Minister of Agriculture / *Põllumajandusminister*: Helir-Valdor Seeder (1964 male, IRL)
Minister of Regional Affairs / *Regionaalminister*: Siim Valmar Kiisler (1965 male, IRL)

Issues in national politics

In January, Estonia became a member of the Eurozone, after successfully curbing inflation levels while keeping the government debt and budget deficit below the Maastricht criteria throughout the recession. In 2010, Estonian economy had become the fastest growing in the EU, GDP growth peaking at 9.5 per cent year-on-year in the first quarter. However, high levels of inflation returned (5 per cent annually) and relatively high levels of unemployment persisted. An immediate consequence of joining the Eurozone was the need to participate in joint efforts to stabilize the common currency in the face of the debt crisis. The parliament voted in favour of accession to the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) on 29 September. Even though the debate on the issue did not create political tensions on the scale seen in some other Eurozone countries (e.g. Finland and Slovakia), the decision was not unanimous as 18 MPs (mostly KE) voted against budgetary commitments totalling nearly 2 billion Euros; the opponents wished to put “Estonian teachers, police officers, medical staff and emergency services” before big European banks, who were seen as the main beneficiaries of EFSF. After Indrek Teder, the Chancellor of Justice, had raised concerns over whether the resolution was constitutional, the initial bill was amended on the eleventh hour so that the delegation by the parliament of decisions on individual guarantees to the government was avoided.

A scandal rocked IRL as a couple of its senior figures were implicated in a scheme mediating residence permits to foreign businessmen for a fee. State television reported in November that more than 100 businessmen mostly of Russian background, some of them with criminal background, had made bogus investments in companies registered in an apartment owned by senior figures in IRL. According to Estonian law, those who have made genuine investments

in the country totalling at least 63,900 Euros may apply for a residence permit that by extension allows visa free travel in the Schengen Area. One of those involved in running the “investment office” was Indrek Raudne, one of the key figures behind the launch of Res Publica in 2002, who stepped down from the parliament and left the party.

Constitutional amendment

In April, the parliament passed a constitutional amendment proposed by the president that removed from the Constitution clauses on the appointment of the Commander of the Defence Forces. The amendment effectively transferred the right to appoint the Commander from the parliament to the government. The constitutional amendment was passed following an approval by two consecutive parliaments – it had been passed already in 2008, without gaining enough support to be passed right away. KE remained opposed the amendment, arguing that it weakens parliamentary civil control over the defence forces.

Source and further information

Pettai, V. (2010). Estonia. *European Journal of Political Research* 49(7–8): 955–963.

Sikk, A. (2011). Estonia. *European Journal of Political Research* 50: 960–964.