

# Will the Centre Party manage to retain office in Estonia?

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ANALYSIS

958 571 Estonians, 77 881 of whom are living outside of the Baltic State will be electing their 101 MPs in the Riigikogu, the only House of Parliament, on 3rd March next. 1 099 people from 10 different political parties and 16 independents are officially in the race in this election.

Estonians can vote early electronically as of 21st February. To fulfil their civic duty this way citizens must firstly have the following – apart from a computer (or a mobile phone) on which a special programme has been installed, an e-ID card and two pin codes, the first enabling his identification at the beginning of the voting procedure, and the second to make an electronic signature. The voter then has to go on the site [www.valimised.ee](http://www.valimised.ee) managed by the Electoral Commission, which is responsible for running the Internet vote, to post his electronic envelope. Cyber-voters can review their vote as many times as they want or finally decide to go to ballot the on the official day of voting; in this case the voting slip they put in the ballot cancels their previous e-vote.

296 109 people i.e. one third of voters accomplished their civic duty early in the last general elections on 1st March 2015, 176 491 of whom using the e-vote.

Since November 2016 Estonia has been led by Juri Ratas (Centre Party, K) with, apart from his own party, a government comprising the Social Democratic Party (SDE) and Pro-Patria (I). The Reform Party (ER), which held office from 2005 to 2016 is going to try and make its return as head of government during these elections.

According to the most recent poll by Kantar Emor undertaken between 24th and 29th January, the Reform Party is due to come out ahead with 26.3% of the vote. It is due to take the lead over the Centre Party (K), which is due to win 24.4%. The People's

Conservative Party (EKRE) is due to come third with 18.2%, the Social Democratic Party 9.7% of the vote; Pro-Patria 7.5% and the new party, Estonia 200, 7.2%.

According to the polls Estonians (including the supporters of both of these parties) would prefer a government coalition bringing the Centre Party (K) together with the Reform Party (ER) after the elections on 3rd March next. The two parties disagree however on two major issues: fiscal policy and the use of Russian in education. They have governed together already though at local level, in the country's biggest town, Tartu.

Kadri Simson, Deputy Chair of the Centre Party declared that his party, for its part, wanted to work with the present tripartite government again. One third of Estonians want the outgoing Prime Minister to retain his seat as head of government (35%), 18% would like to see the leader of the Reform Party, Kaja Kallas replace him.

In the last local elections, which took place on 15th October 2017, the Centre Party took the lead with 27.3% of the vote, ahead of the Reform Party (19.5%) and the Social Democratic Party (10.4%) and Pro-Patria (8%). The People's Conservative Party won 6,7% of the vote.

## THE POPULISTS OF THE PEOPLE'S CONSERVATIVE PARTY READY FOR AN AMBUSH

As in many European countries, Estonia has not been spared the rise of the populists. Mart Helme, the

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leader of the People's Conservative Party (EKRE), a Europhobic party which says it defends a Europe of nations, when it is not demanding Estonia's withdrawal from the European Union, repeats that "the traditional parties do not dare to talk of what people are really thinking," and maintains that his party is the only one to give Estonians a chance to control immigration, so that their children and grandchildren can live in the "Estonian spirit", in a country where people speak Estonian.

The People's Conservative Party could come third in the election and thereby make the formation of the future government difficult. The Centre Party, Reform Party and the Social Democratic Party have declared that they would refuse to take part in a government coalition alongside the People's Conservative Party. It is possible however that the latter does not want to integrate government at all.

The party programme entitled For Estonia, defends conservative values: the reduction of the number of abortions without medical justification, inclusion in the Constitution, the fact that marriage can only be between a man and woman. The party also wants to make Estonian the only language used in the education system and to have lessons on integrity, ethics and the Estonian spirit in schools. It is opposed to refugee quotas and is demanding that foreigners' access to Estonian nationality be rationed. It also tried to organise, on the same day as the election a referendum on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, Regular Migration (also called the Marrakech Pact) adopted on 19th December 2018 by the United Nations General Assembly. Pro Patria was also against the adoption of the Compact when it was voted upon in parliament on 26th November last – the Reform Party chose to abstain.

From an economic point of view the People's Conservative Party hopes to extend the 9% VAT rate, as well as exonerate medicines and other necessary equipment for handicapped people from this tax. It also wants to reduce taxes on gas and electricity, and on renewable energies, as well as on alcohol; a reduction in taxes which, according to

the party, would save Estonians 70€ per month, i.e. 840€ per year.

### **WHICH OF THE CENTRE PARTY OR THE REFORM PARTY WILL COME OUT AHEAD ON 3RD MARCH NEXT?**

The battle between the Centre Party and the Reform Party is very much like that between left and right. The first is defending a wider distribution of wealth, whilst the second is more liberal in attitude.

Juri Ratas supports an extraordinary increase in retirement pensions (100€), social aid granted to families with children, help distributed for healthcare and access by young people to property. The outgoing Prime Minister also wants to develop infrastructures by building new roads and extending free public transport across the entire country. In his opinion the Estonians' choice is a simple one: either they choose the Centre Party, which wants to develop and enrich the middle classes, supporting the country's progress towards being a strong, protective State, or Estonia will return to Pro-Patria's rule, which will implement a policy that will only benefit the wealthiest. The Centre Party also supports the election of the President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage. At present the head of State is elected every five years by indirect suffrage, i.e. by Parliament (if MPs do not manage to agree on a name) or by an electoral college of 101 members of Parliament and representatives of the local councils.

For the leader of the Reform Party, Kaja Kallas, taxes and the economy are the main issues in these general elections. "Fiscal policy has been based on the Estonia's economic success. Low taxes, the simplicity and fairness of the system have led to the creation of many jobs and the increase in Estonian purchasing power. In just two years, the Centre Party has succeeded in messing this system up and making it unfair. If we return to office, we shall make the tax system simple and fair again," she declared.

The Reform Party hopes "to increase the Estonians' income." It is asking for an increase in teachers'

salaries for this to rise to 2000€ by 2023, an increase of 200€ on the average retirement pensions over the next four years and tax exemption for working pensioners. It is proposing the simplification of the tax system, the development of infrastructures, innovation and the business environment, a reduction in State intervention in the economy and a reduction in the number of civil servants. Finally, it supports the privatisation of some businesses such as Enefit Green which controls the energy sector, Ent Eesti Teed, the roads, Levira Services, the digital economy and Omniva, the postal service.

"I am going to give you three reasons to vote for the Reform Party: because it can guarantee that Estonia will not be a country closed in on itself, but one that is open and that will move forward; because the party will also guarantee freedom and not make the State its priority and finally because it will turn Estonia into a country where fighting for a better life is not reprehensible, where everyone can develop as he wants and where taxation is simple and fair," repeats Kaja Kallas. The opposition leader likes to recall that Estonia is the country with the highest inflation rate in the EU and that half of the Estonians (52%) deem the present tax system to be unfair.

With the slogan 'A better future', the Reform Party has described the choice put to the Estonians on 3rd March next: either we move forward and remain a part of the West or we regress and remain a country of the East.

#### THE OTHER PARTIES

The Social Democratic Party has focused its campaign on education, the family, the development of the State and the green economy. "In a country like Estonia, which has few natural resources, education is the first economic policy," declared its leader Jevgeni Ossinovski. The Social Democrats hope to increase investments in education and research and to have at least one Estonian university feature as one of the best 100 in the world. The party chose as its slogan, "Everyone counts".

"We shall not increase taxes. We shall make taxes fairer, so that the poorest pay less," reads the Social Democratic programme. The party wants to increase average retirement pensions to 700€ and exempt this from income tax, it hopes to bring monthly incomes, of which the first 500€ will be exempt from tax up to 2000€ (it lies at 1,200€ at the moment). This would concern 90% of Estonians. According to Jevgeni Ossinovski, this exemption should increase with the increase of the minimum wage. Today this lies at 500€, and it is due to increase to 540€ during 2019.

Estonia 200 (Eesti 200), a party created on 3rd November last and led by Kristina Kallas might disrupt the political landscape. The party hopes for a better integration of Russian speakers into Estonian society and to reform the State in order to abolish inequalities in the areas of education, healthcare and social services. It is proposing to exonerate company spending in support of their employees of taxation and supports the expansion of Estonian businesses abroad.

The party refuses to position itself either on the right or the left. "We are liberals with conservative values. This however is a somewhat forced definition because we offer left and right-wing solutions," declared one of the executives, Kristiina Tonnison.

#### THE ESTONIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Riigikogu, the only house in Parliament, comprises 101 members, elected every four years by a proportional vote within the 12 multi-member constituencies comprising at least 5 seats (Lääne-Viru) and a maximum of 15 (Harju and Rapla). The voting method is proportional, and voters can choose the order of preference of the candidates on their voting slip.

For the distribution of seats, a quota is established for each constituency by dividing the number of valid votes by the number of MPs allocated to the constituency. Every candidate who wins a number of votes over this quotient is declared elected. Seats

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that are not attributed at constituency level, called compensation mandates, are distributed according to the modified d'Hondt method between the parties whose candidates have won at least 5% of the national total of votes cast.

Candidates running in the general election, who must be aged at least 21, can stand under the label of a political party or with the support of the voters. Each candidate has to pay a deposit, which is given back if he or she wins a number of votes equal to half of the quotient of his or her constituency, and if the party to which he or she belongs wins at least 5% of the vote at national level.

6 political parties won more than 5% of the vote in the last election on 1st March 2015 and are represented at present in the Riigikogu:

- the Reform Party (ER), founded in 1994 by former President of the Central Bank of Estonia and former Prime Minister (2002-2005) Siim Kallas, originally two parties (the Reform Party and the Liberal Democratic Party) and led since April 2018 by his daughter, Kaja Kallas. The main opposition party, it won 30 seats;
- the Centre Party (K), founded in 1991 and led by Prime Minister Juri Ratas. Lying to the left of the political scale, extremely popular amongst the

country's Russian-speaking minority, it won 27 seats;

- the Social Democratic Party (SDE), former People's Moderate Party (M) created in 1990 and led by Jevgeni Ossinovski, won 15 seats.

- Pro-Patria Union-Res Publica (IRL), alliance of two conservative parties (Pro-Patria and Res Publica) founded on 4th June 2006 becoming Pro-Patria (Isamaa I) on 2nd June 2018. Led by Helir-Valdor Seeder, it won 14 seats;

- the Free Party (EVA), centre-right, led by Kaul Nurm, with 8 seats;

- the People's Conservative Party (EKRE), a populist party led by Mart Helme, with 7 seats.

In Estonia, the President of the Republic is elected for 5 years by indirect suffrage, ie by Parliament or (if the MPs do not manage to agree on a name) by an electoral college of 101 members of Parliament and representatives of the local councils. The 101 members of the Riigikogu elected Kersti Kaljulaid on 3rd October 2016 as President of the Republic of Estonia. The only candidate running, she won 81 votes. Her appointment to the supreme office, a first for a woman in Estonia, ended an electoral saga which almost led the country to the brink of a constitutional crisis.

Reminder of the results of the most recent elections on 1st March 2015 in Estonia

Participation : 64.20%

Political parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of seats
Reform Party (ER)	158 970	27,7	30
Centre Party (K)	142 458	24,80	27
Social Democratic Party (SDE)	87 189	15,20	15
Pro-Patria-Res Publica (IRL)	78 699	13,70	14
Free Party (EVA)	49 882	8,70	8
People's Conservative Party (EKRE)	46 772	8,10	7
Greens	5 193	0,90	0
People's Unity Party	2 289	0,40	0
Independence Party	1 047	0.20	0
United Left Party	764	0,10	0
Independents	887	0,20	0

Source : <https://www.valimised.ee/en/archive/riigikogu-elections>

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