

Alar Karis, only candidate for President of the Republic in Estonia

On 30 August, at 1 p.m., the 101 members of the Riigikogu, the single chamber of Parliament, were called upon to vote for the next President of the Republic. If they fail to do so, this responsibility will fall to the Electoral College, which comprises the 101 MPs and the 107 members of the representative assemblies of Estonian municipalities. Their vote must be taken before 25 September.

Usually, the candidates for the supreme office are determined in the spring, around April, but the previous long and difficult election in 2016 left its mark and made the political parties very cautious.

On 3 October 2016, Kersti Kaljulaid became the first woman President of the Republic in Estonia. She was elected by the 101 members of the Riigikogu. She was the only candidate in the race and received 81 votes. Her appointment to the supreme office was the conclusion of an electoral soap opera that almost brought the country to the brink of a constitutional crisis.

On 25 September 2016, Estonia found itself in a situation unseen since the country's return to independence in 1991, when the Electoral College (Valimiskogu) failed to elect a new president. This was unprecedented in a country in which all heads of State have been appointed by this assembly since 1996, when the current system of appointing the head of State was established, with the exception of the 2011 election in which Toomas Hendrik Ilves was the first Estonian president to be appointed by the Parliament. On 27 September, the parliamentary conference of presidents, comprising the chairs of the 6 political groups in the Riigikogu and the three members of the assembly's bureau, decided to support the candidacy of Kersti Kaljulaid who was officially elected six days later.

A SINGLE BIDDER

Two of the five parties represented in the Riigikogu have enough seats to field a candidate: the Centre Party (K), led by Jüri Ratas, and the Reform Party (ER) of Prime Minister Kaja Kallas. However, the votes of MPs from at least three, if not four, parties will be needed for any candidate to be elected. With the exception of the Conservative People's Party (EKRE), the parties would like to see the next President of the Republic elected by the Parliament and thus bypass the Electoral College vote.

The Reform Party and the Centre Party proposed Alar Karis as a candidate for the Presidency of the Republic. He accepted on 18 August.

Alar Karis, 63, a molecular geneticist and developmental biologist, has been director of the National Museum in Tartu since October 2017. He was Auditor General (i.e. the person in charge of auditing public accounts) between 2013 and 2017 after having been rector of the University of Tartu from 2007 to 2012.

It should be noted that both main parties have renounced their own candidate - the outgoing head of State, Kersti Kaljulaid, for the Reform Party and Tarmo Soomere, President of the Academy of Sciences, for the Centre Party - and each has accepted a compromise candidate to achieve a quick election of the next president.

However, the 2 main parties have only altogether 59 votes, i.e. 9 less than the number required for their candidate to be elected. In the other parties, the leaders of Pro Patria (Isamaa, I) do not reach an agreement to support the candidacy of Alar Karis and decide to let their MPs free to vote accordingly to their consciousness.

Presidential elections in Estonia

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The same conclusion has been adopted by the Social Democrat Party (SDE) given no voting instruction.

The Centre Party and the Reform Party are quite optimistic to obtain on August 30 the nine votes needed for the election of Alar Karis.

The Conservative Party would like to present as candidate Henn Polluaas, chairman of Riigikogu. But it has only 19 MPs, i.e. 2 below the threshold required to nominate a candidate. The Party has given any instruction between blank vote or abstention.

If the Riigikogu failed to elect the president on August 30, a second round will be held on August 31 and, if needed, a third round the same day.

THE PRESIDENTIAL SEAT AND THE MEANS OF VOTING

The office of the head of state in Estonia is essentially honorary. As head of the armed forces, the President of the Republic represents the country on the international scene, concludes treaties with foreign states, and accredits and receives diplomatic representatives. The President of the Republic also has the right to draft amendments to the Constitution.

He is elected by indirect suffrage. Anyone who is at least 40 years old can stand for the highest office. To participate in the election, he or she must be nominated by at least one fifth of the 101 members of the Riigikogu, or 21 deputies. Elected for 5 years, the head of state cannot remain in office for more than two consecutive terms.

The presidential election takes place first in the Parliament. In the first round of voting, the candidate who receives at least 2/3 of the votes of the 101 deputies (i.e. 68 votes) is declared elected. If no candidate obtains this number of votes, a 2nd round is held the following day, followed by a 3rd round (with the two candidates with the highest number of votes) if necessary. If no candidate obtains enough votes to qualify for the supreme office at the end of the round, the President of the Riigikogu convenes the Electoral College (Valimiskogu) within 30 days to elect the future head of State.

During the vote of the Electoral College, new personalities can stand for the presidential election (any group gathering at least 21 members of the College can present a candidate). In this vote, any person who receives an absolute majority of votes is declared elected. If this majority is not achieved, a second round is held on the same day and the candidate who obtains the majority of votes is declared elected. Since 1996, the Electoral College has been convened four times: in 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2016 (unsuccessfully).

If the electorate fails to appoint the next President of the Republic, the 101 members of the Riigikogu are called upon to do so again. A new election must be held within 14 days.

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