



Weekly Briefing

**Estonia Political briefing:
Eyeing the 2019 parliamentary elections
E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

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Eyeing the 2019 parliamentary elections

From this September onwards, the Estonian Republic's political life will be fully focused on the next elections to the country's 101-seat unicameral parliament, the *Riigikogu*. Scheduled for **3 March 2019**, the elections will see all major political parties trying hard to pass a threshold of 5% votes nationwide. From the date of the latest elections (1 March 2015), only two political parties out of the six, which made it through to the parliament then, have managed to keep the same leaders so far. These are the growing in popularity Conservative People's Party of Estonia (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* or *EKRE*), a right-flank establishment whose ideology is driven by a mixture of extreme populism, Euroscepticism and nationalism, **and** the Estonian Free Party (*Eesti Vabaerakond* or *EV*), which, in general, represents a centre-right variation of liberal conservative movement within Estonia. Currently, both *EKRE* and *EV* are in the parliamentary opposition.

Yet another oppositional party – the Estonian Reform Party (*Eesti Reformierakond* or *ER*) – is of a different kind as compared to the aforementioned two. In November 1994, the party was founded by Siim Kallas, one of the most recognisable personality in Estonian politics, who has a remarkable history of serving for three consecutive European Commissions, being the institution's Vice-President in the two Commissions headed by José Manuel Barroso. Since 1999 until 2016, the *ER* was participating in five consecutive parliamentary coalitions, while providing the Estonian Government with six Prime Ministers to date. In principle, for a bit less than two decades, the Estonian Republic's trademark liberal economy, budgetary stability, and positive international image have been associated with the *ER*'s classic liberal approach in policy-making.

Having won the highest number of votes – 27.7% - during the 2015 parliamentary elections and converting them into 30 seats, the *ER* is naturally

focusing on its ultimate return to the country's Government after March 2019. In order to achieve what is naturally desired in politics, in April 2018, the party made a decisive move in the process of solidifying its position within the country's political spectrum – Kaja Kallas, the then Member of the European Parliament, was elected to lead the *ER*. The daughter of Siim Kallas, she has been in top-level politics from 2011, becoming a Member of the *Riigikogu*. Then, in 2014, Ms. Kallas successfully ran for the European Parliament to be one of Estonia's six Members of the European Union's parliamentary institution.

The latest groundbreaking development, associated with the *ER*'s active 'retrenching' process, came out in the form of the announcement that Marko Mihkelson, the *Riigikogu* Foreign Affairs Committee's Chairman and an unaffiliated Member of parliament, joined the *ER* on 4 September 2018 and will be "in the run-up to the *Riigikogu* elections"¹. The south Estonia-born politician, Mr. Mihkelson is one of the country's political 'heavyweights' who has been the parliament's Member from 2003. Since then and while being with another party (Pro Patria or *Isamaa*), Mr. Mihkelson has chaired a number of parliamentary Committees, including the ones on the European Union Affairs and the National Defence. In June 2017, Marko Mihkelson left *Isamaa*, becoming an unaffiliated Member of the *Riigikogu* until this very recent development.

As for **the current Estonian Government**, since November 2016, it is represented by a politically multi-faceted coalition that is quasi-unifying the centre-right with the centre-left under one 'umbrella' of the country's Government.² The already mentioned *Isamaa*, the smallest member of the coalition, contributes twelve seats to the *Riigikogu* and leads four portfolios in the cabinet (Justice, Defence, Environment, and Finance). It is an Estonian conservative political party with a long-time history of making positive differences for the country. Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union when Estonia managed to regain its independence, the *Isamaa*'s predecessors had

¹ 'Reformierakonnaga liitub Marko Mihkelson'. 4 September 2018. Available from [<https://www.reform.ee/>]

² 'Vabariigi Valitsus'. Available from [<https://www.valitsus.ee/en>]

chaired the country's Government for three times, with Dr. Mart Laar being arguably the most internationally acclaimed politician from the *Isamaa*-associated political 'palette'. Dr. Laar led the Government twice (in 1992-1994 and 1999-2002), and his cabinets effectively pioneered the European continent in introducing many crucial reforms – from flat taxes to e-governance initiatives. These days, *Isamaa* is going through a number of challenges – **from** trying to battle the party's obvious popularity deficit (the 2015 parliamentary elections saw *Isamaa* losing nine seats as compared to the 2011 results; percentage wise, it represented the downfall from 20.5% to 13.70% of total votes) **to** attempting to create a stable leadership circle (since Mart Laar had to leave the party's chairmanship in January 2012, *Isamaa* has had three other leaders with seemingly different visions on the party-building process).

The second member of the Estonian governmental coalition is the Social Democratic Party (*Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond* or *SDE*) that tries to find its niche in the political centre-left. From 1992, the *SDE* has been on and off the cabinet, and currently it is represented at the *Riigikogu* by fifteen Members, while holding five portfolios in the Government (Culture, Health and Labour, Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Entrepreneurship). A relative stability in terms of the *SDE*'s leadership, which was associated with Sven Mikser (the country's current Minister of Foreign Affairs and the *SDE*'s leader from October 2010 until May 2015), was shaken when Jevgeni Ossinovski became the party's chairman on 30 May 2015. Mr. Ossinovski, an alumnus of London School of Economics and Political Science and the son of Estonia's wealthiest person Oleg Ossinovski, has been in the Government on two occasions, having held different portfolios (initially – Education and Research, and then – Health and Labour). Considering the fact that during the 2015 parliamentary elections the *SDE* lost four seats if compared to the 2011 elections' outcome, the party has a serious hurdle to overcome in terms of holding the *status quo* on, at least. In a significant addition, back in November 2016, both the *SDE* and *Isamaa* got engaged with the then-in-deep-opposition Estonian Centre Party (*Eesti*

Keskerakond or *EK*) and voted the *ER* out from the Government. Having lost its place in the cabinet for the first time since 1999, the *ER* will not be an easy-to-negotiate-with prospective coalitional partner for both the *SDE* and *Isamaa* in March 2019.

In a final remark on the country's current governmental coalition, the *EK* represents a political party with twenty-seven Members at the *Riigikogu* and five portfolios (Prime Minister, Public Administration, Education and Research, Rural Affairs, and Economic Affairs and Infrastructure). Since 5 November 2016, when Jüri Ratas succeeded Edgar Savisaar (a monumentally ambiguous Estonian politician) to become the then biggest oppositional party's leader, it had taken less than twenty days for him to negotiate the *EK*'s key place in the dramatically reshuffled Government. Skilfully pushing the boundaries of a leftist Estonian version of cross-societal populism and building up on the *EK*'s long-term solid position in the Estonian capital city's local government, Jüri Ratas got the numbers in the *Riigikogu* and secured his premiership, seemingly until March 2019.

In August 2018, Estonian Public Broadcasting (*Eesti Rahvusringhääling* or *ERR*) reported on the latest public polls in regards of the country's political parties and their current levels of popularity. One of the ratings showed that if the *Riigikogu* elections were held these days, the *EK* would generate 27% of support, while for the oppositional *ER* the result would be around 25% (it is worthwhile noting that after Kaja Kallas assumed her leadership in the party back in April 2018, the *ER*'s ratings rose up to 33%).³ Intriguingly, the same poll underlined the relative political 'health' of the existing coalition – a government of the *EK*, the *SDE* and *Isamaa* would be supported by 43% of Estonian citizens; the opposition, with the *ER* and *EKRE* in it, would generate only 35% of votes, keeping in mind that the struggling *EV* would not make it to the *Riigikogu* with its existing rating of 2%.⁴

³ 'August ratings: Centre Party ahead as Reform's downward trend continues'. 29 August 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/857102/august-ratings-centre-party-ahead-as-reform-s-downward-trend-continues>]

⁴ Ibid.

Another August poll, conducted by a different organisation but also reported by the *ERR*, did confirm the tendency – the *EK*, *ER* and *EKRE* are on the top with the popular support being detected with correspondingly 23.8%, 29.8% and 21.2% of prospective votes⁵ – even though the two major political parties ‘swopped’ the positions in this poll as compared to the previously mentioned. As for the *SDE* and *Isamaa*, this survey underlined their ‘junior’ status for any prospective coalition with correspondingly 12.7% and 5.2% of votes, which the two parties would get if the elections were scheduled for tomorrow.⁶

In short, there is a likelihood that the next parliamentary elections in Estonia will bring a number of surprises, be it in the process of coalition building or the outcome wise. In the following political briefings and closer to March 2019, a content-based discussion on differences between major Estonian political parties will be offered. In the meantime, since 24 February 1989 when the blue, black and white National Flag was hoisted at the Tall Hermann Tower in Tallinn, the Republic of Estonia has successfully managed to maintain the practice of holding free, general, uniform and direct elections of the *Riigikogu*. The March 2019 elections will not bring any change in this respect.

⁵ ‘August party ratings: Reform, Centre, EKRE remain most popular’. 23 August 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/855744/august-party-ratings-reform-centre-ekre-remain-most-popular>]

⁶ *Ibid.*