






## **Weekly Briefing**

**Estonia Political briefing:**  
**The pre-elections ‘talks’ gear up in different dimensions**  
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## The pre-elections ‘talks’ gear up in different dimensions

As specified in the previous political briefing – September 2018 – Estonian politics has already entered a distinct pre-elections phase, gearing up for the March 2019 parliamentary elections. Evidently and predictably, the overall debate is moderated by the following two main factors: **continuation of educational reform** and **budgetary issues**.

### The educational reform as a political moderator

Arguably, the process deserves to be described using **the** definite article – in Estonia, **the** reform on education adopted a *perpetuum mobile* effect since the country had regained its independence in 1991. For 27 years to date, the aim of Estonian policy-makers has been on establishing a working as well as pragmatic connection that would conceptually and practically interlink ‘education’ with ‘societal integration’. Having been implemented not without noticeable general successes,<sup>1</sup> the educational reform – due to its distinct continuous mode – has rarely had a chance to be tested by time, even though, in 2001, *OECD* conducted a highly informative but rather descriptive review of the Estonian national policy for education<sup>2</sup>.

At this moment, yet another prospective attempt to politically ‘tackle’ the education has a **focus** on finding a solution that would allow for comprehensive Estonian-language teaching in the Russian-language educational establishments. In 1993, the Estonian Parliament, *Riigikogu*, passed a major normative document on *Primary and Secondary Education*, which provided for the Estonian language to be recognised as the official language of education in the country, however, as noted by Mihkel Lees, “as a result of public discussion,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, a PISA-originated study, as reported, confirmed that “the [academic] results of Estonian 15-year-olds are the best in Europe and among the strongest in the entire world”. See ‘PISA study: the Estonian basic education is the best in Europe’. December 2016. Available from [<http://estonianworld.com/knowledge/oecd-estonian-elementary-education-best-europe/>].

<sup>2</sup> ‘Reviews of National Policies for Education: Estonia’. 2001. Available from [<https://www.curriculum.ut.ee/sites/default/files/sh/oecdstonia.pdf>].

Russian was also allowed in middle schools”<sup>3</sup>. The current *status quo* has been framed up by a number of historico-normative developments – **from** the 1997-2007 *Activity Plan* that was adopted to get closer to a unified Estonian education system **to** a 2007 Government-issued “step-by-step plan to fully implement Estonian as the educational language”<sup>4</sup>.

During one of the last month’s plenary sessions at the *Riigikogu*, Viktoria Ladõnskaja-Kubits, a Russian-born prominent Estonian politician and a Vice-Chairman of the *Isamaa*<sup>5</sup>, while noting that the country decisively moves towards establishing a united Estonian-language system of education, argued on the importance of avoiding confrontation along the road<sup>6</sup>. In a balanced way, she stated that

*Russians in Estonia must be given a feeling of confidence that even in Estonian school the child will not lose their identity, will not become alienated from their mother and father and their ancestral roots. [...] And the main thing, Estonians must be given the feeling of confidence that the Estonian language will be preserved through the ages.*<sup>7</sup>

The same report quotes Hannes Mets, director of the *Ida-Virumaa* Vocational Education Centre who noted that “of the 2,350 students studying at the center 207 are studying in Estonian and the rest in Russian”, adding that “there is a major shortage of teachers of specialist skills able to teach in two languages, and to have such teachers available in the future they must be trained already now”<sup>8</sup>. As described at length in the September 2018 society development briefing, the *Ida-Virumaa*-related integrational issues are directly linked with the factor of the Russian language that is considered the first language for the vast majority of the **county’s** population.

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<sup>3</sup> Mihkel Lees, ‘Estonian Education System 1990-2016: Reforms and their impact’. 2016. Available from [[http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Estonian-Education-System\\_1990-2016.pdf](http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Estonian-Education-System_1990-2016.pdf)].

<sup>4</sup> Mihkel Lees, ‘Estonian Education System 1990-2016: Reforms and their impact’. 2016. Available from [[http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Estonian-Education-System\\_1990-2016.pdf](http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Estonian-Education-System_1990-2016.pdf)].

<sup>5</sup> *Isamaa* is the smallest member of the current governmental coalition in Estonia, which contributes twelve seats to the *Riigikogu* and leads four portfolios in the cabinet (Justice, Defence, Environment, and Finance).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Riigikogu discusses transition to Estonian-language teaching at all levels’. 14 September 2018. Available from [[https://www.baltictimes.com/riigikogu\\_discusses\\_transition\\_to\\_estonian-language\\_teaching\\_at\\_all\\_levels/](https://www.baltictimes.com/riigikogu_discusses_transition_to_estonian-language_teaching_at_all_levels/)].

<sup>7</sup> Viktoria Ladõnskaja-Kubits in ‘Riigikogu discusses transition to Estonian-language teaching at all levels’.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Riigikogu discusses transition to Estonian-language teaching at all levels’.

In a **relatively unexpected** political ‘twist’, during this particular pre-elections period, the *Ida-Virumaa* in itself has turned out to be a subject of an all-involved heated discussion on the idea of Russian ‘cultural autonomy’. Yana Toom, an Estonian Member of the European Parliament (MEP) who was a Russian citizen before 2006, underlined her political intentions clearly: “There are several things I fight for on a day-to-day basis, including Russian-language schools and the need to consider cultural autonomy there”<sup>9</sup>. For years, Toom has been associated with a pro-Russian (for some commentators – a distinctly pro-*Kremlin*) political stance, but, since ‘cultural autonomy’ is a legal status, her latest remarks has brought the debate up to a **conceptually different** level. It did not take long for the Estonian political elites to get engaged in such an ‘upgraded’ (due to its serious political consequences) discussion. The most comprehensive indirect response to Yana Toom arrived from her colleague in the European Parliament and the country’s former long-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs (2005-2014), Urmas Paet:

*The idea of cultural autonomy is primarily conceived for small national groups that do not have such opportunities, which are open in Estonia for Russian cultural life. [...] In regards of supporting culture, the Russian cultural autonomy will not add any value. Therefore, this idea was brought forward, unfortunately, with a completely different set of goals in mind. [...] How is it going, in Estonia, with Russian and Russian-speaking cultural life? [...] For example, in the central square of Tallinn, there is a Russian theater subsidized by the Estonian state to a large extent; we have state-funded Russian-language radio and television programmes [...]; many local governments finance most of the various cultural and educational projects in Russian language. Apart from that, we have a large number of Russian-speaking private radio and television channels, literature is published in Russian, and all movies in cinemas have subtitles in Russian, etc. It means, in Estonia, there are no obstacles for*

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<sup>9</sup> Yana Toom in ‘Russian cultural autonomy needs serious consideration, says Yana Toom MEP’. 28 September 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/864989/russian-cultural-autonomy-needs-serious-consideration-says-yana-toom-mep>].

*participation in cultural life in the Russian language and in the Russian environment. On the contrary, the opportunities for this are widely supported both by the state and by local governments.*<sup>10</sup>

Within the *Riigikogu*, Kristen Michal, an oppositional politician and the former Estonian Minister in two different Governments (having held portfolios of ‘Justice’ and ‘Economic Affairs and Infrastructure’), argued that

*[t]he idea to give cultural autonomy to the Russian-speaking community of Estonia, floated by MEP Yana Toom from the ruling Center Party, would lead to the separation of [Ida]-Viru[maa] county from the rest of Estonia and cannot be supported.*<sup>11</sup>

Predictably and considering the super-swift way it took off, there will be a growing number of Estonian political heavyweights who will also have commented on the issue of Russian cultural autonomy in coming weeks, gradually converting it into a major topic in the pre-elections period.

### **Budget vs. Populism**

In September 2017, the Estonian Government approved the country’s budget for 2018, and for the first time in the country’s history the total figure was exceeding €10 billion<sup>12</sup>. One of the main features of the document was the so-called “basic exemption reform” when the tax-exempt portion of income for low and medium income earners would be increasing to €500 per month, indicating that those people whose gross monthly income was up to €1,200 would see up to €64 more net income per month (such a measure would be costing the state €182 million annually)<sup>13</sup>. Many commentators treated the 2018

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<sup>10</sup> Urmas Paet in ‘Урмас Паэт: в Эстонии нет необходимости в культурной автономии для русских’. 27 September 2018. Available from [<https://rus.postimees.ee/6415920/urmas-paet-v-estonii-net-neobhodimosti-v-kulturnoy-avtonomii-dlya-russkih>]. Translated from a Russian-language source by author.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Estonian MP: Cultural autonomy for Russian community would separate East-Viru county’. 28 September 2018. Available from [[https://www.baltictimes.com/estonian\\_mp\\_cultural\\_autonomy\\_for\\_russian\\_community\\_would\\_separate\\_east-viru\\_county/](https://www.baltictimes.com/estonian_mp_cultural_autonomy_for_russian_community_would_separate_east-viru_county/)]

<sup>12</sup> ‘The Estonian government approves 2018 state budget’. 27 September 2017. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/632847/estonian-government-approves-2018-state-budget>]

<sup>13</sup> ‘The Estonian government approves 2018 state budget’.

budget in the context of Estonia starting to drift away from its long-term status of being a flat tax country.

This year, which precedes the all-about-the-elections 2019, the Government approved the draft legislation for the 2019 state budget with a volume of expenses totalling €11.31 billion<sup>14</sup>. In details, as reported, some of the key features of the budgetary ledger have a populism-driven political ‘flavour’ and are as follows:

*- the Estonian Health Insurance Fund or Haigekassa (by the end 2017 it totalled €898 million) will be receiving about €180 million of additional funds;*

*- one third of the budget or €3.39 billion is focused on social protection (this line will experience a significant increase by €454 million, comparing to the previous budgetary year);*

*- the public transport subsidy will be increasing to €101 million from €92 million allocated for 2018;*

*- The Government-issued direct support to farmers is budgeted to be €143.9 million, in order to keep the Estonian agriculture competitive internationally.<sup>15</sup>*

In support of the proposed budget, while rebuffing the critics, the country’s Prime Minister Jüri Ratas noted that the budgetary document that was handed on to the *Riigikogu* has a nominal surplus with maintained structural balance. In addition, he argued that

*The state budget of more than €11 billion is the result of the work of diligent entrepreneurs and people who have contributed to developing our nation this year and during the last decades. [...] We are moving step by step and getting closer each year to Western Europe and the Nordic countries.<sup>16</sup>*

The coming year will clarify whether or not the current Government’s reasoning behind some of the populist budgetary *manoeuvres* was backed up

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Estonian government approves €11.3 billion 2019 state budget’. 26 September 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/864344/estonian-government-approves-11-3-billion-2019-state-budget>]

<sup>15</sup> ‘Estonian government approves €11.3 billion 2019 state budget’.

<sup>16</sup> Jüri Ratas in ‘Ratas: €11.3 billion budget for 2019 balanced, including surplus’. 27 September 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/864532/ratas-11-3-billion-budget-for-2019-balanced-including-surplus>].

by a set of solid economic provisions. Otherwise, it will be a new Government's task to prepare a new budget for 2020.