



# Weekly Briefing

**Estonia political briefing:**  
**Estonian politics in 2018: an overview**  
**E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

## China-CEE Institute

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## **Estonian politics in 2018: an overview**

On 27 March 2013, Estonia entered a new political era – since regaining its independence in 1991, the country ‘lived’ a day longer as an independent nation if compared to the period in between the two world wars<sup>1</sup>. By successfully surpassing the length of the first period of freedom – from 1918 to 1940 – the Republic of Estonia underlined its geo-strategic comfort of being a member of the EU and NATO, while remaining one of the most vocal supporters of both. In a certain way, this argument was evidently re-confirmed yet again, when Estonia, ahead of the schedule, stepped into the pre-designed-for-the-British ‘presidential shoes’ to lead the Council of the EU from 1 July to 31 December 2017. Indeed, the Estonian Presidency was planned for **2018** to ‘crown’ a very special year when the 1.3 million country was to celebrate its first centennial. However, it was not to worry, and, politically, Estonia – being generally as well as genuinely credited for the successfully arranged Presidency, which, as argued, “helped the bloc avoid a major banana peel”<sup>2</sup> at the time of Brexit – was still very busy, preparing the nation for the unknown tomorrow.

### **The ‘ghost’ of the new parliamentary elections**

By the beginning of 2018, the country’s Prime Minister Jüri Ratas had already got accustomed to his role that was assigned to him in November 2016, after a dramatic crash of the Taavi Rõivas’ second cabinet. That particular development literally threw the Estonian Reform Party (*Eesti Reformierakond* or *ER*) out of the governmental coalition, which the *ER* had been leading for **11 years (!)**, in **5 cabinets (!)** in a row, from April 2005. Moreover, the *ER* holds the highest number of seats in the current *Riigikogu* (the Parliament of Estonia), having won the previous parliamentary elections in 2015, with 27.7% of the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Estonia celebrates Lasting Liberty Day’ in *Estonian World*. 28 March 2013. Available from [<http://estonianworld.com/life/estonia-celebrated-lasting-liberty-day/>].

<sup>2</sup> ‘Estonia’s presidency: How it went’ in *Politico*. 3 January 2018. Available from [<https://www.politico.eu/article/estonias-presidency-how-it-went/>].

total votes. In such a context and in the light of the upcoming parliamentary elections in March 2019, one can easily foresee a big battle for votes **between** the Ratas-led **Estonian Centre Party** (*Eesti Keskerakond* or *EK*), a centre-left political movement that has successfully combined leftist ideas, pragmatic ideological flexibility and different variations of cross-societal populism to maintain its every-day being, **and the ER**, a centre-right party that has been known for its liberal approach in policy-making, strict vision on fiscal issues and experience in leading the country's Government from more than 12 years since January 2002.

In April 2018, in order to get ready for the new elections, the *ER* appointed a new leader – Kaja Kallas<sup>3</sup>, who was then the European Parliament's Member. Throughout the year, according to a number of different polls, the country's two biggest political parties were also maintaining their positions as the Estonian most popular parties. At the same time, in a stable European democracy – Estonia is evidently one of those – an elections winner usually needs a coalitional partner or partners to form a government. Currently, **the Estonian Government** is comprised of three political parties – the aforementioned *EK* (portfolios of the Prime Minister, Public Administration, Education and Research, Rural Affairs, and Economic Affairs and Infrastructure), the **Social Democratic Party** (*Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond* or *SDE*) that holds the portfolios of Culture, Health and Labour, Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Entrepreneurship, and **Isamaa** that represents the conservative centre-right and take care of Justice, Defence, Environment, and Finance. In a remarkable twist, the relatively stable political *palette* in Estonia was re-configured by a 'wave' of new parties, which, in the Estonian political

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<sup>3</sup> Kaja Kallas is the daughter of Siim Kallas who is one of the most recognisable politicians in Estonia. Apart from serving as the country's 14<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister (January 2002 – April 2003), Siim Kallas was an instrumental member of three (!) consecutive European Commissions, being the body's Vice-President in the two Barroso Commissions.

environment, reached its break-point in 2018. From November 2018, there has been no ‘business as usual’ for existing political formations in the country.

### A ‘wave’ of new parties

On 3 November 2018, while listing the names of 543 citizens as party members, **the Estonia 200** (*Eesti 200*) got established, eyeing the March 2019 parliamentary elections. In a way, it was the Estonian Republic’s ‘response/participation’ to/in a trend that has been ‘rocking-n-rolling’ in Europe for quite some time already – **the trend of new political parties**. As noted in one of the previous briefings, a relatively short historic period (2015-2017) was featured by 31 new political parties entering national parliaments in 23 EU Member States<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the *Riigikogu* was one of those European parliamentary bodies, too. In 2015, the country’s *intra*-parliament political spectrum was, to an extent, enhanced by the **Conservative People’s Party of Estonia** (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* or *EKRE*), an organisation of the political right that stands on the ground of extreme populism, nationalism, xenophobia and Euroscepticism, and the **Estonian Free Party** (*Eesti Vabaerakond* or *EV*), an establishment that attempts at finding a political *niche* in a combination of the centre-right politics and liberalism. Both parties ‘scored’ big time in 2015 – correspondingly, their programmes were supported by 8.1% and 8.7% of the total electorate<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the two parliamentary neophytes, each of them for different reasons, did not make it to the Government. This time, having the **Eesti 200**<sup>6</sup> in the circle of serious contenders, the situation may look promising for the *nouvelle* political movement in terms of becoming an integral part of a new governmental coalition, whichever the leading party may be.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘New Parties in Europe: A Comeback for the Parties or Just Another Symptom for Their Decline?’ in *The ECPR 2018 General Conference*, Universität Hamburg, 22-25 August 2018. Available from [<https://ecpr.eu/Events/SectionDetails.aspx?SectionID=778&EventID=115>].

<sup>5</sup> ‘Eesti Vabariik’ in *Riigikogu*. 20 March 2015. Available from [<http://rk2015.vvk.ee/voting-results.html>].

<sup>6</sup> The ‘Eesti 200’’s political background and the etymology of the party’s name were extensively described in the November 2018 Political Briefing.

Speculatively, in October 2018, the Eesti 200 was receiving plenty of educated and not-so-educated *guesstimations* in regards of the party's level of popularity – there were even calls that it was on the level of attracting about 9% of the total as well as prospective votes. Therefore, the results of the latest poll on the parties' popularity were impatiently awaited by many in Estonia. Commissioned by Eesti Meedia to be conducted by Kantar Emor, an online poll, which was announced in November, underlined the two facts: **firstly**, the ER and the EK are still the country's most popular political parties (correspondingly, with 29% and 24.7%); **secondly**, the Eesti 200, from the ground zero, is indeed enjoying a high level of popular support – 8.5%<sup>7</sup>. Yet another November-issued poll, conducted by Turu-uuringute AS, a Tallinn-based independent research company, confirmed the same tendency, but 'swopped' the leading parties with each other (the EK – 33% and the ER – 23%). As for the Eesti 200, the latter poll showed 8% as the party's level of support, even placing it ahead of the SDE<sup>8</sup>. Such a development may lead to a different configuration for the new Estonian Government to be established after March 2019 – especially if one considers the fact that the finale of 2018 was not the brightest time for the current governmental coalition, which had to experience (surviving only just) a major crisis.

### **Crisis? Crisis! What Crisis?**<sup>9</sup>

While the world was approaching a big event – *Intergovernmental Conference on the Global Compact for Migration*<sup>10</sup> – that was scheduled to take place in Marrakech on 10-11 December 2018, the Government of Estonia had to sort out a truly compact coalitional crisis. On 15 November 2018, in order to

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<sup>7</sup> 'Poll: Estonia 200 now fifth most popular party' in *ERR*. 15 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/877211/poll-estonia-200-now-fifth-most-popular-party>].

<sup>8</sup> Urmet Kook, 'Eesti 200 võib nurjata Reformierakonna valimisvõidu' in *ERR*. 19 November 2018. Available from [<https://www.err.ee/877234/eesti-200-voib-nurjata-reformierakonna-valimisvoidu>].

<sup>9</sup> The briefing's title is a wordplay based on the title of the fourth album by the English rock band *Supertramp*, released in 1975, *Crisis? What Crisis?*

<sup>10</sup> 'Intergovernmental Conference on the Global Compact for Migration'. Available from [<https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/intergovernmental-conference-2018>].

establish the Estonian Republic's vision on whether or not the country should support the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*<sup>11</sup>, which is planned for adoption at the aforementioned Marrakech Conference, the Estonian Government met to discuss the matter. However, after Sven Mikser (the Minister of Foreign Affairs) had proposed that the cabinet should support the document, another member of the Government, Urmas Reinsalu (the Minister of Justice) expressed his opinion that the cabinet should reject it. On the same day, recognising the difficult situation, the country's Prime Minister Jüri Ratas stated that

[w]hen we formed this coalition, we agreed upon consensus decision-making. Unfortunately, consensus was not achieved today. [...] Comprehensive management of migration is important for all countries, and we assure that European democratic principles are reflected in Estonian laws today and it will remain so in the future as well.<sup>12</sup>

Next day, Jevgeni Ossinovski, the Chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which holds five governmental portfolios (Culture, Health and Labour, Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Entrepreneurship), expressed his vision that the Prime Minister should dismiss Minister Reinsalu<sup>13</sup>. It was a clear sign that the Estonian Government had entered a period of coalitional turmoil. Trying to find a way to prevent the cabinet from slumping even lower, the SDP proposed that, instead of the Government, it should be now up to the *Riigikogu* to decide on the country's participation in the new migration framework<sup>14</sup>. Almost immediately, Kaja Kallas, the Chairwoman of the ER, reacted on the

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<sup>11</sup> It is informally known as the UN Migration Pact.

<sup>12</sup> Jüri Ratas in 'The government could not reach consensus on the UN migration pact'. 15 November 2018. Available from [<https://www.valitsus.ee/en/news/government-could-not-reach-consensus-un-migration-pact>].

<sup>13</sup> Jevgeni Ossinovski in 'Ossinovski demanding Reinsalu's resignation'. 16 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/877521/ossinovski-demanding-reinsalu-s-resignation>].

<sup>14</sup> 'To solve government crisis, let Riigikogu decide on UN compact, says SDE' in *ERR*. 19 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/878149/to-solve-government-crisis-let-riigikogu-decide-on-un-compact-says-sde>].

development with a statement that her political party is ready to take over the cabinet<sup>15</sup>.

Having been monitoring, with patience, how the heated cabinet-level discussion was getting unfolded, President Kersti Kaljulaid decided to interfere, calling for her meetings with the leaders of all major political parties, including those in the opposition. After the meetings had taken place, the President's reflection was explicitly clear, outlining the framework where the final decision on the issue would be eventually made:

We must recall that our regime is a parliamentary democracy. [...] I believe that it would be honest, if you see that there is no other way out of this jam, to hand this question over to the Riigikogu for discussion. Discussing this question in parliament is not releasing the government from its responsibility, but rather a foundation of democracy.<sup>16</sup>

That was not, however, the end of the crisis. On 20 November 2018, the next day after the presidential decision was made public, the Estonian Minister of the Interior, Andres Anvelt, called for a press conference to announce his resignation. A highly influential politician who represented the SDP in the Estonian Government in three different cabinets, Anvelt unexpectedly stepped down from his high-profile ministerial position to leave Estonian politics altogether, due to his health-related issues<sup>17</sup>. Facing a crucial parliamentary debate on the state budget in the next few days – not to mention that the Riigikogu's decision on the UN Migration Pact was already scheduled to be

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<sup>15</sup> Kaja Kallas in 'Kallas: Reform prepared to take over government' in *ERR*. 19 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/878237/kallas-reform-prepared-to-take-over-government>].

<sup>16</sup> Kersti Kaljulaid in 'Kaljulaid: Let the Riigikogu discuss the migration framework' in *ERR*. 19 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/878309/kaljulaid-let-the-riigikogu-discuss-the-migration-framework>].

<sup>17</sup> 'Minister of the Interior Andres Anvelt resigns, to leave politics' in *ERR*. 20 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/878520/minister-of-the-interior-andres-anvelt-resigns-to-leave-politics>].

made on 26 November – the current Estonian Government was at its weakest point since its formation on 23 November 2016.

One day before the parliamentary vote on the UN Migration document, Urmas Paet, the Estonian Republic's former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2005-2014), who currently represents the ER and the country in the European Parliament, made a comprehensive statement that, in a certain way, assisted in understanding his party's final call on the issue:

Thus, let the government start deciding and stop overmystifying the UN declaration on migration. [...] Estonian society is standing face to face with much more substantive and urgent problems. And there is no point in hiding behind the artificially created desire for consensus. [...] [A] disproportionate and unreasonable amount of energy has been spent on this subject and tensions raised, considering that the document does not establish a single obligation for Estonia, but rather addresses global issues related to migration, such as illegal migration, human trafficking and similar matters, in none of which is Estonia a problem state. [...] No Estonian law says that the government has to make decisions by consensus. At the same time, it is clear that the government must decide, and voting is an absolutely legal way of making a decision.<sup>18</sup>

Next day, on 26 November 2018, almost all members of the Riigikogu met to establish the country's opinion on the UN Migration Pact. After hours of deliberation, the outcome of the discussion was as follows: 41 MPs voted in favour of the document and 27 MPs – against it; quite predictably, after the Urmas Paet's extensively cited commentary became known, the oppositional ER

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<sup>18</sup> Urmas Paet in 'Paet: Let Estonian government decide on migration pact with a vote'. *ERR*. 25 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/879789/paet-let-estonian-government-decide-on-migration-pact-with-a-vote>].



decided to not take part in the voting<sup>19</sup>. Most probably, this move will cost the party some prospective votes in the upcoming elections – in general, a major political establishments does not usually abstain from voting on an issue of global significance. However, even though, the ‘in favour’ number did not represent the simple parliamentary majority, the decision still stood due to the rule of ‘simple majority of the participating voters’ that was applied on this particular occasion. As reported, the Riigikogu “expressed hope that the objectives listed in the global migration framework will aid in fighting against illegal migration and reducing it”<sup>20</sup>.

The end of the ‘search’ for the Estonian Republic’s official opinion on the UN Migration Pact coincided with yet another escalation on the front-lines of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The 25 November 2018 conflict in the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov quickly reminded Estonia and the country’s political parties about the broader perspective of the foreign policy making process. Suddenly, the main reason for the coalitional political crisis became marginalised on the background of the European continent’s biggest military conflict at present. In such a context, Jüri Luik, the Estonian Minister of Defence, described the situation as “dangerous”, because “a full-fledged military conflict could erupt at any moment”<sup>21</sup>. The Minister was indirectly supported by Margus Tsahkna, an influential MP and the predecessor of Luik in the Ministry of Defence, who stated that “[the] [r]ecent events once again prove that the threat to sovereignty and an independent Estonian state originates from the east. [...] Government parties must immediately stop this fight in everyday politics and end this

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Riigikogu adopts declaration in support of UN Compact on Migration’ in *ERR*. 27 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/880211/riigikogu-adopts-declaration-in-support-of-un-compact-on-migration>].

<sup>20</sup> ‘Estonian parl’t approves draft statement in support of UN Global Compact on migration’ in *The Baltic Times*. 27 November 2018. Available from [<http://m.baltictimes.com/article/jcms/id/142553/>].

<sup>21</sup> Jüri Luik in ‘Luik: Full-fledged military conflict could erupt in Ukraine at any moment’. *ERR*. 26 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/880050/luik-full-fledged-military-conflict-could-erupt-in-ukraine-at-any-moment>].

pseudo-government crisis<sup>22</sup>”. With the statements like the above cited, the Estonian Government have returned to a ‘business as usual’. Crisis? What Crisis? A new year is coming up.

**Prepared by:** E-MAP Foundation MTÜ, Tallinn, Estonia

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<sup>22</sup> Margus Tsahkna in ‘Tsahkna: Security situation requires end to political games in Estonia’. *ERR*. 26 November 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/880092/tsahkna-security-situation-requires-end-to-political-games-in-estonia>].