



Weekly Briefing

Estonia political briefing:
Estonian politics: the calm before the storm?
E-MAP Foundation MTÜ

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.
 +36 1 5858 690
 office@china-cee.eu
 china-cee.eu

Estonian politics: the calm before the storm?

In politics of a democracy, there is always a relative ‘quietness’ to be noted before the real ‘storm’ of upcoming elections will have approached the electorate, overwhelming the society’s politically-active segment with myriads of multi-vectored proposals, promises and claims. In a metaphorical way, these days, the Republic of Estonia bears a resemblance with a sprinter who is patiently waiting for the signal to start 110-meter hurdles. A political signal to ‘run for life’ (in other words, for a parliamentary seat) can arrive from everywhere, but a false start (like the one that was produced by the Estonia 200 and described in the January 2019 Society Development briefing) can easily write a political party’s campaign off. After the turbulent beginning of January, no other Estonian party is willing to deliberately make the Estonia 200’s mistake; therefore – the great calm. However, even during such a focused preparation for the big final debates, it is possible to detect a topic, which, if re-directed in a particular way, can be transformed into the aforementioned signal everybody is waiting for.

The Russian ‘Total dictation’: *Таллин* vs. Tallinn

From 2004, the Russian Federation organises a broadly promoted event called ‘Total dictation’. The declared framework is educational, and the initial idea, allegedly, came from Novosibirsk¹, the third-most populous city in Russia. During the ‘Total dictation’, every person who would like to test his/her ability to comprehend the Russian language (it is chosen as the language of dictation in almost all the locations where the event takes place), attends a nominated address in a particular locality and participates in the dictation. As a rule, a personality who leads the test, becoming the dictation’s voice, is a well-known figure within the Russian Federation’s cultural circles or a local celebrity who has a native-level command of the Russian language. Not many real experts in the field of political science will disagree with the statement that the ‘Total dictation’ represents a classic example of Russia-framed public diplomacy. The latter phenomenon of international relations, naturally and effectively, utilises plenty of ‘fruits’ that have ‘grown up’ in the plentiful ‘valley’ of ‘soft power’. Not to mention, the semantic side of the project’s title – its original Russian version (*Тотальный диктант*) contains nearly absolute abundance of data to conduct a doctoral-level research in some academic fields as different as linguistics, social anthropology, strategic communication, strategic narrative studies, and, certainly, political science. In itself, the ‘Total dictation’ is a

¹ ‘Что такое Тотальный диктант’. Available from [<https://totaldict.ru/about/>].

perfect conceptual metaphor that does not even make a single attempt to hide the real goal of the project.

In the beginning of February 2019, an announcement was made that the Estonian capital city, Tallinn, was chosen to be the capital of this year's 'Total dictation', and the event is scheduled for 13 April. On the project's official page where the announcement was placed, one could see a stylised map of Russia (the illegally annexed Crimea is included in the country's boundaries) with five circles-pictures, presumably representing the short-list of contenders². The circled picture of Tallinn, being slightly within the borders of Russia, was largely positioned in the area where Estonia would have been located, had the map been drawn up further westwards from the visible Russian boundaries. Having looked at such an intriguing variation of popular cartography – for some who are not familiar with the contemporary political map of Europe – it is possible to imply that Tallinn is one of those Russian localities, which participated in the contest. On the same page, Estonia was not even mentioned, and the Russian equivalent of 'Tallinn' lost the second 'n' to become *Таллин*. From the times of Soviet occupation, the Kremlin and its central agencies are very well aware of the fact that the vast majority of Estonians have been treating this shortened Russian variation of their capital city's name as an insult directed towards the whole nation³. Nevertheless, the 'Total dictation' will be coming to *Таллин* in April, and Mihhail Kõlvart, the Chairman of Tallinn City Council and one of the Vice-Chairmen of the *Estonian Centre Party*, will be leading the project's organising committee⁴.

It did not take a while until the above-described developments started generating some feedback from the Estonian political elites. Urmas Reinsalu, the Estonian Minister of Justice and an influential member of the *Pro Patria* (11 seats in the current *Riigikogu*), wrote an extensive comment on his personal *Facebook* page, linking the concept of 'Total dictation' to Russian propaganda and the Russia-sponsored *Russkiy Mir Foundation*⁵. Reinsalu argued that

² 'Голосование завершено'. Available from [https://totaldict.ru/voting_capital/].

³ In Estonia, the Russian language equivalent of "Tallinn" is always written with the double 'n' at the end of the word – Таллинн. The Estonian word 'linn' means a 'city', but 'lin' does not carry any meaning in the Estonian language.

⁴ 'Таллин'. Available from [<https://totaldict.ru/tallinn/>].

⁵ 'Урмас Рейнсалу: "Тотальный диктант" — часть российской пропаганды' in *Delfi.ee*, 4 February 2019. Available from [<http://rus.delfi.ee/projects/opinion/urmas-rejnsalu-totalnyj-diktant-chast-rossijskoj-propagandy?id=85224563>].

[t]o implement the idea of *Russkiy Mir*⁶, the Russian state established a number of entities, which, among other things, are also formally engaged in the promotion of the Russian language. Molotov's grandson, Vyacheslav Nikonov, who symptomatically participates in conferences on security, not linguistics, leads the *Russkiy Mir*. The *Estonian Internal Security Service* has repeatedly warned this Foundation on its activities in the interests of the splinter policy of the Russian state [towards Estonia]. In Estonia, some former *KGB* officers, rather than philologists, are bustling around this Foundation. It is the main leader and sponsor of the 'Total dictation'⁷.

On 8 February, *Postimees*, a major Estonian newspaper, managed to arrange a Russian language-based debate between Mihhail Kõlvart, who was naturally acting as a supporter for Tallinn to be featured as the capital of the 'Total dictation' in April 2019, and Eerik-Niiles Kross, a high-profile member of the oppositional *Estonian Reform Party*. Characteristically for that particular open discussion, Kross was, presumably, invited due to his direct family connections – he is the son of Jaan Kross, the most prominent Estonian writer of the second half of the XX century. One could suggest that Mihhail Kõlvart, who visibly enjoyed performing in his native-level Russian language, won the debate with a decent margin – Kross had very little chances to shine linguistically, using the language, which he can speak with obvious limitations⁸. At the same time, the two sides managed to run through the main point of difference: “the action is absolutely apolitical, and the organisers firmly adhere to this principle” (Kõlvart) and “[i]t is obvious that we do not live in isolation and know what is happening in the world” (Kross)⁹.

Arguably, considering the fast approaching parliamentary elections, it is only the beginning of the story. Most probably, the 'Total dictation' as well as the fact that the leadership of the *Estonian Centre Party* is directly involved in the project will be moderating the electoral campaigns of all major political parties in the country. At the end of the day, the *Таллин* vs. Tallinn 'contest' is, historically, of existential nature for the Republic of Estonia.

⁶ 'Russkiy Mir' is the Latin characters-based transliteration of the Russian language-originated 'Русский Мир' (or 'Russian World').

⁷ Urmas Reinsalu in 'Урмас Рейнсалу: "Тотальный диктант" — часть российской пропаганды' (translated from Russian by E-MAP Foundation MTÜ; non-official translation).

⁸ 'Крость: культурную дипломатию могут обернуть против нас! Кылварт: Тотальный диктант – вне политики' in *Postimees*, 8 February 2019. Available from [<https://rus.postimees.ee/6517451/kross-kulturnuuyu-diplomatiyu-mogut-obernut-protiv-nas-kylvart-totalnyu-diktant-vne-politiki>].

⁹ Mihhail Kõlvart and Eerik-Niiles Kross in 'Крость: культурную дипломатию могут обернуть против нас! Кылварт: Тотальный диктант – вне политики' (translated from Russian by E-MAP Foundation MTÜ; non-official translation).

The aggregated polling data on 20 January

The previously discussed tactical ‘hiccup’ made by the *Estonia 200* in January did cost big time for the party-neophyte in polling results. As reported by *PollofPolls.eu*,¹⁰ on 20 January 2019, in accordance to an aggregation trend line *Kalman Smooth*, the *Estonia 200* ‘jumped’ away from the list of contenders to enter the new *Riigikogu* (see *Table 1* for more details).

Table 1: Aggregated polling data in Estonia (November 2018-January 2019)¹¹

Political party	Date of recording/Aggregated %		
	20 November 2018	20 December 2018	20 January 2019
The Estonian Centre Party	28%	27%	27%
The Estonian Reform Party	25%	23%	25%
The Conservative People’s Party of Estonia	17%	19%	18%
The Social Democratic Party	10%	10%	10%
Pro Patria	5%	7%	7%
Estonia 200	7%	7%	4%
The Estonian Free Party	1%	1%	1%
The Estonian Greens	3%	3%	3%

Source: Pollof-Polls.eu

Having lost 3% in popular support, the *Estonia 200* needs to conduct plenty of ‘homework’ to be able to pass the nationwide threshold of 5% during the March 2019 elections – before January, it did not seem like a big hurdle for the new organisation, but a different time it was. Keeping in mind that the *Estonian Centre Party* and the *Social Democratic Party* show

¹⁰ ‘All polls for Estonia’ in *Pollof-Polls.eu*. Available from [<https://pollofpolls.eu/EE>].

¹¹ ‘All polls for Estonia’.

a certain level of consistency in polls, the prospective votes, which the *Estonia 200* was dreaming about, can easily find different political ‘homes’. In this context, the holder of the current governmental coalition started being more open about its prospective coalitional partners. In her interview, Kadri Simson, the Estonian Minister of Economic Affairs and Infrastructure and a Vice-Chairman of the *Estonian Centre Party*, noted, as reported, that the “current partners in the government would be the party’s first choice for next government also”¹². With necessity, it can mean that the *Estonian Centre Party*, the *Social Democratic Party*, and *Pro Patria* are pre-set to negotiate the country’s next governmental coalition, while trying to avoid any drops in popularity. Indeed, playing safe could be a winning strategy.

¹² ‘Simson: Coalition with SDE, Pro Patria first choice of Centre Party’ in *ERR*. 7 February 2019. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/908098/simson-coalition-with-sde-pro-patria-first-choice-of-centre-party>].