




## **Weekly Briefing**

**Estonia political briefing:  
Retrenchments, retrenchments, retrenchments...  
E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

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## Retrenchments, retrenchments, retrenchments...

In a stable democracy, the end of an electoral campaign usually represents the beginning of the next one. Life in politics is very changeable, and being in opposition does not necessarily mean remaining in opposition for the whole electoral period. The history of post-1991 Estonian politics tells a compelling story on how a governmental coalition can be changed overnight, respecting all legal procedures. Estonia, without a doubt, is a liberal democracy, and the latest parliamentary elections (together with its extensively discussed outcome) immediately made the country's major political parties ready for the next contest, be it elections of municipal councils or presidential elections (both in 2021), or campaigns for the *Riigikogu* (2023)<sup>1</sup>.

In March 2019, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (*EKRE*) literally stormed into the Estonian Parliament, having added 12 more seats to their existing faction. In the current composition of the *Riigikogu*, *EKRE* has 19 seats, while also enjoying the presence in the European Parliament (1 member). The fact that the immediate post-March 2019 *EKRE*'s parliamentary faction consisted of the party's leader (Mart Helme), his wife (Helle-Moonika Helme), and his son (Martin Helme)<sup>2</sup> could, speculatively, lead to a range of sceptical as well as ironic commentaries. At the same time, since the party comfortably holds five portfolios in the current Estonian Government (including the ministerial positions on 'the Interior', 'Finance', and 'Foreign Trade and Information Technology'), the situation looks anything but ironic.

It could be argued that the *EKRE*-originated political rhetoric has not become milder from the moment when the party, once called "a far-right upstart that says it wants to protect an 'indigenous Estonian' population under threat"<sup>3</sup>, entered the ruling governmental coalition. Why is the focus, once again, on the *EKRE*? Because, in June 2020, they were the first out of all major political parties in Estonia to informally start every next electoral campaign, whichever it may be. As reported, on 27 June, Mart Helme announced his plan to step down from the leader's role, adding that

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<sup>1</sup> *Valimised*. Available from [<https://www.valimised.ee/en>].

<sup>2</sup> 'Conservative People's Party of Estonia Faction' in *Riigikogu*. Available from [<https://www.riigikogu.ee/en/parliament-of-estonia/factions/conservative-peoples-party-estonia-faction/>].

<sup>3</sup> Evan Gershkovich, 'Estonia joins the far-right club' in *Politico*, 30 April 2019. Available from [<https://www.politico.eu/article/estonia-tallinn-joins-the-far-right-club-martin-helme-mart-helme-kersti-kaljulaid-populism/>].

[EKRE] need to be the prime minister's party after the next elections that requires us to leave our comfort zone and do things with a fresh energy and outlook. I will start with myself. [...] This decision was not made lightly, emotionally or least of all following any kind of pressure. [...] Because we are moving into a series of elections – local government council elections, presidential and Riigikogu elections – it is sensible to give the floor to people with better administrative capacity. We are taking a carefully considered step to maximize the party's success at upcoming elections.<sup>4</sup>

Having arranged the handover of the leadership 'torch' from Helme the father over to Helme the son, the *EKRE* immediately started 'narrating' its multi-vectoral communicational strategy on remaining relevant in years to come. It is about time, since the current polling figures are supposedly not looking too pleasing for the party. On 17 July, the governmental parties (the *Centre Party*, the *EKRE* and *Pro Patria*) were correspondingly on 24.1 per cent, 15.9 per cent, and 5.2 per cent of popular support (if compared to 24.5 per cent, 17.9 per cent, and 4.9 per cent recorded exactly two month ago)<sup>5</sup>. These are contrasting with what the oppositional *Reform Party* and the 'social democrats' managed to score on the same day – correspondingly, they enjoy having 31.4 per cent and 9.3 per cent of support, comparing with 29 per cent and 8.6 per cent they had recorded in May<sup>6</sup>.

The aforementioned polling results are detecting that, in the last two months, the country's parliamentary opposition gained more backing from the prospective electorate than the governmental coalition lost it. Objectively, it has to be treated as a worrying sign for the political parties in the Government, if they ever want to keep the same composition of the body after 2023 (and should they survive until then). In the whole scheme of actions, there is always a 'shadow' of the non-parliamentary *Eesti 200*, a party that is currently favoured by 8.9 per cent of the prospective voters in Estonia<sup>7</sup>. If taken together with the opposition, the three parties are very close to reach the desirable 50 per cent barrier to be in a very comfortable position before any upcoming elections.

There are no reasonable doubts that the *EKRE* is carefully monitoring the process, while the party's leaders are attempting to retrench the political *platzdarm* to be ready for a 'tiger's

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<sup>4</sup> Mart Helme as cited in Jekaterina Minkova, 'Mart Helme to step down as EKRE chair', *Postimees*, 29 June 2020. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7006248/mart-helme-to-step-down-as-ekre-chair>].

<sup>5</sup> 'Estonia. National Poll Average' in *Europe Elects*. Available from [<https://europeelects.eu/european-union/estonia/>].

<sup>6</sup> 'Estonia. National Poll Average'.

<sup>7</sup> 'Estonia. National Poll Average'.

leap’ at any given moment. It is still not known whether or not the current Estonian President is planning to be up for re-election in a year. However, it is known and well-publicised in the country that the *EKRE* and the President are not the biggest ‘fans’ of each other. Therefore, in a hypothetical but very distinct way, Mart Helme started elaborating about his presidential ambitions:

I would be the kind of president as you see me today as head of the party and minister – particular and pragmatic. Also, a square shooter and not soft-spoken, always upholding certain principles. I would definitely not be a president trying to jump over the shadow of the institution as such solo acts and attempts to hijack authority the president does not have are disruptive. I would try to be a uniting figure and offer people courage and self-confidence.<sup>8</sup>

In his turn, the *EKRE*’s newly appointed leader, Martin Helme, is doing ‘retrenchments’ from his new position, trying to outline the party’s stance on a range of policies as well as relationships within the governmental coalition. For example, allegedly, the leaders of both the ‘centrists’ (Prime Minister Jüri Ratas) and *Pro Patria* (First Vice-Speaker of the *Riigikogu* Helir-Valdor Seeder) were not pleased with the *EKRE* new Chairman’s speech at the party’s latest congress. In one of his most recent interviews, Martin Helme, while admitting that the *EKRE*’s two coalitional partners “did express their dissatisfaction with what was a political show”, still argued that his party’s “congress is the most exciting, coolest and most convincing political show in Estonia, which is how it should be”<sup>9</sup>. Intriguingly, the same interview was featured by Martin Helme’s harsh *critique* expressed towards Jaak Madison, his party’s only Member of the European Parliament (“criticizing his own party from Brussels is perhaps not the best way to gain in popularity”) and a note that “[w]e will create our own Fox New[s] in Estonia”<sup>10</sup>.

Nevertheless, the local readership did not have to wait for a long time before the new leader of *EKRE* would give a large programming interview. Absolutely, that was a long-read, but, as it was noted by Toomas Sildam, a high-profile Estonian journalist who conducted it, “EKRE’s coalition partners, farmers and the Social Democrats would do well not to read this interview in the interests of peace of mind”<sup>11</sup>. Summarising the findings out of the interview, it

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<sup>8</sup> Mart Helme as cited in Toomas Kask, ‘I would not be soft-spoken as president’ in *Postimees*, 3 July 2020. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7009620/i-would-not-be-soft-spoken-as-president>].

<sup>9</sup> Martin Helme as cited in Elo Mõttus-Leppik, ‘Helme says national conflict fuel[led] by partner’ in *Postimees*, 7 July 2020. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7012149/helme-says-national-conflict-fueled-by-partner>].

<sup>10</sup> Helme in Elo Mõttus-Leppik.

<sup>11</sup> Toomas Sildam, ‘Interview | New EKRE chair Martin Helme: We are living in insane times’ in *ERR*, 8 July 2020. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1110443/interview-new-ekre-chair-martin-helme-we-are-living-in-insane-times>].

is possible to underline a certain number of important points, which should assist in forecasting the *EKRE*'s future steps, and they are as follows: **a)** despite existing tensions, the party is planning to remain a coalitional partner with the 'centrists' and *Pro Patria* until the end of the current electoral period ("[...] if what you [a]re asking is whether the coalition is on its deathbed – it is not, of course"<sup>12</sup>); **b)** a serious conflict between the *EKRE* and the Tallinn City Government is only a matter of time ("[t]he capital is run by Mihhail Kõlvart<sup>13</sup>. Last I checked, he is not Estonian"<sup>14</sup>); **c)** *EKRE*'s rhetoric towards the EU can be considered antagonistic ("Piece by piece, the EU is taking over state functions over which the people have no democratic control. I find it completely disagreeable."<sup>15</sup>); **d)** Martin Helme is eyeing the Prime Minister's position ("I do not argue with my father"<sup>16</sup> as his answer to "Mart Helme says that while Jüri Ratas is a brilliant diplomat, you would be a more competent prime minister in terms of economic affairs. Do you agree?" **e)** "*contra mundum*" is the party's *credo* ("That is how it has been from the first. Nothing unusual about it. We are different from all other parties in Estonia."<sup>17</sup>)

Arguably, as noted by Sildam, Martin Helme "says things that do not require interpretation"<sup>18</sup>. In politics of a democracy, the only interpretation that matters is how the electorate responds to your political programme. Time will show what *contra mundum* really means in the *EKRE*'s particular case.

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Helme in Sildam.

<sup>13</sup> Mihhail Kõlvart, the current mayor of Tallinn, is a Kazakhstan-born Estonian citizen. He was born in Kyzylorda to an Estonian father and a Korean/Chinese mother.

<sup>14</sup> Helme in Sildam.

<sup>15</sup> Helme in Sildam.

<sup>16</sup> Helme in Sildam.

<sup>17</sup> Helme in Sildam.

<sup>18</sup> Sildam.