





Weekly Briefing

Estonia political briefing:
A year to forget, the year to remember
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

A year to forget, the year to remember

When it is all over, the outgoing year will be associated in history with quite a number of very different as well as conceptually metaphoric adjectives – hectic, unpredictable, changing, unforgettable, deadly, incredible, stressful, and, most definitely, eye-opening. For the **European continent** and its most integrated geo-strategic segment, the EU, this pandemic-raged year was all about reflections, which had apparently led the entity towards declaring something extraordinarily important. In September 2020, Thierry Breton, the European Commissioner for Internal Market, issued a notable brief on what the EU should taking away from its own experience of managing the crisis:

Nobody knows what the world will look like tomorrow, but one thing is clear: no European country can hope to influence the new world order on its own. We must project ourselves on the scale of a continent. And faced with the risk of becoming a battleground for world tensions, Europe cannot stand idly by. The era of a conciliatory or naïve Europe that solely relies on the virtue of its soft power is behind us. We are now seeing the dawn of a Europe that is determined to defend its strategic interests.¹

Most certainly, such an obvious change of the EU's strategic identity narrative was welcomed by different pro-European forces within the continent, but, arguably, it was also noticed with caution in different capitals internationally. Wherever 'more Europe' is genuinely needed, a stronger EU will be more appreciated. However, where the EU is seen as a competitor, then the entity's stronger geo-strategic *silhouette* is unlikely to be valued with joy. On the EU-wide level, the outgoing year's *finale* has been featured by **1)** a game of waiting in regards of the upcoming Biden administration's stance on the US-EU relationships, **2)** the increasingly antagonistic interrelations with the Russian Federation, for many reasons; **3)** a sense of uncertainty on how to frame the post-2020 interactions with China and how to 'accommodate' the concept of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (and its integral projects like the 17+1, for example) into a yet-to-be-developed framework of prospectively strategic cooperation between the two sides; and **4)** the Brexit-associated negotiations on trade. In terms of plain domestic politics, how do these major discussions extrapolate on the Estonian political environment?

¹ Thierry Breton, 'Europe: The End of 'Naïvety'' in *The European Commission*, 10 September 2020. Available from [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/breton/announcements/europe-end-naivety_en].

Evidently, in Estonia, the country-wide diapason for political debates was distinctly local and even, to a visible extent, brutally peripheral, only indirectly touching the grand-themes of the global turbulence. In such a context, it is worth quoting Rainer Kattel that “[t]he idea of Estonia is a vision of what Estonia is, what it is about and what it could become”, because “[i]t is the peculiarity of small cultures that it is often difficult to maintain several viable ideas at once in them”². Moreover, even during the pandemic, the internal non-compatibility of the current governmental coalition kept the country on high alert at any given moment of the year. In 2020, the second cabinet of Jüri Ratas lost four Ministers who had to resign for different political and non-political reasons (keeping in mind some votes of confidence arranged by the opposition in the *Riigikogu*). Tõnis Saarts, while “[l]ooking back at the year in politics and public debates” argued that there were “two topics [that] have stolen the limelight: the coronavirus and the marriage referendum”, when [t]he latter [was] either directly or indirectly tied into discussions over rights of minorities (whether ‘the gays should run to/in Sweden’) and immigration (foreign labo[u]r and the lost strawberry harvest)”³.

Having been extensively discussed in a number of previous briefings, the proposed bill on the so-called ‘marriage referendum’, which was a part of the coalitional agreement back in 2019, made the opposition thinking of issuing “thousands of motions to amend to see the bill get stuck in the Constitutional Committee”⁴. At the same time, Prime Minister Jüri Ratas expressed his determination that his political party – the *Centre Party* – “definitely wants to observe the coalition agreement”⁵. Leaving the distinctly populist bill aside, the Government’s political response to the pandemic is really something that is of interest for the society as well as analysts. The second – or whatever the number it is already – wave of the crisis coincided with the Christmas-bound festive period that is also associated with final exams for many university students. The parliamentary opposition – for example, from the side of the ‘social democrats’ – have already stated that “[t]he government has been hopelessly late with necessary, preventative precision restrictions” and that “[t]hese should have been applied already in October”⁶. However, during his traditional ‘end-of-the-year’ interview, Prime

² Rainer Kattel, ‘Estonia as an idea and ideology’ in *ERR*, 21 December 2020. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1215376/rainer-kattel-estonia-as-an-idea-and-ideology>].

³ Tõnis Saarts, ‘Year without substantial debates’ in *ERR*, 20 December 2020. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1214224/tonis-saarts-year-without-substantial-debates>].

⁴ Anna Põld and Henry-Laur Allik, ‘Referendum on its way to be shelved’ in *Postimees*, 15 December 2020. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7133636/referendum-on-its-way-to-be-shelved>].

⁵ Jüri Ratas as cited in Põld and Allik.

⁶ Jevgeni Ossinovski as cited in ‘SDE MP: New Estonian restrictions come two weeks late’, *ERR*, 12 December 2020. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1202509/sde-mp-new-estonian-restrictions-come-two-weeks-late>].

Minister Ratas metaphorically argued that “we need to separate the glass half empty from the glass half full here”⁷. He continued outlining some important figures:

We have considerable recession, similarly to the EU and the entire world. The latest data puts Estonia’s recession for the first three quarters of the year at 3.2 percent, which is only half of the EU average. This suggests our entrepreneurs have done well. [...] However, we also learned that the Estonian medical system must be even better prepared and needs additional investments.⁸

On the pure *intra*-political segment of the debate, the current governmental coalition’s objective instability brought plenty of questions to the Prime Minister as well as on the Prime Minister’s capabilities as a manager during 2020. As a *Postimees* journalist put it in a summary – “Critics have accused [*Pro Patria*] and mostly [...] Center Party of dancing to the Conservative People’s Party’s (*EKRE*) tune in the government”⁹. Credits to Jüri Ratas, he was not hiding away from answering such a harsh societal enquiry, offering the following response:

The opposition is always out to claim that the prime minister is not up to the task and that really someone else is running the government – it has been the case in the past and I’m sure will be in the future. Whose tune is Jüri Ratas dancing to? The instrument is called the Republic of Estonia and dancing to that tune takes a lot of effort in terms of finding solutions for bringing the country and people out of the crisis in the best possible way. All coalition parties are different. [...] There are certain ideological differences, differences in terms of values, but that is how it needs to be in a coalition. Is it an easy coalition? No, it is not. [...] A coalition means searching for political compromises while being able to take responsibility for Estonia and realise your goals through said compromises.¹⁰

While the Prime Minister was visualising himself as ‘dancing’ to the country’s tune, there is somebody who was by law doing it as well, but also – indirectly – leading a *quasi*-opposition to the Government during the whole year. This personality in Kersti Kaljulaid, the President of Estonia. In 2020, she was instrumental in delivering both spoken and unspoken political messages in a number of situations when, from her point of view, the true constitutional values of Estonia, as a stable liberal democracy, were endangered. Talking on a possibility of establishing productive cooperation with the Government, President Kaljulaid noted:

⁷ Jüri Ratas as cited in Nele Kullerkupp, ‘Jüri Ratas: I’m the prime minister and I dance to the republic’s tune’, *Postimees*, 21 December 2020. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7138492/juri-ratas-i-m-the-prime-minister-and-i-dance-to-the-republic-s-tune>].

⁸ Ratas in Kullerkupp.

⁹ Kullerkupp.

¹⁰ Ratas in Kullerkupp.

It has occurred to me that such efforts have not been easy in the past few years. And this definitely impacts my ability to contribute to life in Estonia. From there, you start to think why it has become impossible today and the reason is that I have fulfilled my professional role – defended the Estonian Constitution. And you cannot cooperate beyond those boundaries. [...] And I feel that this kind of hands-on approach we used to have has grown much more seldom now, even though it is not really in the president's job description. The reason is that it would only be possible to continue that cooperation today by abandoning value-based policy. And that is not something I am willing to do.¹¹

In 2021, Kersti Kaljulaid is up for the OECD's top job, and the next presidential campaign will be on in Estonia as well. Objectively, she has some prospects to remain politically relevant. As for the governmental coalition, its ability to survive will be tested in January-February. In the meantime, on 24 December, at noon, the Mayor of Tallinn Mihhail Kõlvart proclaimed Christmas peace by reading a historic Christmas peace message from the Town Hall window in Tallinn. This has been an ancient tradition, which began during the ruling time of Queen Kristiina of Sweden (1632-1654)¹². Social peace? What a great idea! Let it be.



Source: Ken Mürk/ERR (Mayor of Tallinn Mihhail Kõlvart proclaimed Christmas peace at noon on 24 December 2020).

¹¹ Kersti Kaljulaid as cited in Priit Kuusk, 'President: Estonians' will to cooperate highlight of the outgoing year', *ERR*, 23 December 2020. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1217284/president-estonians-will-to-cooperate-highlight-of-the-outgoing-year>].

¹² 'Gallery: Mayor of Tallinn declares Christmas peace' in *ERR*, 24 December 2020. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1219141/gallery-mayor-of-tallinn-declares-christmas-peace>].