




# Weekly Briefing

**Estonia political briefing:  
Leading the world...  
E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

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## Leading the world...

Closer to the end of February 2021, a monitoring report from the World Health Organisation (WHO) notified the public that Estonia's 14-day average was 850.81 per 100,000 people, making the country's COVID-19 infection rate the second highest in Europe<sup>1</sup>, after the Czech Republic. Then, commenting on the issue, Üllar Lanno, Director General of the Estonian Health Board, stated that “[i]f everything continues in the same way, then becoming the first is not difficult”<sup>2</sup>. In less than two weeks since the aforementioned statement was made, yet another report was issued by *Postimees* claiming that “Estonia had [...] the highest coronavirus rate worldwide”<sup>3</sup>. Since this point – no matter whether the country is leading the world on the pandemic rate per capita or not – the issue became of both regional and the EU-wide importance, and a direct political attention to the problem was felt to be missing. With the country's population of a bit over than 1.3 million, the locally counted figures showed that, from 6 until 12 March, Estonia recorded between 1,181 to 1,957 new coronavirus cases per day, “giving an average of **1,435 new cases per day for that period**”<sup>4</sup>. The only relatively positive element of the situation is that Estonia's COVID-19-linked death rate is “comparatively low, even in proportion to the size of the country, at **695** since the pandemic began, compared with a reported 22,865 for the Czech Republic [...] [and the UK's] death toll surpass[ing] the 100,000-mark earlier this year”<sup>5</sup>.

The current *status quo* frames the main challenge for Estonia's newly appointed Government – the effectiveness of the Prime Minister's and all hers Ministers' combined performance will be measured by the society on the basis of how well they are now addressing the ubiquitous pandemic-associated difficulties. This is no longer a question on a second or whatever wave of the crisis – having arrived a year ago to ruin the country's normal life, the COVID-19 does not simply go away. Having decided to announce the lock-down from 11

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Estonia has Europe's second highest coronavirus rate’ in *ERR*, 25 February 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608121879/estonia-has-europe-s-second-highest-coronavirus-rate>].

<sup>2</sup> Üllar Lanno as cited in ‘Estonia has Europe's second highest coronavirus rate’.

<sup>3</sup> Carl-Robert Puhm, ‘Kuldmedal: Eestist sai maailma suurima nakatumisnäitajaga riik’ in *Postimees*, 12 March 2021. Available from [<https://tervis.postimees.ee/7199970/kuldmedal-estist-sai-maailma-suurima-nakatumisnahtajaga-riik>].

<sup>4</sup> ‘Daily: Estonia has highest seven-day COVID-19 rate globally’ in *ERR*, 13 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608141184/daily-estonia-has-highest-seven-day-covid-19-rate-globally>].

<sup>5</sup> ‘Daily: Estonia has highest seven-day COVID-19 rate globally’.

March, Prime Minister Kaja Kallas (*Reform*) also expressed a serious concern that a set of “more stringent restrictions could only come at a cost to business and society”:

Restrictions must be very targeted. On the one hand, it would be very easy for us to shut everything down, but on the other, this all comes at a price. [...] If people do not behave responsibly [...], then the more vulnerable among us – the elderly – will be getting hospitalised, and hospitalised hard.<sup>6</sup>

In details, the new rules, which were placed by the Government under the lock-down’s ‘umbrella’ are as follows<sup>7</sup>. **Firstly**, the 2+2 rule has to be respected not only inside but also outside as well. Essentially, it means that “up to two people may move around together, keeping a distance of 2 metres from others”. **Secondly**, the Government’s recommendation is that “children are not taken to kindergarten or child care unless it is urgently necessary”. The basic idea is that from 11 March, “students in grades 1 to 4 are not allowed to be in the school buildings anymore either, and those preparing for the basic school final exams and state exams will not be allowed to have contact learning”. **Thirdly**, the situation severely affects nearly everything that is related to sporting and hobby activities as well as informal educational and refresher training. The new rule is that, from the beginning of this particular lockdown, “all indoor activities in the listed sectors are prohibited”, but these sets of restrictions do “not extend to people with special needs and rehabilitation activities”. On sport, professional competitions are to be allowed, but “[n]o more than 50 people may participate in sports competitions and sports and exercise events indoors, and no more than 100 people outdoors”. **Fourthly**, on catering, those establishments that sell their food products for takeaway are allowed to continue. **Fifthly**, a truly challenging time is ahead for all Estonia-based retail outlets – “the stores must be closed [...] [but] [t]he restriction does not apply to grocery stores, pharmacies, stores that sell aid equipment and medical devices, the sales points of telecommunications enterprises, optical stores, pet stores and filling stations”. **Finally**, those enterprises that provide services “may continue their activities but the occupancy requirement will become more stringent – the previous 50 per cent maximum occupancy will be reduced to 25 per cent”.

Framework wise, this is how Estonia is going to be living until the end of March 2021, considering the fact that the situation is under strict monitoring. The aforementioned measures

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<sup>6</sup> Kaja Kallas as cited in ‘Prime Minister: Lock-down came only when absolutely necessary’, *ERR*, 11 March 2021. Available from [https://news.err.ee/1608138163/prime-minister-lock-down-came-only-when-absolutely-necessary].

<sup>7</sup> ‘Lockdown restrictions in force across Estonia until April 11’ in *ERR*, 11 March 2021. Available from [https://news.err.ee/1608138127/lockdown-restrictions-in-force-across-estonia-until-april-11]. The direct quotes specified as such in the following paragraph are taken from this source.

are tough, but with all that, there are still a number of *intra*-political calls on a range of tougher steps to be made in order to stop the pandemic. The most influential proponent of a stricter legal framework to be imposed is Mihhail Kõlvart (*Centre*), Mayor of Tallinn. Even though his political party is an integral element of the current ruling coalition with all the needed rights to run the country, his main idea is bound by the concept of emergency situation that can be declared in Estonia – the point is that such a legal framework can allow for much shorter time-frames to be needed in the decision-making process. Moreover, the state of emergency gives more operational rights to the local governments. The Prime Minister, however, is opposing the need for coronavirus emergency situation though<sup>8</sup>. Clarifying the reasoning behind his idea, Kõlvart noted that

[i]n a situation where we already have one, we should come out and say it and make it official. It is not about what we call things but our actions. I said at the city government press conference that the situation is bad, while we need to count on it getting worse. Decisions need to be based on what could happen three weeks, a month or two months from now as opposed to recent statistics. Measures need to be preventive, not reactive. We are currently reacting with a delay.<sup>9</sup>

On this occasion, Kõlvart was supported by his party's boss as well as the former Prime Minister Jüri Ratas (*Center*) and one of the key members of the parliamentary opposition Urmas Reinsalu (*Isamaa*)<sup>10</sup>. However, in one of his latest TV interviews, Üllar Lanno, who was already cited at the beginning of this brief, questioned the necessity to proceed further with the Mayor's proposal. Being in agreement with the Prime Minister's line, Lanno argued that

[h]aving an emergency situation would not add anything practical to solving the situation. It would introduce only a few additional elements. The infection rate can only go down if people make sure to keep their distance and not infect others. [...] All the necessary attributes or possibilities for which an emergency situation was previously required have been introduced into legislation today. [...] It seems right now that this latest package [of measures] could be what causes the case rate to plateau and eventually go down. I believe it is all we need today.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 'Prime minister: No need for coronavirus emergency situation' in *ERR*, 10 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608137572/prime-minister-no-need-for-coronavirus-emergency-situation>].

<sup>9</sup> Mihhail Kõlvart as cited in Toomas Kask, 'Tallinn demands tougher Covid measures' in *Postimees*, 5 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7194505/tallinn-demands-tougher-covid-measures>].

<sup>10</sup> 'Ratas and Reinsalu: Another emergency situation is needed' in *ERR*, 12 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608140470/ratas-and-reinsalu-another-emergency-situation-is-needed>].

<sup>11</sup> Üllar Lanno as cited in 'Lanno: Emergency situation would not add anything practical', *ERR*, 12 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608140275/lanno-emergency-situation-would-not-add-anything-practical>].

This high-profile *intra*-political debate is still on, and, closer to the end of the month's second week, Estonia finished the vaccination cycle for about **38 per cent** of the population. In the meantime, the latest survey on the country's public opinion (conducted by *Norstat* on behalf of *MTÜ Ühiskonnauuringute Instituut*) showed that the governmental coalition (*Reform* and *Centre*) is supported by 53.2 per cent of prospective voters<sup>12</sup>, indirectly approving the current Government's decisions on tackling the crisis. Out of the parties, which are outside of the *Riigikogu*, the *Eesti 200* scored very high, collecting 12 per cent of the electorate's support<sup>13</sup>. In regards of the top-3, the Prime Minister's political force is leading the 'race' with 35 per cent, followed by the *EKRE* (19.8 per cent) and the 'centrists' (17.7 per cent). The latter party, as stated in the report, is "continuing a downward trend with a fall of 1.3 percentage points to its lowest level since before the March 2019 general election"<sup>14</sup>.

On 18 March, there is a likelihood that the *Riigikogu* will elect its new Speaker. The latest reformation of the Government, which made it possible for Kaja Kallas to eventually form her first cabinet of Ministers, is to lead to the predictable change of leadership within the country's parliament. It is known that Jüri Ratas is the choice for the ruling coalition for the post of the *Riigikogu*'s Speaker, and it appears to be inevitable that the former Prime Minister will soon be appointed to run the work of the parliament. This fact can speculatively mean that Jüri Ratas is not going to become a candidate for the post of the President, during the upcoming contest that is scheduled for the beginning of August 2021.

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<sup>12</sup> 'Party ratings: Reform continue on up, EKRE confirmed second-most popular' in *ERR*, 10 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608136897/party-ratings-reform-continue-on-up-ekre-confirmed-second-most-popular>].

<sup>13</sup> 'Party ratings: Reform continue on up, EKRE confirmed second-most popular'.

<sup>14</sup> 'Party ratings: Reform continue on up, EKRE confirmed second-most popular'.