




Weekly Briefing

Estonia political briefing:
A routine of political retrenchment during the pandemic
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 routine of political retrenchment during the pandemic

In political terms, this month has a very distinct linkage with the previous one. It was when Jüri Ratas (*Center*), the country's former Prime Minister, became the Speaker of the *Riigikogu*, without giving up the leadership in his party. A truly hard period for Ratas it had been, before he became free from having to run the country. In such a context, his current high-profile appointment can be considered a 'breeze', if compared to those 'hurricanes' he had to go through only a few months ago to politically survive. Symbolically, the return of the former Prime Minister to the country's political summit is featured by his expression that "[i]t is a good sign if the Estonian and EU flags are displayed side by side"¹. This is the reference to the decision made during the reign of Ratas' Second cabinet to remove the EU flag from one of the main halls of the *Riigikogu*, the White Hall. There is no real surprise that Jüri Ratas has changed his mind yet another time, reminding himself that "Estonia has had a very successful EU period [...] [and that] [t]he European Union has guaranteed our security, lent us economic strength and contributed to our culture by allowing us to travel freely"². From the analytical perspective, though, this change of heart shows that both Ratas and, probably, his party have already 'jumped' off the coalitional 'hook' they had with the *EKRE*, which used to successfully put plenty of political pressure on the *Centre Party* and its leader in the previous Government. 'The EU flag story' was one of those populist successes of the *EKRE*, but these days Jüri Ratas has to think on how to restore his political party's position as well as reputation. Clearly, there is quite a bit to restore.

In accordance to the findings of the most recent poll, conducted by *Norstat* on behalf of *MTÜ Ühiskonnauuringute instituut*, the *Centre Party* has 20.9 per cent of popular support³, which is not a tremendous drop from what Jüri Ratas and his party received after the latest parliamentary elections in the country (23.1 per cent, in March 2019). At the same time, the current Prime Minister's political movement, the *Reform Party*, is on 33.6 per cent these days⁴, which represents a noticeable upward trend from the same March 2019, when Kaja Kallas and

¹ Jüri Ratas as cited in Toomas Kask, 'Jüri Ratas: EU flag to return to the Toompea White Hall', *Postimees*, 19 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7205282/juri-ratas-cu-flag-to-return-to-the-toompea-white-hall>].

² Ratas in Kask.

³ 'Ratings: Reform continues steady hold over party support rankings' in *ERR*, 7 April 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608168601/ratings-reform-continues-steady-hold-over-party-support-rankings>].

⁴ 'Ratings: Reform continues steady hold over party support rankings'.

her party received 28.9 per cent of the votes. The picture is worrying for the ‘centrists’ all the way – the difference in popular support between them and the ‘reformists’ is nearly 13 per cent, making the former looking secondary if compared to the latter.

Out of the six largest political parties in Estonia (see their logos in *Picture 1* below), the *Eesti 200*, the only non-parliamentary party among them, is currently enjoying plenty of comfort with 11.4 per cent of the prospective electoral support. If taken together with the ‘social democrats’ (6.2 per cent)⁵ and the ‘reformists’, this trio can easily form the next Estonian Government without any prospective input from the *Centre Party*, should they all maintain their current level of popularity. As for the *EKRE*, considering their relatively stable 18.8 per cent⁶ or thereabouts, there is a likelihood that their performance in the previous governmental coalition will keep them away from being chosen as a partner to form a Government with for quite some time.

Picture 1: Logos of the six largest political parties in Estonia



Source: ERR

⁵ ‘Ratings: Reform continues steady hold over party support rankings’.

⁶ ‘Ratings: Reform continues steady hold over party support rankings’.

Evidently, the *Eesti 200* leadership are keen to maintain their current position in terms of popularity. Another analytical point is that the ‘centrists’ are chosen to get them off the road to the next Government of Estonia. Margus Tsahkna, the country’s former Minister of Defence (November 2016 – June 2017) and an influential member of the *Eesti 200*’s board, launched a severe critical attack on some of the holders of ministerial portfolios in the current Government – more specifically, on Tanel Kiik (*Centre*), Minister of Health and Labour. In an extensive message delivered via Estonia’s major current affairs TV show, Tsahkna noted that

[i]f Estonia functions with all of its digital possibilities, data, knowledge of the people, there would n[o]t have been the need to organise such mass events belonging to the XX century where people are invited to get injected. We should have reached people personally. There was chaos throughout, in the organization, communication, which ended with private medical centres getting fines and termination of contracts from the Health Insurance Fund. [...] Kaja Kallas does n[o]t have leadership skills. Tanel Kiik, who I respect, has been a minister responsible for two governments – instead of dealing with the pandemic, the last coalition dealt with a referendum. If Kiik does n[o]t make somebody in his managing area take responsibility, the trophy will reach him, political responsibility.⁷

Indirectly (or, most probably, also directly) responding to this kind of criticism, which is very normal to a well-functioning liberal democracy like the Republic of Estonia, the country’s Prime Minister decided to announce the Government’s plan on the “principles of decision-making and activities needed for Estonia to recover from the virus crisis”⁸. Making her political statement at the *Riigikogu*, Prime Minister Kaja Kallas talked about the process of establishing the country’s risk levels in the context of this and any other possible pandemics. Estonia has survived multiple occupations by foreign forces, but, apparently, it has not been prepared well enough to face the COVID-19 crisis and its consequences. While countries like New Zealand and Australia are set to start their no-quarantine travel bubble from 19 April 2021⁹, such a situation looks like a very professionally written science fiction for many Member States of the EU, including Estonia. As of mid. April 2021, a 5-million New Zealand has had 2,596 COVID-19 cases recorded, losing 26 people; a four times smaller Estonia has picked up 117,782 cases,

⁷ Margus Tsahkna as cited in ‘Eesti 200 board member: There is no political leader in current situation’, *ERR*, 7 April 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608168637/eesti-200-board-member-there-is-no-political-leader-in-current-situation>].

⁸ ‘PM: It is time for society to take back control from coronavirus’ in *ERR*, 8 April 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608170125/pm-it-is-time-for-society-to-take-back-control-from-coronavirus>].

⁹ ‘New Zealand, Australia travel no-quarantine bubble to start on 19 April - Ardern, Hipkins’ in *RNZ*, 6 April 2021. Available from [<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/439909/new-zealand-australia-travel-no-quarantine-bubble-to-start-on-19-april-ardern-hipkins>].

with 1,100 people having lost their lives because of the pandemic-associated infection¹⁰. The difference is huge, especially when one keeps in mind that both countries represent the developed side of the world's economy. Therefore, in order to eventually have a system in place and at the nearly total absence of the pan-EU approach on tackling the crisis as a politico-economic union, the Prime Minister proposed the following:

A four-tier system of risk levels will be rolled out for assessing the situation. A low, medium, high and very high-risk levels will respectively be described with the colours green, yellow, orange and red. On each level, possible activities for curbing the spread of the virus are described for individuals, organisations and the state. For each level, guidelines and recommendations can be created in various fields according to the specific characteristics of the field to protect people's health and reduce the need for government-imposed restrictions. The plan also includes descriptions of restrictions that are to be weighed by the government as the risk level changes.¹¹

Having analysed plenty of decisions made by the previous and her own Government, the Prime Minister specified that the whole idea **is not** about creating an opportunity for the Ministers to utilise a top-down approach every now and then. Instead of building a system that would be imposing different types of conditions on the population and businesses, Kaja Kallas is proposing the contrary:

[W]e want to include the entire society so that everyone should be aware of their role and responsibility in curbing the spread of the virus. We want that all people of Estonia as well as businesses and umbrella organizations operating here should be able to contribute constructive ideas and proposals on how to take sector-wide action to contain the virus. No one wants for their establishment, business, organisation or the entire sector to be shut down – everyone is tired of the restrictions.¹²

The current set of restrictions, discussed in a number of previous briefings, are not drastically severe, but the longevity of this uncertainty is making a noticeable impact, let alone socially or in economic terms, but also politically. For example, the topic on postponing the country's local elections (scheduled for October 2021) has already been discussed, giving the

¹⁰ Coronavirus dataset in *Terviseamet*, last updated 19 April 2021. Available from [<https://www.terviseamet.ee/en/coronavirus-dataset>].

¹¹ Kaja Kallas as cited in 'PM: It is time for society to take back control from coronavirus'.

¹² Kallas.

example of Finland that postponed its local elections from 18 April until 13 June¹³. The issue is still getting debated, while the currently imposed restrictions (originally due to end on 11 April) have been extended to 25 April. Tanel Kiik (*Center*), the same Minister of Health and Labour, who, as discussed, is receiving plenty of *critique* from the opposition, expresses cautious optimism that “it will be possible to make certain openings on 26 April [...] primarily speaking of outdoor conditions, the education sector”¹⁴. A perspective to have May-June without some of the major restrictions is a big political call, while this *routine* of political retrenchment is preparing the country for the local elections in autumn.

¹³ Toomas Kask, ‘Postponing local elections can be avoided’ in *Postimees*, 29 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7212531/postponing-local-elections-can-be-avoided>].

¹⁴ Tanel Kiik as cited in ‘Health minister: I am optimistic we can ease some restrictions on April 26’, *ERR*, 19 April 2021. Available [<https://news.err.ee/1608183118/health-minister-i-am-optimistic-we-can-ease-some-restrictions-on-april-26>].