



Weekly Briefing

**Estonia political briefing:
Entering a new political era of concerns
E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

China-CEE Institute

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Entering a new political era of concerns

If the pandemic literally ruined the normality of political routine in 2019-2021, the Russo-Ukrainian War is to dictate the Eurasian continent's internal politics, speculatively, for another five decades, at least. Beyond any doubts, Estonia and the country's political life are going to be substantially affected by the current global crisis. One does not have to be an expert in the field of political communication to predict that the first serious test for the Estonian political elites will be held in March 2023, during the next parliamentary elections (should the country avoid any extraordinary electoral 'exercises' before). History shows that the country's main parties get engaged into a more pronounced as well as new elections-focused activities by about nine-ten months before the time. It means that this coming Estonian summer, regardless of the usual coolness of the temperature, will be hot in political sense.

It appeared to be that the *Centre Party*, which historically, for three decades already, has been 'cultivating' the 'Russian theme' in Estonian politics, became the first to declare the upcoming challenge that it is currently facing – the Russian-speaking electoral cluster will somehow be reflecting on what is going on between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. How? It is a 'million-dollar' question, and there is a likelihood that it has a potential to turn the country's political landscape upside down in the immediate future. Yana Toom, a member of the *European Parliament* and an influential representative of the *Centre Party*, underlined the fact that the "war in Ukraine is having a negative impact" on her political party in polls, noting the following:

I can see that *Centre Party* voters are very torn over the war taking place in Ukraine. We [a]re losing voters. I am also losing them, starting from the moment when I condemned the war. It began after that. I receive quite a lot of unpleasant letters in which people express their disappointment and such. I hope that this wave of misunderstanding subsides in time. It [i]s possible that once we start receiving more information regarding what is happening there, that

something will change. But maybe not. It [i]s difficult for people to give up their steadfast convictions.¹

Certainly, the above statement is heavily political, because the perspective for the *Centre Party* to lose big time in March 2023 is very real – an educated guess allows to think that a significant number of people, who have been voting for the ‘centrists’ over the years, have a very ambiguous opinion on what Russia does in Ukraine. Presumably (and factually), there is a significant segment of the Estonian society that is still distinctly pro-Soviet, trying to find a moral clause in and a political justification for Russia’s atrocities committed against Ukraine. For example, as argued, the city of Narva, where “[m]ore than 95 per cent of residents [...] speak Russian [as their first language], and at least 30 per cent carry Russian passports”, currently feels like living “at the edge of a new Iron Curtain created by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine”, solidifying its status as “a place between two worlds, where Russia and Russian identity meet Estonia and the West”².

Objectively, the *Centre Party* can no longer maintain its trade-mark populist stance on ‘accommodating’ the Russian Federation’s major strategic policy narratives into Estonia-wide political discourse. Russia has already received and is still receiving loads of world-wide condemnations for its aggression against the Ukrainian sovereign state, and even a humble attempt support or even understand the latest Russian aggression can cost plenty in terms of non-repairable society-wide reputational damage for any political party. Thus, on 6 March 2022, Jüri Ratas, the ‘centrists’ Chairman and the *Riigikogu*’s Speaker, declared that his party’s board eventually confirmed that “the joint protocol on cooperation between the *Estonian Centre Party* and *United Russia*, concluded in 2004, has expired, and is no longer valid”³. The document had an 18-year-old turbulent history, being “unpopular with the general public and other political parties for much of that time”⁴, and managed to generate many rumours, suspicions, and controversies (especially, during the years of the parliamentary elections). From the electoral angle, however, a set of very serious questions still remains unanswered: where

¹ Yana Toom as cited in ‘Interview with Center MEP Yana Toom: We’re losing voters over Ukraine war’, ERR, 14 April 2022. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608564844/interview-with-center-mep-yana-toom-we-re-losing-voters-over-ukraine-war>].

² Phil McCausland, ‘Russian speakers in Estonia live in a tug of war between Russia and the West’ in *NBC News*, 11 April 2022. Available from [<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russian-speakers-estonia-epitomize-two-worlds-russia-west-rcna22789>].

³ ‘Center Party board annuls agreement with United Russia’ in *ERR*, 6 March 2022. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608522557/center-party-board-annuls-agreement-with-united-russia>].

⁴ ‘Center Party board annuls agreement with United Russia’.

are the ‘hard-core always pro-Russia’s voters’ planning to go to? between which political party are they planning to split up in March 2023? does the majority of these people go for the ‘centrists’ regardless? is the *Centre Party*, having felt its aforementioned vulnerability, going to try shaking up the country’s political life by demolishing the current governmental coalition with the Reform Party?

In the *intra*-societal side, the religious dimension needs to be counted in (even though the Estonian society is one the world’s most secular ones, but its Russian-speaking segment is predominantly *Orthodox Church*-oriented). As reported, Metropolitan Eugene of the *Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate*, in his extensive interview, did “not deny Russia’s invasion of Ukraine but stop[ed] short of condemning the Russian leadership for unleashing war, pointing to different interpretations of the ongoing aggression”⁵. Commenting on the interviewer’s statement that “Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24 [...] [,] [and] [t]ere is no way to contest that”, Metropolitan Eugene noted the following:

We cannot contest that. But can we say for sure what were its reasons for launching the operation? I will say again that while I am loathe to intervene in politics, we must admit that Russia's interpretation is that they anticipated an imminent invasion by Ukraine. I will not be evaluating this [claim]. Because it is one side’s argument against the other.⁶

With necessity, such a position cannot be neglected by the main political parties in Estonia – literally the country’s political elites will need to find the way to introduce the irrevocability of the situation to some of those who are still getting influenced by Russia’s rhetorical narratives, which push for justifications of the war. From the legal point of view, the *Riigikogu* did what it could – a law that amended the Penal Code was introduced by the end of April 2022, addressing Estonia’s negative attitude to such activities as “[p]ursuant to the act, joining the armed forces of a foreign state committing an act of aggression or any other armed unit participating in an act of aggression committed by a foreign state, participation in the commission of or preparing an act of aggression by a foreign state as well as knowingly and directly, including financially supporting an act of aggression by a foreign state is punishable

⁵ ‘Head of Orthodox church: Bombing civilian objects is a crime’ in *ERR*, 31 March 2022. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608549934/head-of-orthodox-church-bombing-civilian-objects-is-a-crime>].

⁶ Metropolitan Eugene as cited in ‘Head of Orthodox church: Bombing civilian objects is a crime’.

as a criminal offence”⁷. However, the legal dimension is one of many – the main one has to be found within myriads of societal aspects, which make the ‘basement’ for the nation either solid or weak. For example, one can notice an emerging trend of the so-called “awakening of ‘the good Russians’”⁸. For a range of different reasons and only just now, a number of Russian people (meaning – Russia-based or being from Russia) are experiencing some kind of a ‘revelation’ on what their country currently does, trying to not remember about a nearly decade-long “comprehensive smear campaign that included outright lies [...] against Ukraine in Russian state media”⁹. This trend can easily have a spill-over effect onto Estonia’s ethnic Russians who did not mind watching all those stories on Russian TV for many years, but all over sudden became surprised by the very fact of the Russian aggression. The economic side of the surprise is prevailing – the bank cards, how to travel, why the Russian passport is no longer welcomed for a simplified visa framework. How sincere these ‘revelations’ is, perhaps, the biggest security-bound challenge for any country with significant segments of Russian citizens.

By the end of April 2022, an Estonian reputable poll confirmed that, indeed, “[t]he war in Ukraine is changing the political parties’ landscape”¹⁰ in the country. In details, the Prime Minister’s *Reform Party* was on 30.9 per cent of the popular support, followed by the oppositional *EKRE* (21.5 per cent)¹¹. The electoral support of the ‘centrists’ – 16.9 per cent – was recorded “at the lowest point over the last few decades”, and the non-parliamentary *Eesti 200* nearly caught the *Centre Party* up with its 16.6 per cent. As argued by an analyst, “[t]he growth in the popularity of *Eesti 200* was probably largely due to [a message that] ‘we are like the *Reform Party*, but newer, better and more decisive’”¹². It could be speculatively suggested that, if there is an extraordinarily parliamentary election in Estonia, the ‘reformists’ and the *Eesti 200* are not too far from reaching a point of possibility to form a prospective governmental coalition on their own.

⁷ ‘Riigikogu passes law banning symbols of aggression’ in *ERR*, 24 April 2022. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608571546/riigikogu-passes-law-banning-symbols-of-aggression>].

⁸ Aimar Ventsel, ‘The awakening of the ‘good Russians’ in *ERR*, 1 April 2022. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608551983/aimar-ventsel-the-awakening-of-the-good-russians>].

⁹ Ventsel.

¹⁰ Mikk Salu, ‘The Reform Party dominates and the other parties are helpless’ in *Postimees*, 22 April 2022. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7506335/analysis-the-reform-party-dominates-and-the-other-parties-are-helpless>].

¹¹ Salu.

¹² Salu.