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DOMESTIC POLICIES

ESTONIAN POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE MID-2010S

D. Lanko*



The article provides an analysis of political party system of the Republic of Estonia in the mid-2010s. The analysis is based on the works of Moris Duverger. As one might expect, the establishment of proportionate electoral system in Estonia has resulted in the formation of a multi-party system, in which no single party dominates in the Parliament even in a short run. The article demonstrates that though the Estonian political party system develops in line with the tendencies typical of political party systems of most European countries, some of its elements are more common to post-communist countries. It indicates that the political party system in Estonia has stabilized throughout the past decade. Today, five sixths of voters support one of the four main political parties. A minority of voters does not consider any of the four dominant parties as a representative of their interests; thus, they vote for parties that were previously represented in the Parliament. This allowed the two minor political parties to pass into the Parliament at the 2015 elections: the Estonian Conservative People's Party, and Free Party. In the long run the minor parties will be able to keep parliamentary seats depending on their ability to build coalitions, either with the three governing parties — the Reform Party, the Pro Patria and Republic Union, and the Social-Democratic Party, or with opposition Centre Party. The article considers the impact of the split in the Estonian society between ethnic Estonians and Russophonic people on the political party system. It demonstrates that the majority of Russophonic voters in Estonia support the Centre Party, every major political party in the country has its Russophonic voters, while Estonian United Left Party, which promotes itself as a particular representative of the country's Russophonic minority, remains a marginal political force.

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The parliamentary election held in the Republic of Estonia on March 1, 2015, the course of the campaign, and the nature of coalition negotiations between the political parties following the announcement of election results make it possible to identify major trends in the development of the country's political party system in the mid-2010s. The proportional election system established in the early 1990s, having undergone only slight changes, shaped the country's multi-party system. Moreover, none of the parties has ever been dominant in the Parliament — the Riigikogu — even for a short time. The Reform Party, whose members (A. Ansip and Taavi Rõivas) have served as Prime Ministers, remains ruling due to its ability to form coalitions with other political parties. This party, characterised as liberal, has been in coalition with the conservative Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, the left Social Democratic Party, and even the Centre Party.

On the one hand, the Centre Party is supported by a significant proportion of Estonian Russian-speaking voters and thus is even more popular than the left Social Democratic Party. However, it does not show a similar ability to create coalitions with other parties. As a result, it has been in opposition for eight years. It is quite surprising, but the most stable ruling coalition in the history of the Estonian political party system has been the coalition formed by the liberal Reform Party, the conservative Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, and the left Social Democratic Party. However, the emergence of a stable four-party system, where the three above parties would form the ruling coalition and the Centre Party remain in opposition, is obstructed by the fact that most voters do not consider any of these parties as representing their interests in the governmental bodies. As a result, new political parties are gaining popularity in a short-term perspective.

In the 2015 parliamentary election, the new parties were represented by the Estonian Conservative People's Party and the Free Party. In a short-term perspective, their popularity owes to the powerful anti-Russian rhetoric adopted by its leadership against the background of deteriorating Russia-EU relations in the aftermath of the 2014—2015 Ukraine crisis. In a long-term perspective, these parties will be able to remain in the Parliament only if they manage to create stable coalitions with larger political parties. Otherwise, they will lose the 2019 election and become marginal. That is why the Estonian United Left Party positioning itself as a representative of Estonia's Russian-speaking population, remains a marginal party that did not win any seats either in 2015 or in the previous election. Most of Estonia's Russian-speaking voters prefer the Centre Party, others vote for other Parliamentary parties, and, finally, a considerable proportion of the Russian minority does not participate in Parliamentary elections.

Estonia's political party system in the context of general European and post-Soviet trends

Since the demise of the USSR, the interactions between the Estonian political party and election systems have been a proof of Maurice Duverger's thesis that proportional representation creates conditions favourable to foster

multi-party development [1, p. 298]. The 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Estonia establishes a parliamentary republic with a president elected by the Parliament (if the Parliament fails to elect a president, this authority is transferred to a special college comprising members of the Parliament and local municipalities). The Cabinet is formed by members of the Parliament according to the results of parliamentary election held in accordance with the proportional representation system. The prime minister has wider powers than the president in addressing the foreign and domestic policy issues. The proportional representation system also explains the large number of Parliamentary parties.

Political scientists outside Estonia pay little attention to the country's political party system considering it in comparison with the political party systems of the other post-Soviet states. A good example is the monograph by the Ukrainian political scientist A. Mekleshevich dedicated to a comparative analysis of the political party systems of the three Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — as well as Russia and Ukraine [2]. In Estonia, the most eminent researcher of the country's political party system is the political scientist R. Toomla, who published two monographs on the topic — one dedicated to the development of the Estonian political party system in the 1920s-1930s and the 1990s [3] and the other — to its development in the first decade of the 21st century [4]. R. Toomla considers Estonia's political party system over these periods in the context of general European traditions of political party system development — both those theoretically generalised in the above cited work of M. Duverger and the new trends identified only in the beginning of the 21st century.

It also seems justified to analyse Estonia's political party system in the context of trends characteristic of post-Soviet states. Firstly, one cannot but notice similarities between the political party systems of Estonia in Russia. Between the Estonian parliamentary elections of 2011 and 2015 and the elections in Russia in 2011 and 2015, the parliaments of both countries (in the case of Russia, the lower chamber of the Parliament — the State Duma) consisted of four parties, with the first one ruling, the second — oppositional, the third — nationalistic, and the fourth — social democratic. In both states, the ruling party relied on the support from either the nationalist or the social democratic party. Secondly, Russia still exhibits a binary attitude to Estonia and the other two Baltic states: sometimes they are considered as post-Soviet countries and sometimes as European. This explains the duality of Russia's foreign policy towards these countries [5].

Estonia's ruling coalition — a union of liberals, conservatives, and socialists

The ideological designation of the political parties or, in other words, “the communicative strategy aimed to present its favourable image to the target audience while jamming the competitors using ideological terminology” [6, p. 68], does not always have anything to do with ideology. However, the three political parties comprising the Estonian Cabinet in 2007—2015 opt

for spatial positioning. The most popular party — the Reform Party — positions itself as a liberal one. The leaders of this party — A. Ansip in 2005—2014 and T. Rõivas in 2014—2015 — have served as prime ministers for over a decade. In the first half of the 2010s, the popularity of this party was decreasing as the population's discontent with the government was growing on account of the global economic crisis. If, in the 2011 parliamentary election, the party won 33 seats in the Riigikogu — the unicameral Parliament of Estonia, in 2014, it had only 30 seats.

The popularity of the other two Cabinet parties was also declining. In 2001, the conservative Pro Patria and Res Publica Union had 23 seats in the Riigikogu, after the 2015 election, it had only 14. The losses of the Social Democratic Party were less significant — 19 seats in 2001 against 15 in 2015. Despite the ideological differences between the liberals, conservatives, and social democrats — who would create a two-party coalition against the third party in a three-party system — the parties managed to forge an alliance within the ruling coalition. Following the 2007 parliamentary elections, all three parties — the liberal Reform Party, the conservative Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, and the Social Democratic Party joined the ruling coalition.

This coalition, known as ‘A. Ansip’s second Cabinet’, stayed in power for four years between the 2007 and 2001 elections. This was the only case in Estonia since 1991, when the same ruling coalition stayed in power throughout the inter-election period. For instance, two cabinets worked between the 1992—1995, three in 1995—1999, two in 1999—2003, and two in 2003—2007. Finally, according to the results of the 2011 parliamentary election, the cabinet was formed by a coalition between the Reform party, the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union. However, this government did not stay in office until 2015. In 2014, it was replaced by a Cabinet formed by a coalition between the Reform Party and the Social Democratic Party. As a result, a stable coalition of liberals, conservatives, and social democrats emerged in Estonia. Its stability owes to the confrontation between these three parties, on the one hand, and with the oppositional Centre Party, on the other — the four of them representing the Estonian elite.

The Estonian Centre Party: eight years in opposition

If the Reform Party has been the ruling party in Estonia for over a decade, the Centre party has been in opposition since the 2007 election. In 2005—2007, the Reform Party and the Centre Party comprised the ruling coalition known as ‘A. Ansip’s first Cabinet’. The Centre Party’s leader E. Savisaar served as the Minister of Economy and Communications in this Cabinet. However, the 2007 election resulted in the formation of a three-party ruling coalition discussed above and the Centre Party became opposition. E. Savisaar was elected mayor of Tallinn and retained this post for the next eight years. Although, socialist or social democratic parties usually position themselves as representatives of the poorest voters, in Estonia, this

niche is secured not by the Social Democratic Party, as one could expect, but rather by the Centre Party widely supported by both the Russian minority and ethnic Estonians. The Centre Party is more popular among the Russian minority than ethnic Estonians, because, on average, the financial situation of the Russian-speaking population is often more difficult than that of ethnic Estonians.

The Centre party is one of the oldest in Estonia. It was established as early as 1991 as a successor to the Popular Front of Estonia. Another party with a long history is the Social Democratic Party (founded in 1990). After losing the 1995 parliamentary election and participating in a number of mergers, it was renamed the People's Party Moderates. Under the new name, it achieved success in the 2003 parliamentary election and regained its old name of the Socialist Democratic Party, under which it has been operating since. Finally, the third oldest party is the Pro Patria National Coalition (established in 1992). In 1994, a number of activists left the party to found the current ruling Reform Party. After the 1995 parliamentary election, the Pro Patria National Coalition merged with the Estonian National Independence Party forming the Pro Patria Union. Finally, in 2006, the Pro Patria Union merged with the populist Res Publica Party founded prior to the 2003 election and formed the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union.

Unlike the other Estonian political parties, whose support base differs significantly from one election to another, the electorate of the Centre Party has been stable over almost two decades. In the 1999 parliamentary election, it won 28 seats, in 2003 28, in 2007 29, in 2011 26, in 2015 27. The ruling Reform Party's criticism of the Centre Party rests on the alleged connection between the Centre Party's leadership and the Russian elite. Whereas the role of Estonia and the other Baltics in Russia's foreign policy has significantly diminished since 1999 [7], in Estonian politics, the image of Russia is still of crucial importance. If the Russian-speaking voters take the alleged connection between the Centre Party and the Russian elite positively, such connections — as the ideologists of the Reform Party see it — should appeal ethnic Estonians and compel them to vote for the other parties. In effect, this does not take place, and the Centre Party's electorate remains stable.

Far right parties in Estonia: a schism caused by the Ukraine crisis

The 2014—2015 Ukraine events did not affect the voters of the Centre Party in the 2015 election. No surprise that, after the Crimean referendum on joining Russia, the Centre Party's leader E. Savisaar adopted a neutral position stating that what matters is not whether the referendum was legitimate but that the population of Crimea and the rest of Russia is content with its results [8]. Paradoxically, these events caused a greater damage to the nationalistic Pro Patria and Res Publica Union. In the 2015 election, the party won 14 seats in the Parliament as opposed to 23 in 2011. The 2015 election was the worst for the party in more than a decade. It seems that the key cause of the Union's failure was a schism between the Estonian far right politicians triggered by the Ukraine events.

The merger between the Pro Patria Union and the Res Publica Party in 2006, on the one hand, made it possible for the untied party to become a more tangible force in Estonian politics, on the other, unsettled many veterans of the Pro Patria Union. As a result, foreseeing the failure of the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union in the 2015 parliamentary election, some veterans of the Pro Patria Union left the party and engaged in independent party activities. A. Herkel, the former leader of the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union in the Riigikogu, headed the Free Party, which brought together some of the veterans of the Pro Union party, who had left the Party after the merger with Res Publica. In the 2015 parliamentary election, this party won eight seats. However, the new party did not have any space for a political manoeuvre — it could enter the ruling coalition only with the Reform Party and the Pro Patria and the Res Publica Party. Prior to 2015, the party adopted a radical anti-Russian rhetoric; therefore, it can hardly form an alliance with the Centre Party.

Of greater interest is another political party, which won seats in the Riigikogu in the 2015 parliamentary election, namely, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia. On the one hand, this party is headed by M. Helme, Estonian ambassador to Russia in 1995—1999, who — alongside J. Madison — joined Estonian far right politicians after the diplomatic service [9]. M. Helme has authored several books criticising Russia's allegedly anti-Estonian policy [see, for instance, 10]. On the other hand, the party managed to win seven seats in the 2015 parliamentary election only due to its alliance with the Party of People's Union representing the interests of Estonian farmers. In 2007, the People's Union was part of the ruling coalition alongside the Centre Party. Therefore, one cannot exclude an alliance between the Centre Party and the Conservative People's Party of Estonia, if the latter abandons its radical anti-Russian rhetoric as the basis of its election campaign.

The ‘Russian’ parties of Estonia: a marginal position

The political parties positioning themselves as representatives of Estonia's Russian minority lost seats in the Riigikogu in the first decade of the 21st century. In 1994, the Russian Party in Estonia was established; it positioned itself as a successor to the Russian National Union of Estonia — a political party functioning in the country in the 1920s, which won a single seat in the 1920 parliamentary election. In the 1995 parliamentary election, this party created the Our Home is Estonia coalition with the United People's Party. The coalition won six seats in the Riigikogu. In the 1999 parliamentary election, the Russian Party in Estonia and the United People's Party ran separately. As a result, the United People's Party won six seats, whereas the Russian Party in Estonia did not pass the electoral threshold with 2 % of the vote. In the 2003 parliamentary election, neither the Russian Party in Estonia, nor the United People's Party obtained any seats in the Riigikogu.

The failures of the ‘Russian’ parties in Estonia were believed to stem from two circumstances. Firstly, it is the adoption of the law on Estonian

citizenship in the 1990s, which left many members of the Russian minority without the country's citizenship and thus the right to vote. Secondly, it is the passivity of the Russian-speaking population of Estonia. However, none of these factors is decisive. The events of 2007, when thousands of members of the Estonian Russian-speaking minority took to the streets after the government had decided to relocate the memorial to Soviet soldiers from the centre of Tallinn to the military cemetery in the outskirts, refuted the thesis about the passivity of the Russian minority [11]. The proportion of the country's permanent residents without the Estonian citizenship is also constantly decreasing, which means that many minority members undergo naturalisation thus gaining the right to vote.

The electorate of the Centre Party, which was expected to grow as the Russian-speaking residents were acquiring citizenship, does not increase. One can suppose, that some of them vote for the ruling Estonian parties, for instance the Social Democratic party, with which the Russian Party in Estonia merged in 2012. In the 2015 parliamentary election, 12 Russian-speaking Estonians representing almost all — both right and left — political parties won seats in the Parliament. It seems that some of them continue to vote for the United People' Party, renamed the Constitution Party in 2006 (in 2008 it merged with the Estonian Left Party to form the Estonian Untied Left Party), however this proportion is rather insignificant. In the 2015 Parliamentary election, this party obtained fewer than 1,000 votes, i.e. a tenth of a per cent. Finally, one can suppose that a significant part of the Russian minority does not consider any of the current parties as representing their interests and does not take part in elections.

The parliamentary election held in Estonia on March 1, 2015 demonstrated the stability of the country's political party system. Five out of every six voters opted for the same parties as four years ago. The discontent of a significant part of the population with the economic situation in the country resulted in the fact that the ruling Reform Party and the Social Democratic Party gained smaller representation in the Parliament, whereas the oppositional Centre Party obtained a few seats more than earlier. The least successful party was the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, which lost more than a third of its seats.

At the same time, the Riigikogu seats were gained by the Conservative People's party of Estonia and the Free Party, whose success rests on the anti-Russian rhetoric of its leaders. It seems that these parties can secure their success if they manage to create a coalition with other parties; otherwise, they will not be able to past the electoral threshold in the parliamentary election of 2019, whereas the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union will 'regain' some of the seats lost in 2015. The chances of the parties positioning themselves as representatives of the Russian minority — predominantly, the Estonian United Left Party — seem slim in the situation when other parties, for instance the Centre Party, have found support among the Russian-speaking population.

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