



General Elections in Estonia, a round up one week before the election

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D-77 days before
the poll

912,565 Estonians i.e. +15,000 more in comparison with the previous general election on 4th March 2007 are being called to ballot on 6th March next to renew the 101 members of the Riigikogu, the only chamber in Parliament. Early voting starts on 28th February and can be undertaken until 2nd March - on-line voting (by computer or mobile phone) started on 24th February and will be possible until 2nd March. Internet voters can review their vote as many times as they want or finally decide to go to ballot at their polling station on election day; in which case the slip they post in the box cancels their previous vote. The country mobilised a "cyber-brigade" to prevent or at least foil any possible attacks against the electronic voting system set up especially for the general elections. In 2007, Estonia was victim to a cyber-attack that was blamed on Russian hackers and which forced government sites and also those of the media and the banks to shut down for a certain time. In 2008 Tallinn, together with NATO created a cyber-brigade comprising voluntary military staff which was responsible for countering attacks of this type.

A record number of people are standing under the "independent" label. They put forward several reasons to explain their choice – the most frequently quoted reason being that they want to highlight a particular issue. "Votes for me will protect social democratic values," says Mark Soosaar. Leo Kunnas indicates that his aim is to highlight defence issues, which a party that has to cover all of society's problems cannot do. Rein Teesalu says "only votes that focus on one candidate should lead to entry into Parliament and not in the present way, where the position of the candidate on an electoral list is important." Member of the Greens and independent candidate Eugen Veges deplores that political decisions are taken in ministerial cabinets, supposedly on "behalf of the people". Finally Mart Helme accuses the political parties of having forgotten their principles and believes that they have become real businesses.

Many public personalities are standing on 6th March. Hence actress Katrin Karisma-Krumm will be standing for the Reform Party (ER) of Prime Minister Andrus Ansip; actor Indrek Saar will be standing for the Social Democratic Party (SDE) of Sven Mikser, actor Aivar Riis-

salu will sport the colours of the Centre Party (K) of Edgar Savisaar; actress Elle Kull, decathlon athlete Erki Nool and navigator Toomas Toniste will be standing for the Pro-Patria Union-Res Publica (IRL) of Mart Laar.

The Estonian political scene has consolidated over the last few years. The country now has two opposing blocks: one on the right which rallies the Reform Party and the Pro-Patria Union-Res Publica and one on the left in which we find the Centre Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Estonian People's Union (ERL). In this electoral campaign the progressive nature of taxation is one of the major subjects which divides the two extremes of the political scale. The two parties in the outgoing government coalition (the Reform Party and the Pro-Patria Union-Res Publica) support the maintenance of the single taxation rate for VAT, income and on companies (set at 21% for 2010) whilst the parties on the left support the introduction of a progressive taxation system.

This is why the declarations of the former Mayor of Tallinn (2005-2007) and Vice-President of the Riigikogu, Jüri Ratas (K), which state that the Social Democratic Party might prove to be a good government partner for

the Reform Party, aim to discredit Sven Mikser's party. Disagreements over the tax policy make this almost impossible. Indeed the social democrats support a progressive income tax system (21% for those who earn less than 1,000€ per month and 26% for those who earn more than this). They also want to increase family allowance; reduce VAT on food to 5% and on company profit to 10%.

The parties on the right have made good financial management by the State and budgetary balance their priorities. The left believes that some social spending and even the increase in wages in the public sector are necessary both to help the poorest Estonians and to stimulate the country's growth.

The Pro-Patria Union-Res Republica leader, Mart Laar, rejected any possible alliance with the Centre Party after 6th March, likewise any possible collaboration with any other party that would not make budgetary balance its priority. Mart Laar said he wanted to see the present government coalition continue after the general elections. *"I am sure that together with the Reform Party we can come to an agreement over a transition towards free higher education and on an allowance for mothers,"* he said. Both parties in the government coalition disagree on some things but Mart Laar says he is convinced of his ability to change the Prime Minister's party's position on several issues.

Prime Minister Andrus Ansip, intends to continue his present policy if his party wins on 6th March. He recalls that Estonia had experienced average growth of 4.82% over the last decade which is the highest rate in the European Union. The head of government stressed that growth was not a goal in itself but that it was vital so that the State could offer quality social services to his countrymen and to enable an increase in retirement pensions.

He reflected on the so-called *"Vladimir Yakunin"* affair in the daily Postimees on the occasion of the visit of the latter to Tallinn. On 21st December last the Kaitsepolitsei (security police, the Estonian secret service) released a report revealing that the Centre Party leader, Edgar Savisaar had called on the chairman of the Russian railway company – and former KGB officer – Vladimir Yakunin, for funds. According to the secret services the business man is said to have paid 1.5 million € towards the Centre Party's electoral campaign and an equiva-

lent sum for the construction of an orthodox church in Lasnamäe, an area of Tallinn, the town of which Edgar Savisaar is the mayor. The latter denies the fact that his party received money from the chairman of the Russian railway company. The head of government said that anyone who accepted a meeting with Vladimir Yakunin in Tallinn were *"suspicious"*. *"It is not the first time that Moscow has tried to bring an obedient Prime Minister to power in Estonia whose financial problems make it dependent on the Kremlin. Many people in Russia want to turn Estonia into a Russian sphere of influence and subject us to Moscow's will. These are the people Edgar Savisaar welcomes with open arms,"* declared Andrus Ansip who again said that he would never govern with the Centre Party.

The President of the Republic Toomas Hendrik Ilves has said that he would never put Edgar Savisaar forward for the post of Prime Minister.

The main opposition party is suffering tension which emerged in December when the Vladimir Yakunin scandal occurred. Evelyn Sepp, the party's former spokesperson said in a TV interview on Kanal 2 that Edgar Savisaar was *"no longer the right person to lead the party"*. Former Interior Minister (2005-2007) Kalle Laanet (K) said last month that the Centre Party should choose a new leader. Another former Interior Minister (2002-2003), Ain Seppik also makes no secret of the fact that he supports the replacement of Edgar Savisaar as head of the Centre Party.

Just one week before the election Sven Mikser is a firm favourite amongst the Estonians. According to a poll by Klaster Ltd, published by the daily Eesti Päevaleht, the social democratic leader is the second best loved politician by the electorate behind outgoing Andrus Ansip who is due to win 40.5% of the vote. Sven Mikser is due to win 29.3% much more than Edgar Savisaar (13.4%) and Mart Laar (16.8%).

A new comer to the political arena (he was elected as head of the SDE on 16th October 2010), the social democratic leader has really made a difference to the political landscape. More generally the polls show a clear decline in the credibility of the Centre Party; most of the supporters of the main opposition party no longer seem to believe that Edgar Savisaar can be elected as Prime Minister again. *"The left wing voter now thinks that Sven Mikser is the only left wing politician who*

has a chance of leading the government one day," says political expert Agu Uudelepp.

All political observers say they are convinced that the Reform Party and the Pro-Patria Union-Res Publica will retain power after the elections on 6th March. Only doubts remain about the attribution of the ministerial posts of Foreign Affairs Defence and Economic Affairs. According to Tonis Stamberg, director of the polling institute Turu-uuringute, the Reform party holds all the right cards since *"the painful decisions taken in the past during difficult times will pay off."* The analyst says that in contrast with the election on March 4th 2007 when Andrus Ansip had promised to grant 25,000 crowns to civil servants and to make Estonia one of the five richest countries in the next fifteen years, the parties in office have been very modest with regard to the promises they are making. *"The situation is clear and everyone is calm. Everyone knows who will win the general election, who will lose it and which parties may form the next government,"* stresses Tonis Stamberg. The latest poll by Faktum-Ariko shows that the Reform

Party is due to win in 7 of 12 of the country's constituencies and is due to win 39% of the vote and 47 seats in Parliament. The Centre Party is due to win 5 constituencies and take 25% votes and 28 seats; the Pro Patria Union-Res Publica, is due to win 14% and 15 seats and the Social Democratic Party 11% and 11 seats. The independent candidates are credited with 8% of the vote. The Estonian People's Union is due to win 2% and the Greens 0.4%; both of these parties are not due to be represented in the Riigikogu.

"In reality the gap between the Reform Party and the Centre Party is very small – both parties are running almost neck and neck," warned Kristen Michal, Secretary General of the Reform Party who believes that *"voters will choose the person they want to see take the post of Prime Minister and will decide between Andrus Ansip and Edgar Savisaar."* *"Four years ago 1.7% of the electorate made the difference in the result,"* she insisted (the Reform Party won 27.8% of the vote and the Centre Party, 26.1% of the vote during the general elections on 4th March 2007).

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