

Success for liberal parties, and populists lose in Estonian parliamentary elections

The liberal Reform Party (ER), led by outgoing Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, has emerged as the clear winner of the Estonian parliamentary elections held on 5 March. It garnered 31.24% of the vote and won 37 seats, up 3 from the previous elections on 3 March 2019. It overtook the right-wing populist Conservative People's Party (EKRE), led by Martin Helme, which became the second largest party in the country, but which fell back winning 16.05% of the vote and 17 elected members (- 2). The left-wing Centre Party (K), led by Juri Ratas, took third place in the poll but is also in decline with 15.28% of the vote and 16 MPs

(-10). With 13.33% of the vote, the liberal Eesti 200 party led by Kristina Kallas won 14 seats. The Social Democratic Party (SDE), led by Lauri Läänemets, obtained 9.27% of the vote and 9 seats (- 1). It overtook Isamaa (I), Helir-Valdor Seeder's Christian Democratic Party, which lost 8.21% of the vote and won 8 seats (-4).

Turnout, at 63.50%, was almost the same as in the March 2019 elections. For the first time, more than half of Estonians (50.97%) voted by internet.

Results of the Estonian parliamentary elections of 5 March 2023

Turnout: 63.53%

| Political Parties | Number of votes won | % of votes won | Number of seats |
|---|---------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Reform Party (ER) | 190 659 | 31.24 | 37 |
| Conservative People's Party (EKRE) | 97 959 | 16.05 | 17 |
| Centre Party (K) | 93 243 | 15.28 | 16 |
| Eesti 200 | 81 347 | 13.33 | 14 |
| Social Democratic Party (SDE) | 56 578 | 9.27 | 9 |
| Isamaa (I) | 50 114 | 8.21 | 8 |
| United Estonian Left Party-United | 14 607 | 2.39 | 0 |
| Parempoolsed (Those on the Right) | 14 035 | 2.30 | 0 |
| Estonian Greens | 5 889 | 0.96 | 0 |
| Independents | 5 887 | 0.96 | 0 |

Source : <https://rk2023.valimised.ee/et/election-result/index.html>

Parliamentary elections in Estonia

5th March 2023

Kaja Kallas can be pleased with the result. After two years in office, the outgoing Prime Minister still has the confidence of her compatriots. "Voters have to choose between two different roads. We support an open, friendly, pro-European and intelligent country and our main opponents think that we should turn inwards, follow our own interests and stop helping Ukraine," she said on the eve of the election. She can also boast of having secured 31,821 preferential votes in her name, a record in the country's history. She beat Tallinn mayor Mihhail Kolvarit (K), who won 14,598 preferential votes, and Tallinn city councillor Kristen Michal (ER), who won 9,207 votes.

The war in Ukraine has undoubtedly had an impact on the elections. For many Estonians, whose country shares a border of almost 300 km with Russia, this is "their" war. They probably feel more than other Europeans that by defending Ukraine they are fighting for their own country and for democracy. "People are very concerned about security issues. They know that even if Russia loses, it is still dangerous, threatening and potentially aggressive while it is on our doorstep," said Tarmo Jüristo, founder of the Liberal Citizens' Foundation (SALK).

On 22 February, the parliament voted to increase the defence budget from 2% to 3% of GDP. Estonia, which sent anti-tank missiles to Kyiv in the early weeks of the conflict, is one of the countries that is devoting the largest share of its GDP (over 1%) to helping Ukraine. Similarly, it is the European state that has taken in the largest number of Ukrainians in relation to its population (which stands at 1.3 million): around 124 000 refugees since 24 February 2022. 77,000 are still living in Estonia.

The Prime Minister also asked the European Union to impose sanctions on Russia as soon as Vladimir Putin recognised the Donetsk and Lugansk Republics. Estonians particularly appreciate the way the crisis is being managed along with the war between Moscow and Kyiv and Kaja Kallas' position as an unconditional supporter. "The majority of Russian speakers are politically passive. They don't want to speak out about the war. There is also a generation

gap between young Russian speakers, who are increasingly reacting like average Estonians, and older ones. Those who actively support Russia are very few in number," said Kristi Raik, deputy director of the International Centre for Defence and Security, adding: "No pro-Putin party is in a position to play a role in these parliamentary elections. The Russian-speaking population in Estonia is not a homogeneous group," said Marek Tamm, a historian and professor of cultural history at Tallinn University, who said that, according to opinion polls, half of Russian speakers are opposed to Russia's war in Ukraine. Only a quarter are said to support it.

"The current political debate crosses ethnic lines. Before, most Russian speakers voted for the Centre Party, now people are more determined to choose between populist aspirations and the desire for reform," said Tarmo Jüristo, who said that young voters are less and less supportive of a community's interests when they cast their ballot. Russian speakers make up 28.50% of Estonia's population.

Martin Helme, who repeatedly said that it was necessary to be more conciliatory with Russia and who campaigned for a halt to arms deliveries to Kyiv and to the reception of Ukrainian refugees as well as a decrease in immigration to protect Estonian workers, did not convince his compatriots, including Russian speakers. The populist leader had promised to lower energy bills in the event of victory. In vain. "People are really afraid of the future and the main parties, especially those of the outgoing government, are not giving them any answers," he said. His proposals did not appeal to Estonians either.

The Centre Party lost its status as the first opposition party since it came third. At the beginning of March 2022, it had officially broken the cooperation contract that had bound it since 2004 to United Russia (ER), Vladimir Putin's party. It condemned the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian armed forces. "The Centre Party no longer has the image of a classic left-wing party and is no longer associated with Russian politics. It has lost part of its electoral base. Among Russian speakers, one third supports Ukraine, one

third is pro-Putin and the last third is afraid to speak out," analyses Tonis Saarts, professor of political science at Tallinn University.

Kaja Kallas, 45, has a degree in law from the University of Tartu and a degree in economics from the Estonian Business School. She is the daughter of the former President of the Central Bank of Estonia and former Prime Minister (2002-2005) Siim Kallas (ER). After practising as a lawyer, she was elected in 2010 as a member of the Riigikogu and in 2014 as an MEP. In 2018, she became the leader of the Reform Party, which she led to victory in the parliamentary elections on 3 March 2019. However, Kaja Kallas did not become Prime Minister until two years later, in

January 2021, and she is the first woman to hold this position in Estonia. She governed with the Centre Party before, , forming a new coalition in July 2022 that included, in addition to her party, the Social Democratic Party and Isamaa.

On 5 March, Kaja Kallas scored a victory that should lead her to retain her position as head of government. The Reform Party could form a liberal coalition with Eesti 200 and the Social Democratic Party.

President Alar Karis now has fourteen days to nominate a candidate for the post of Prime Minister, who will have the same amount of time to form his or her government and secure the confidence of parliament.

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