

Estonia's Prime Minister Andrus Ansip resigns

Joanna Hyndle-Hussein

Andrus Ansip, the leader of the liberal Reform Party, who has served as the prime minister of Estonia since 2005, announced his resignation on 23 February and will formally hand it in on 4 March. Ansip, who has led the centre-right cabinet partnered by the conservative Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL), is making way for the founder of the Reform Party, former prime minister, Siim Kallas. Kallas is returning to active politics domestically after a ten-year stint in Brussels, where he served as vice-president of the European Commission and the European Commissioner for Transport. Ansip intends to replace Kallas as European Commissioner, but the decision to this effect will depend on the new coalition. Kallas has been making efforts to gain support in parliament and has been negotiating the makeup of the new coalition for several weeks already although he has not been formally nominated by the president.

Commentary

- The planned role reversal in the Reform Party is motivated by preparations for the parliamentary election in Estonia scheduled for 2015. According to forecasts, the Reform Party, which triumphed in 2011, is losing popularity due to corruption scandals. In the local elections last year, representatives of the Reform Party were only in third place (13%), less than their coalition partners and political opponents from the pro-Russian Centre Party led by Edgar Savisaar, which won as much as 32% of the votes and is now the most popular party. Kallas has not been tainted by any of the scandals and his task is to regain the confidence Estonians have in the Reform Party. He also has the personal ambition to lead the government of Estonia when the country holds the EU presidency in 2018 and to prevent Savisaar from leading the government at that time.
- The existing coalition, which Kallas will use as the base to build his own coalition on, has a small majority of votes (55 out of 101). To guarantee parliament's support, Kallas may be forced to attract another grouping to the coalition, most probably the Social Democratic Party, which President Toomas Hendrik Ilves originates from. The negotiations could also decide Ansip's future. It is still uncertain whether he will be nominated EU commissioner, since potential coalition partners of the Reform Party are also interested in putting their own candidates forward for this post.
- The government change will take place at a time when Estonia has resumed relations with Russia, which were frozen after the Bronze Soldier monument was removed from the centre of Tallinn in 2007. The Russian and Estonian ministers of foreign affairs

signed a Border Treaty on 18 February. Many Estonians find this document is controversial, since their country has lost more than 5% of its territory to Russia in comparison to the provisions under the Tartu Peace Treaty. The fact that the treaty has been signed does not mean that a breakthrough in bilateral relations has taken place; no Russian senior official, not even the minister of foreign affairs, has come on an official visit to Estonia as yet. Russia is still putting pressure on Tallinn regarding the rights of the Russian ethnic minority. Kallas is likely to be more successful in normalising relations with Russia than Ansip, who has been fomenting Estonian nationalism. However, he must keep his actions balanced, since excessive concessions to Russia in exchange for economic co-operation might be unacceptable to the Reform Party's electorate.