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Estonia: the fall of the Rõivas cabinet and the end of isolation of the Centre Party

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Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas, the leader of the liberal and pro-Western Reform Party, which had governed Estonia since 2001, lost support of his coalition partners, and the parliament passed a no confidence motion against him on 9 November. Since 7 November, the Social Democrats and the conservative party Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL) have been engaged in talks on building a new coalition with the main opposition force – the Centre Party. The prime minister did not intend to resign, but all the parliamentary groupings but the reformists backed the vote of no confidence against him. The cabinet led by Rõivas was formed in April 2015. Considering the differences in the political manifestos of the coalition members (above all in the area of economy and social issues), the implementation of the governmental agenda was slow, and tension was present among the leaders of the coalition parties. The inability to co-operate among the government coalition partners led to the October crisis over the election of the president of Estonia.

Commentary

- The Centre Party overcame its political isolation in which it had been since 2007. It was unable to form a coalition due to the openly pro-Kremlin and anti-NATO stance taken by its former leader, Edgar Savisaar. The change of the leader opened up the way for the Centre Party to return to the government circles. Jüri Ratas became the president of the party on 5 November, and this allowed the party to embark on coalition talks with the Social Democrats who have a similar leftist profile. The Social Democrats' leader, Jevgeni Ossinovski, an ethnic Russian, demanding Rõivas's resignation supported the nomination of Ratas for prime minister. The Centre Party (it has 27 out of 101 members of parliament) is the second most popular political force in the country, after the Reform Party. Russian-speaking people predominate among its electorate (around 25% of the country's residents, but some of them also vote for the Social Democrats).

- The Reform Party, which is losing power, was viewed by Estonia's Western partners as a guarantor of the country's Euro-Atlantic approach. Ratas, the leader of a grouping which has a reputation of a pro-Russian party, will have to take action to maintain Western partners' trust. He has declared that an Estonia governed by his party will remain a loyal member of the EU and NATO. As a politician who appeals to the Russian-speaking electorate most of whom for not want the presence of NATO troops in Estonia he has

become engaged in promoting among his voters the country's existing defence policy based on increasing the presence of allied NATO troops in the Baltic region.

- The new government will be more left-inclined. More emphasis will be put on strengthening social support and actions aimed at consolidating ethnically divided society. Ratas, like Ossinovski, wants to ensure that the needs of the Russian-speaking minority are taken into account to a greater extent in the education and regional policies, which is expected to improve the integration of this group with the rest of society. However, the Centrists and the Social Democrats have no parliamentary majority (a total of 42 seats) and both of these parties are engaged in coalition talks with the conservative IRL party. However, this is a party with a liberal and free market approach, which may make the implementation of the left-wing parties' pro-social agenda more complicated.