

Estonia: The Reform Party wins the parliamentary election

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The parliamentary election held on 5 March in Estonia ended in victory for the ruling liberal Estonian Reform Party (Eesti Reformierakond, Reform), which won 31.2% of the vote and will be the main force in the new cabinet. In addition to Reform, five other parties crossed the 5% electoral threshold. The parliamentary arithmetic suggests that the process of forming the future coalition (which needs at least 51 seats) should be fairly smooth. The most convenient option for Reform, the party of current prime minister, Kaja Kallas, will probably be to join forces with the liberal Estonia 200 (Eesti 200) and the Social Democratic Party (Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond, SDE).

The conservative-nationalist Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) came second with 16.1% of the vote, followed by the Estonian Centre Party (Eesti Keskerakond, Centre) with 15.3%. Three smaller groups also entered parliament. Formed in 2018, Estonia 200 gained 13.3% of the vote and entered the Riigikogu for the first time. SDE came fifth with 9.3%. The Isamaa (literally, Fatherland) party also crossed the electoral threshold, with 8.2% of the vote. Turnout was 63.7%, the highest ever for independent Estonia.

Security issues and the international situation were the dominant themes in the election campaign. Most parties called for raising defence spending to at least to 3% of GDP and for reforms of the broader security sector. Another important topic was the ongoing war in Ukraine and its consequences for Estonia. The biggest policy differences were between two factions: Reform and EKRE led by Martin Helme, which tried to position itself in opposition to the pro-Ukrainian agenda of Kaja Kallas's party. Members of EKRE pointed to the dangers posed by the influx of war refugees and criticised excessive transfers of military equipment to Ukraine, which depleted Estonia's stockpiles. Social and economic issues took a back seat in the debate.

However, it was a report published by the Politico website on 18 February that caused the biggest stir during the campaign. It described efforts by Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin to influence the 2019 elections in Estonia and suggested that the conservative EKRE had collaborated with public relations agencies controlled by him. Although Estonian counter-intelligence agencies did not confirm any such ties, the topic became a tool of political warfare employed by the major parties in the election campaign.

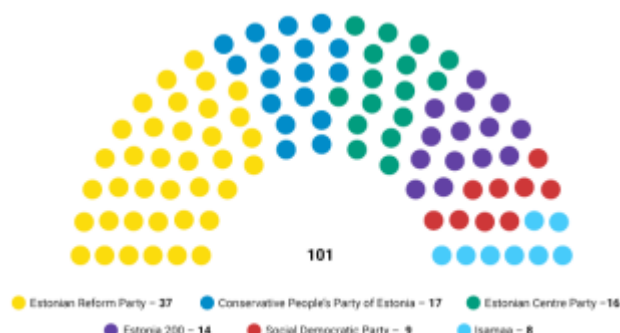
Commentary

- Security issues have been one of the most important political concerns for Estonian society over the past year. Reform and Prime Minister Kallas have managed to reap a

significant electoral dividend from this, having sought since 2015 to position themselves as the only party capable of guaranteeing security for the Estonian population. Despite the economic downturn, high inflation and soaring energy prices, socio-economic issues have faded into the background. This is reflected in the results of two parties that tried to focus their message on economic issues. The conservative-nationalist EKRE scored below their polling average. The equally ambitious economic support programme proposed by the Social Democrats also failed to gain traction.

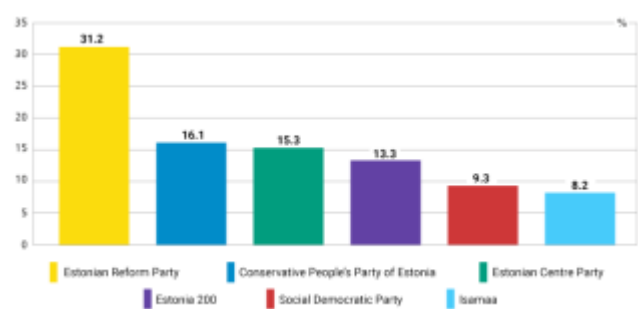
- The election's biggest loser is the Estonian Centre Party led by Jüri Ratas, which lost a significant number of votes (around 36,000) in its strongholds: the Ida-Virumaa region and the northern and eastern districts of Tallinn. The reasons for this can be seen in the disillusionment of the Russian-speaking electorate. The party did not oppose the education reform (the Estonianisation of education) and the decommunisation of public space, which were both important issues for Russian-speaking voters. Most of these stayed home as they could not find an alternative among the other parties running.
- The Estonian Reform Party won 37 seats in the 101-seat parliament, which puts it in pole position ahead of negotiations to form a new coalition government. An alliance with Estonia 200 is enough to give it a slim majority of 51 votes. A deal involving the broader liberal camp (Reform, Estonia 200 and SDE) would guarantee as many as 60 seats. We are unlikely to see a continuation of the current arrangement (Reform, SDE and Isamaa), which would give the coalition 54 votes, or a return to cooperation between the Reform and Centre, which would produce 53 seats. Preliminary talks between Reform Party and potential coalition partners began even before the elections, which means that a government coalition should be formed fairly quickly. President Alar Karis is also hoping for a swift formation of a new cabinet.
- Any government arrangement with Reform as the dominant force guarantees that the current course in Estonia's foreign and security policy will be maintained. The future cabinet will continue to implement programmes of military and humanitarian support for beleaguered Ukraine. It will also call for the fastest possible integration of Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic structures. In the area of security policy, it will increase defence spending and implement ambitious programmes to strengthen and modernise the Estonian armed forces.

Chart 1. The distribution of seats in the Riigikogu after the elections of 5 March 2023



Source: *Riigikogu valimised 2023*, valimised.ee.

Chart 2. The results of individual parties in the elections of 5 March 2023



Source: *Riigikogu valimised 2023*, valimised.ee.