

ESTONIA'S PARTY SYSTEM TODAY: ELECTORAL TURBULENCE AND CHANGES IN ETHNO-REGIONAL PATTERNS

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Received 24 August 2019

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-1-1

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A well-developed party system has emerged in Estonia over the decades of independence. There are, however, distinct geographical patterns of voting. A number of new political parties have appeared in the country; the regional and ethnic patterns of voting (the latter matter much in Estonia) have changed dramatically. This study aims to analyse the recent changes in the Estonian party system as well as the causes of these changes and the effect of the ethnic and geographical factors on the transformation of the electoral behaviour of Estonian citizens. The research employs a systemic approach that makes it possible to solve the agent–structure problem to the benefit of the general structure and integral system of Estonia's party scene. The method of comparative systemic analysis is used alongside those adopted in electoral geography. It is concluded that the effect of the ethnic and geographical factors on electoral behaviour is diminishing as a civil society based on civic rather than ethnic principles is emerging in the country. The main drivers of the change are the formation of new parties and coalition-building — both have an immediate effect on how the image of the parties is perceived by voters.

Keywords:

party system, electoral geography, ethnicity, non-citizens, civic society, coalition-building

Introduction

Since regaining independence, Estonia has developed a mature party system. Almost every ideological position possible has a party to defend it in the country. According to the principles of electoral geography, some parties are traditionally more popular in certain areas. In Estonia, such set patterns have existed for over

To cite this article:

Oskolkov, P.V. 2020, Estonia's party system today: electoral turbulence and changes in ethno-regional patterns, *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 12, no 1, p. 4–15. doi: 10.5922/2078-8555-2020-1-1.

fifteen years. The northeastern county of Ida-Viru and Tallinn used to vote for the Estonian Centre Party (the reasons for that are considered below), whereas the southern counties of Valga and Võru preferred social democrats. The emergence of new players in the Estonian political scene, however, subverted the usual pattern. Coalitions were formed that were quite unexpected for the conservative public, and the electoral map of the country changed.

The article attempts to answer several questions. How has the Estonian party system changed over recent years? What actors are dominating this system? How have the regional patterns of support for certain Estonian parties changed in recent years? What role do the ethnic and border factors play in these changes? A viable hypothesis is that the appearance of new party players in the Country eroded the traditional region-specific electoral preferences resulting in the ethnic and border factors losing their power.

The article has the following structure. The first part provides an overview of Estonia's party system and its changes in 2007–2019, i.e. during the last four electoral cycles. The most conspicuous patterns of voting for selected parties over the study period are identified. The level of analysis is a municipality (*vald*), or a county, if county data are congruent enough for a generalisation to the first level of territorial units. Further, the paper describes the effect of the ethnic factor on Estonian electoral dynamics. Finally, it indicates the causes and consequences of these changes basing on the analysis of the dynamics of the electoral-geographical situation in Estonia over the past twelve years.

The Estonian party system and regional voting patterns

The Estonian party system is highly fragmented. Although only five parties sit in the parliament (*Riigikogu*), there are fifteen registered political groups in the country. According to Giovanni Sartori's classification, Estonia is a country of moderate pluralism. Using the data from the last parliamentary election (2019), it is possible to calculate the Laakso-Taageprea index of the effective number of parties for the country:

$$N = \frac{1}{\sum p_i^2} = \frac{1}{0.288^2 + 0.23^2 + 0.178^2 + 0.114^2 + 0.098^2} = \frac{1}{0.190128} = 5.3.$$

Therefore, if rounded to an integer, the effective number of parties in Estonia is five, which is the exact number of parties in the *Riigikogu*.

Below is an overview of the evolution and ideologies of Estonian parliamentary parties.¹

The Centre Party (*Keskerakond*) is one of the oldest parties in the country. Founded in 1991, it was as a successor to the Popular Front of Estonia, one of the two structures that had a key role in regaining independence. Edgar Savisaar

¹ We also recommend that the reader peruse Rein Toomla's comprehensive study of the 2000–2010 history and structure of Estonian political parties [1, lk. 32–50].

headed the party. Its ideology is social liberalism or left populism. The centrists, however, have traditionally taken advantage of the needs of the Russian-speaking electorate by declaring their support for education in the Russian language, the simplification of naturalisation, and other popular measures. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise that, since 1999 (when the party broke out of partial isolation imposed after a series of scandals), the colours of the centrists have covered the northeastern Ida-Viru county (the most 'Russian-speaking' area of Estonia, it borders on Russia) and Tallinn, which also has a high proportion of Russian-speakers. In 2016, Jüri Ratas replaced Savisaar as the leader of the party (the consequences of this change will be discussed below). The 'dishonourable discharge' was accompanied by the former leader being accused of corruption and connections to the Kremlin (particularly, Vladimir Yakunin and some members of the United Russia party). As early as 2010, the Estonian Internal Security Service (KaPo, Kaitsepolitsei) named Savisaar an agent of Russian influence in its report² [see also 2].

The right liberal Reform Party (Reformierakond) is another veteran of the Estonian political scene. Siim Kallas, the then president of the Bank of Estonia and a current vice-president of the European Commission, founded the party in 1994. The party was inspired by Friedrich Hayek's and Milton Friedman's ideas of economic liberalism. Party members were in the ruling coalitions from 1999 to 2016. Although the reformers (colloquially referred to as 'squirrels' because of the party logo) won the most votes in the 2019 election, their gain was not enough for them to form the government on their own. Almost all Estonian counties on the map have been painted the colours of the reformers from 2007 when the party ceased to be a comfortable coalition partner and turned into an independent political force.

The Social Democratic Party (Sotsiaaldemokraatlik erakond) was established in 1990 as a successor to several social democratic groups that struggled for the independence of Estonia both inside and outside the country. The first leader of the party was the sociologist Marju Lauristin. In 1996–2004, having merged with the agrarians, the party was renamed Moderates (Mõõdukad). The social democrats were represented in the government only in 2016 and 2019. They were a safe and compromise-seeking partner that could provide additional support for the cabinet without imposing unrealistic conditions. In this respect, the situation of the social democrats is similar to that of the Free Democratic Party in Germany — a swing party ready to support any coalition, yet a priori unable to win the majority of votes. In 2007, it became evident that the party was more popular in the south of the country (the Valga and Võru counties). An analysis of the 2015 and 2019 electoral maps shows a dramatic reduction in support for the social democrats. In 2019, there was not a single county where they won the majority of votes (see Fig. 1 and 2). The preferences of Võru county residents shifted to the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (right-wing popu-

² Kaitsepolitseiameti käskkiri, 21.12.2010, nr. 98T.

lists), whereas Valga voters supported the reformers and the centrists. The Kohtla municipality of the Russia-bordering Ida-Viru county, which voted for the Social Democratic party in 2015, was incorporated into the Toila municipality in 2017. Two years later, the untied municipality voted for the reformers (see Fig. 1 and 2).

The Pro Patria party (*Isamaa*, Pro Patria and Res Publica Union [IRL] before 2008) is a right conservative party with an ideology close to Christian democracy. The Pro Patria Union (*Isamaaliit*) was founded in 1995 by a merger of the Estonian National Independence Party (ENIP) and the Pro Patria National Coalition (a union of Christian democrats, conservatives, and republicans). In 2006, they were joined by the Res Publica conservative group. International commentators and Russian-speaking voters often associate the resultant party with Estonian nationalism. Some authors have called it (without good reason) extreme right [3, p. 84]. The Union owes this image largely to its past. In the 1990s, its representatives were the most ardent advocates of the complete economic and political overhaul of the country and its accession to European and Atlantic integration structures. In the early 1990s, the ENIP and Pro Patria absorbed most of the Soviet dissidents, the intelligentsia expressing nationalist sentiments, and re-emigrants.

In recent years, the IRL has tried to clean up its image through attracting Russian speakers. The climax of this strategy was recruiting the Russian-speaking journalist Viktoria Ladõnskaja to spearhead the parliamentary campaign [4, pp. 36–38]. The effect achieved this way was cancelled out when, just before the 2019 election, Pro Patria adopted the motto ‘*Isamaa on eesti keeles*’ (‘Fatherland in the Estonian language’). Naturally, the sensitive Russian-speaking voter saw a potential threat to the Russian-language field in that slogan. The counties and municipalities that vote predominantly for the IRL are scattered across the electoral maps of 2007–2019. Remarkably, in 2019, Pro Patria received the majority of votes only in the Jõgeva municipality of the Jõgeva county (see Fig. 2; that is especially surprising because head of the municipality Aare Olgo and his predecessor Enn Kurg are centrists; probably, the reason was Centre Party fatigue).

The Tallinn political scientist Tõnis Saarts distinguishes two types of democracies formed in Estonia. The first one is a nationalist defensive democracy, which continues the tradition of the Estonian Citizens’ Committee (established in 1990), places the values of national security above those of democracy per se, and employs a rhetoric of confrontation. The second type, civic democracy, is a descendant of the ideas of the Popular Front of Estonia. It gives priority to democratic values and the rhetoric of compromise [5, pp. 80–82]. The former is characteristic of Pro Patria and the latter of the centrists and the social democrats.

The Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE, CPPE), which can be classified as right-wing populist, was established in 2012 as the Estonian Patriotic Movement (Eesti Rahvuslik Liikumine, ERL, EPM) merged with the People’s Union of Estonia (Eestimaa Rahvaliid, PUE). The party uses eurosceptic, anti-immigrant, anti-Russian, and homophobic

rhetoric. Leaders of the EKRE have criticised the government (before becoming part of it) for the ‘non-democratic centralisation of governance and media monopolisation’ [6, p. 98]. The EKRE was headed by Mart Helme, who, among other things, was earlier the Estonian ambassador to Russia. The party exploits the theses of ‘immigration threat’, ‘Russian threat’, and the European Union allegedly undermining Estonia’s sovereignty. An important role is played by the youth wing of the party, the Blue Awakening, which is an effective tool to recruit right-minded young people. Since the party’s establishment, its electoral attractiveness has grown significantly with the help of populist mottos. On a 2015 map, only three municipalities are wearing its colours: Martna in the Lääne county, Koonga in the Pärnu county, and Orava in the Põlva county. There were many more such areas in 2019 (see Fig. 1 and 2), the year when the party joined the coalition government with Pro Patria (the cabinet was dubbed EKREIKE — EKRE, Isamaa, Keskerakond).

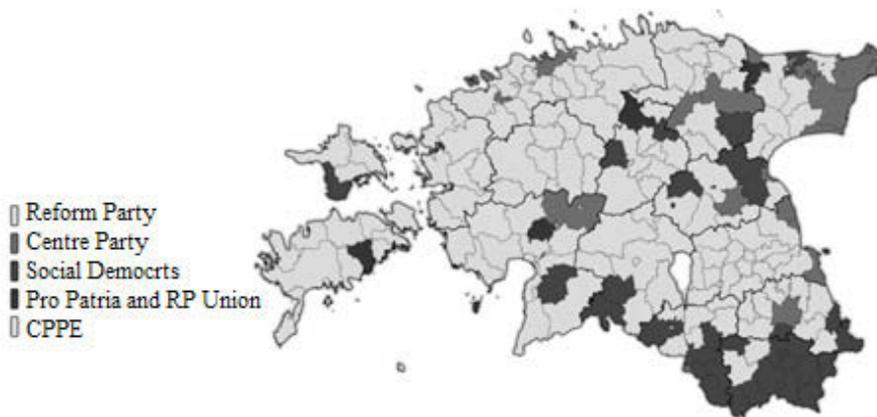


Fig. 1. The distribution of votes for major parties in the *Riigikogu* election of 2015⁵

Other parties have entered Estonian politics within the last 5 years, alongside the EKRE. The most remarkable ones are the Estonian Free Party (Eesti Vabaerakond) and Estonia 200. The former was established on the verge of the 2015 election just to attract votes and enter the parliament. It was a ‘party for a party’s sake’. The latter was founded by the ‘veterans’ of the IRL who opposed the merger of Pro Patria and Res Publica and anticipated a defeat of the union in the 2015 election [7, p. 73]. Although experts have stressed that the party lacks a clear ideology [8], the latter can be roughly described as right centrist. In 2015, having recruited several celebrities, the Free Party got into *Riigikogu*. In 2019, it, however, did not reach the 5% threshold.

Estonia 200 (Eesti 200) is a pure example of an electoral project. The party was established in 2018. Its name is an allusion to Estonia’s 100th anniversary

⁵ Eesti Erakondade Ajalugu. 2015. URL: <http://www.erakonnad.info/kaardid/2015-RK.html> (access date: 17.08.2019).

celebrated that year. The title suggests that, if led by this party, Estonia will solve all its urgent problems and reach its 200th anniversary as a prosperous country. The party was headed by the political scientist Kristina Kallas. The election campaign received much criticism. The party's political technologists put posters that read 'Estonians only' and 'Russians only' on public transport stops without explaining that the prints were part of a campaign. This way the party tried to attract attention to the persistent ethnic and linguistic divide. Following that move, the support for the party halved [9]. Scandals and the absence of a clear-cut position (except the Manichaean 'for all that is good' discourse) prevented Estonia 200 from reaching the electoral threshold.

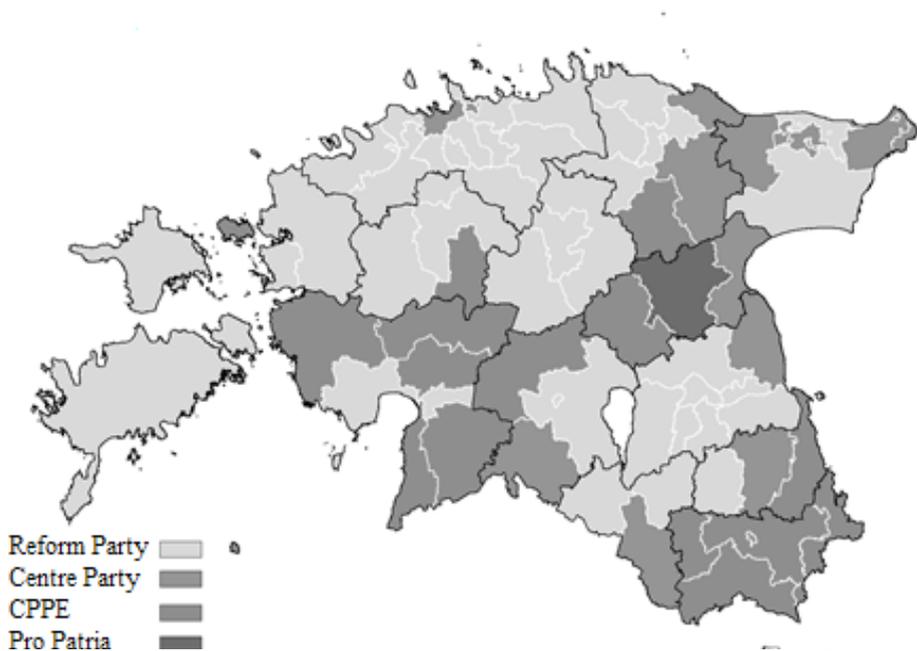


Fig. 2. The distribution of votes for major parties in the 2019 Riigikogu election⁴

The ethnic factor in Estonian party politics

The largest and most visible ethnic minority in Estonia is Russians (avoidance of the more inclusive term 'Russian-speakers' is deliberate). The Russian population of Estonia is heterogeneous. It comprises the descendants of the Russians who lived in Estonia before the 1917 Russian Revolution (a special and numerous group is Old Believers, who settled in the Lake Peipus area in the late 17th century) and during the first independence period (1918–1940); the Russians who arrived in Estonia after the country had become part of the USSR (and their descendants); and the emigrants of the most recent decades.

⁴ Estonian Legislative Election 2019. *Electoral Geography*. 2019. URL: <https://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/estonia2019/2019-estonia-legislative-municipalities.png> (access date: 17.08.2019).

When discussing the Russian population of Estonia, it is impossible to ignore the problem of stateless persons, or 'aliens'. The set of 'aliens' and that of Russian Estonians are intersecting but not equal: firstly, the alien status applies only to those who arrived in Estonia after 1940 and their descendants (not all of them, however); secondly, not every stateless person in Estonia is Russian. According to Statistics Estonia, 328,299 Russians (24.78% of the total population) lived in the country in 2019. Most of them resided in the Harju county (184,600, including the capital city of Tallinn; 30.87% of the total county population) and the border Idu-Vira county (101,248; 74.34% of the county population).⁵ As on January 1, 2019, there were 76,148 stateless people in Estonia. The two numbers are incomparable. As to the composition of stateless people, we could find only 2011 data. Taking the continuing positive trend into account, these data suggest that the subsets 'Russians' and 'aliens' are not equal and that the discourse based on identifying the former with the latter is irrelevant: in 2011, only 21.1% of ethnic Russians in Estonia had an alien's passport.

The problem of aliens arose when, having regained independence, Estonia embraced the legal principle of continuity, i.e. the country declared itself the successor of the republic of 1918–1940. Among other things, this meant that citizenship was granted only to the citizens of that republic and their descendants [for more detail, see 10]. The others could (and still can) either acquire citizenship through naturalisation (the procedure was formalised only in 1995 when then the new version of the Law on Citizenship was adopted) or settle for the alien status (*välismaalane*, 'foreigner', in Estonian). In this sense, Estonia chose a path similar to that selected by Latvia, which also opted for continuity and introduced the alien status (*nepilsoņi*). Latvian aliens, however, have much fewer rights than their counterparts in Estonia do. Lithuania, whose Russian minority is not sizable (there was no mass internal migration from the RSFSR to the republic), chose the 'zero variant', under which there would be no qualification for citizenship. To a degree, the decision not to grant citizenship to part of the population was driven by (reasonable) concerns that, having obtained electoral rights, such a large minority will stay loyal to the USSR and, in a democratic way, impede radical reforms of the country's economy and political system.

Some experts have classified Estonia and Latvia as ethnocracies (in Russian sociology, this concept has been developed by Zhan Tereshchenko [11, p. 55]; see also [12]) or ethnic democracies (proposed by Sammy Smooha [13, pp. 55–56]). Without going into detail, this classification of the Baltic states seems debatable. Following Alexander Tevdoy-Bourmouli, the case of the Baltics is rather that of delayed (by objective circumstances) nation-state building in the time when the concept of nation-states is dying out [14, p. 194].

⁵ Rahvastik soo, rahvuse ja maakonna järgi, 1. Jaanuar. *Eesti Statistika Andmebaas*. 2019. URL: http://andmebaas.stat.ee/OECDStat_Metadata/ShowMetadata.ashx?Dataset=RV0222&Lang=et (access date: 17.08.2019).

In the context of this study, we are interested, first of all, in how aliens affect voting. This influence is almost absent: stateless people (those who hold an alien passport, *välismaalase pass*) do not have the right to vote in national elections, although they do in municipal ones. Thus, the Centre Party can count on the votes of not *all* the Russians/Russian speakers but only naturalised ones, which account for most of Estonia's Russian-speaking population. For the Russians who have naturalised or acquired Estonian citizenship by other means, the ethnic status is not the decisive factor when it comes to electoral preferences. Many Russian speakers vote for other parties, whereas the party's electorate is not limited to Russians. As Dmitry Lanko argued cogently in 2015 before the change in the party leadership, although 'the majority of Russophonic voters in Estonia support the Centre Party, every major political party in the country has its Russophonic voters' [7, pp. 67–68]. According to his calculations, in the 2015 Riigikogu election, 'twelve Russian-speaking Estonians representing almost all, both right and left, political parties won seats in the parliament' [7, p. 75]. Nevertheless, the political group led by Savisaar consciously promoted itself as a 'Russian' party. Today, amid the gradual emergence of the civic nation of 'people of the Estonian land' (*eestimaalased*), which includes naturalised Russians, the new party leader Ratas is trying to change its image. Any transformation of established public perception brings both gains and losses. The above maps of recent Estonian elections prove as much. In 2019, as compared to 2015, the centrists sustained losses in their 'home turf' in the Ida-Viru county, particularly, the Alutaguse municipality (in 2017, it incorporated the municipalities of Alajõe, Iisaku, Illuka, Mäetaguse, and Tudulinna; see. Fig. 1 and 2). The centrists lost the most voters to the Reform Party. Naturalised Russian-speaking voters are, little by little, abandoning usual loyalty to Russophile social democracy in favour of inclusive right liberalism.

It is of interest to consider the results of 2017 municipal elections, in which, as it was mentioned above, aliens had a right to vote. In contrast to the national election, the Centre Party managed to win the most votes (27.3%), with 44.4% in Tallinn and 52.9% in the Ida-Viru county. The EKRE did not have any support in the North-East. The party won only 7% in Tallinn and 6.7% nationwide.⁶ The fact that the parties did not get similar results in the 2017 municipal and 2015 national elections is explained by voters treating elections of different levels differently (they base their decision on the functions that elected candidates will perform) as well as by the conservative electoral preference of those who do not have the right to vote in national elections. There is, however, no direct link between the results of municipal and national elections, particularly, if there is a time lag.

The causes and consequences of changes in the Estonian election map

Among the central causes of changes in the regional patterns of voting for Estonian parties, two seem to be worth noting: 1) coalition building; 2) the appearance of new party actors.

⁶ Cf.: Valimistulemused//Kohalikud Valimised 2017. URL: <https://kov2017.valimised.ee/valimistulemus.html> (access date: 16.09.2019).

The 2016 coalition came as a serious blow to the parties that formed it. The centrists would usually enter into coalition negotiation only with those actors that positioned themselves close to the centre of the political spectrum. The right IRL would consider the reformers or the moderate social democrats as partners. In November 2016, the first government of Jüri Ratas was formed. It comprised ministers representing the Centre Party, the Social Democratic Party, and Pro Patria. Many voters who viewed the centrists as an electoral stronghold of the Russian speakers interpreted the agreement with Pro Patria, a clearly right and professedly nationalistic party, as a betrayal of their interests. Disappointment worked both ways: right voters were dissatisfied with a cabinet shared with 'pro-Russian' centrists. The role of the coalition in eroding electoral patterns should not be overestimated. The centrists have lost part of their electorate after having replaced their popular leader Savisaar with the young technocrat Ratas, who, among other things, annulled the party's agreement with United Russia and declared that Crimea had been occupied. The same is true for some of the 'hawks' of Estonian national idea. Having voted for Pro Patria, they were dispirited by the party's conciliatory rhetoric. Considerable parts of both groups of citizens voted for the EKRE in the next parliamentary election.

Here, the first proposed factor meets the second one. New right-wing parties (more exactly, party, since the Estonian Free Party hardly survived the last parliamentary term) benefitted from the disappointment with the major party actors and managed to sideline the latter. The EKRE gained political prominence in the previous 2015 election as a result of anti-migration sentiment, which the party successfully exploited. By 2019, the politics of its partners made the EKRE a force to be reckoned with. Amid disappointment with the 'old' parties, national populists entered the stage with ambitious slogans ready to attract both the national-conservatives and the Russian speakers. Curiously, in 2016, the EKRE members of the Riigikogu received a piece of parquet. The gift-givers aimed to make a pun: the Estonian word *parketikõlblik* means both 'suitable for parquet flooring' and 'with untarnished reputation'.

In this sense, Ratas's widely criticised decision to enter into a coalition agreement with the national-populists was justified. Many scholars of right-wing populism have stressed that, once in the government, a populist party either finds itself unable to fulfil its big promises and loses popularity or, having taken on additional responsibility, abandons its radical stance [15, p. 20]. When in opposition, such a party becomes increasingly influential, because it is seen a victim of enforced isolation. This strategy, however, is not universal. Although it worked in Finland, in Austria, the undoing of the right-wing was a political scandal, the so-called Ibiza-gate, rather than the inability to fulfil the promises.

The capacity of the EKRE to attract the votes of the Russian-speakers is noteworthy. Andrey Makarychev and Vladimir Sazonov have emphasised that some members of the EKRE, who see the Russian community as a potential partner in anti-immigrant campaigns and an electoral resource, are implementing an inclu-

sive strategy [16, p. 454]. Although the significance of the ‘Russian threat’ is not minimised, the party leaders try to distinguish in their discourse between local Russians (a part of the Estonian electorate) and the hypothetically hostile Russian Federation [17].

Of course, we do not have an election map for the next cycle, yet we can expect that the traditional maps, which we have seen since 2007, will continue to erode. There will be new areas of voting for the EKRE (and, probably, new parties that will be established before the 2023 election) and the reformers, who were forced out of the government by the centrists. Whereas some voters ‘forgave’ the Centre Party with a heavy heart for forming a coalition with right conservatives, a coalition with open right-wing populists, who have been accused (often falsely) of pro-Nazi sentiments, is too much for the traditional centrist electorate. The elder of Põhja-Tallinn, Raimond Kaljulaid, ostentatiously quit the party. The same intention was announced by the veteran of the party Vladimir Velman, even though he never carried it out. According to recent polls, the scandals that plagued the first months of Ratas’s second cabinet reduced support for the centrists to 17.8%. At the same time, support for the Reform Party (the winner of the election; Ratas rejected a coalition with the party and thus formed an unstable government with right-wing populists) increased to unprecedented 38.5% [18].

Conclusion

The five major parties in Estonian politics, which have seats in Riigikogu, are the Centre Party, the Reform Party, Pro Patria, the Social Democratic Party, and the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia. As to the new party projects established in recent years the EKRE was the only successful one. Its success was so enormous that it joined the coalition government. Although the ethnic factor of the Russian minority (and the related factor of proximity to the Estonian–Russian border) has had an important role in the political development of the country, its electoral influence is waning: naturalised Russian-speaking voters are switching from steady support for the Centre Party to voting for other parties, primarily, the Reform Party. This change is a sign that a civil society based on civic rather than ethnic principles is emerging and consolidating in Estonia. The recent parliamentary election (2019) showed that the social democrats, Pro Patria, and the centrists are gradually losing their ‘home turfs’. The cause is, however, the mistakes made by the coalition governments, the composition of which was a surprise for the voters of constituent parties, rather than the appearance of new players. The latter is a visible but not decisive factor. Recent polls suggest that the election map of Estonia will continue to change. The transformation of the party discourse and the party system itself will cause the traditional pattern to erode further. All the above suggests that the studies of the party systems of Estonia and other CEE countries should focus on interdisciplinary research using a wide range of methodological tools, particularly, the methods of electoral geography, statistics,

critical discourse analysis, event and sentiment analysis, etc. Methodological synthesis is the only way to obtain a comprehensive picture of the institutional and discursive transformation of political party systems in the region.

Acknowledgements

This study conducted at the MGIMO University was supported by the Russian Science Foundation within project No. 19-78-10004 ‘The transformations of electoral behaviour in the regions of countries bordering on the Russian Federation: a comparative spatial analysis’.

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