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Changing party dynamics in Europe and Estonia: bringing Europe into the electoral competition

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The changing European political party landscape requires the mainstream parties to rethink their identity and agenda from the left-right divide into a broader set of identifiers. Using Estonia as a case study, this brief argues that integration of EU politics and developments into mainstream political parties' character would provide a more balanced and informed debate about the EU, currently dominated by Eurosceptic parties.

Introduction

In the last few years, mainstream parties have been in decline across Europe, while parties in the fringe have seen a surge in popularity. The General Election for the Estonian parliament – Riigikogu – took place this year on the 3rd of March. As a result, five parties entered the Parliament. The elections delivered a victory to the liberal Reform Party. The governing Centre Party came second, and the third place was taken by the right-wing populist Conservative

People's Party of Estonia (EKRE)¹, followed by Pro Patria and the Social Democrats. The Centre Party has formed a fairly Eurosceptic government with EKRE and Pro Patria, leaving the winning Reform Party to take up a seat in the opposition.

With the discussions running high on the future of the European Union (EU) and in the context of the upcoming European Parliament elections in May 2019, this brief reflects on the changing party politics in Europe on the example of Estonia. It argues that this shift offers the mainstream parties an opportunity to redefine their identity where in addition to traditional left-right divide, party identity and agenda are drawn from attitudes and policies vis-à-vis Europe and shaped by the developments and debates taking place in the EU.

¹ Estonian Conservative People's Party, *Eestimaa Konservatiivne Rahvapartei (EKRE)*

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Changing party politics in Europe

The European political party landscape is going through a transformation. In addition to the traditional left-right spectrum based on distributive justice principle, parties have become either more technocratic or populists. More and more parties are required to define themselves on new grounds such as cosmopolitan versus nationalist, pro-European versus anti-European, technocracy versus emotion.²

Among the parties that took part in the Estonian General Election, a similar pattern emerged. EKRE represented the nationalist, Eurosceptic (but not against Estonia's EU membership) party that appealed to voters' emotions and grievances with its loud rhetoric. On the other end was the newly formed Eesti 200, who did not get into the Parliament, but represented a strong technocratic agenda by trying to appeal to voters with expertise it holds among its membership. Mainstream parties fell between the two with a mix of left-right affiliation. The Centre Party with its slogan and promise of a "fair country" and Pro Patria with its strong emphasis on patriotism aimed to appeal to emotions while proposing left-wing (Centre Party) and right-wing (Pro Patria) policies. The Reform Party in contrast focused more on

specific issues, such as the recently reformed tax system and pensions, coming forward as more technocratic.

The EU in Estonia and in the party platforms

According to Eurobarometer statistics, Estonians are pro-European and this positive attitude has been on the rise since 2015.³ 45% of the population has a positive attitude towards the EU, while 45% holds a neutral attitude. 9% of the population holds negative attitudes towards the EU.⁴ However, statistics also show an interesting paradox. Estonians feel that their chance to influence the developments in the EU is very little, and/or they lack the necessary knowledge to have an informed opinion. When looking at the Eurobarometer surveys on specific policy issues, it is common to see that Estonians opt for the answer "do not know" or "neutral" often in a larger scale than the European average.⁵ However, at the same time, Estonians support the EU.

There are 84 days between the General Election of Estonia on 3 March 2019 and the European Parliament Elections on 26 May 2019. Allowing to think that the parties would use the opportunity to more or less bring the campaigns for both elections together or at least sequence them. However, the close proximity did not

² Chris Bickerton (2019) *The European Union: A Citizen's Guide* UK: Pelican, p 229

³ European Commission, (2018), *Standard Eurobarometer 90*, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2215>

⁴ The equivalent numbers for the EU28: 43% positive, 36% neutral and 20% negative.

⁵ European Commission, (2018), *Special Eurobarometer: Future of Europe (including climate change)*, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2217>

affect parties' engagement with the European Parliament elections or European themes.

Each party platform touched upon Europe and its future. Common themes rose across parties. There is a strong anti-federal stance, and all parties stressed the importance of the EU as an organisation of nation-states. Infrastructure projects and support to farmers and the agricultural sector are prominent themes and often approached first from the EU perspective. On foreign and security policy, some party platforms go into more detail, others less so. Support continues towards the Eastern Partnership and closer EU-NATO cooperation across political parties.⁶ However, in television and public debates, these topics rarely arose and thus were barely discussed.

Redefining political parties

The transformation of the political landscape in Europe and in Estonia opens up an opportunity for the national parties to redefine their character and agenda. Moreover, this is needed.

In EU member states, almost all government policies today are shaped to a more and lesser extent by the EU. EU membership offers new opportunities; however, it constrains member states through both regulation and interdependency. Mainstream parties have rallied support based on the opportunities that the EU offers, putting forward reasoned arguments and offering technocratic solutions,

while often dismissing or softening the limits that EU membership creates. In contrast, Eurosceptic populist forces, such as EKRE in Estonia, have built their support on the limits of EU membership and offered emotion-filled arguments tied to the survival of the nation and people's community.

Connection to the nation and people's communities is missing in the mainstream parties' agenda and identity. The sense of belonging via terms such as "European value system" or "global village" is too abstract and far for people to grasp. However, redefining belonging through national and European politics can strengthen the relations with voters.

Therefore, mainstream parties in Europe and Estonia would benefit from redefining their relation with the EU and European Parliament groups. Mainstream parties should start engaging with the debates and the developments in EU politics. For example, drawing their position from their principle of social justice and the experience of a small country in between the forces of globalisation. Why does the Centre Party not hold views on how to move forward with European competition policy? What do Estonian voters think?

EU developments becoming part of the national political and electoral competition would

⁶ European Commission Representation in Estonia, (2019), *Ülevaade erakondade seisukohtadest EL küsimustes*, https://ec.europa.eu/estonia/news/20190228_erakonna

[d_el_et?fbclid=IwAR0nVfvGft80y_D1Sfp7u-vzMvFE6HXtQ3d77TBQyYqdCw_AK5pcyichxRk](https://www.facebook.com/tepsa/?fbclid=IwAR0nVfvGft80y_D1Sfp7u-vzMvFE6HXtQ3d77TBQyYqdCw_AK5pcyichxRk)

strengthen the democratic nature of the EU, as well as strengthening national politics.

Conclusion

Estonia has been a member of the EU for 15 years and has integrated well in the system and structures of the EU. The structural European integration has been completed. However, political integration of the society and people is still ahead of Estonia and other EU member states. This does not mean the creation of an EU

polity or weakening the nation-state. It means exposing EU issues to an electoral competition through national politics. At the moment, this space is dominated by right-wing populists like EKRE, leaving European citizens exposed to an unbalanced and often unfair debate about the EU and its developments. To change that, mainstream parties need to throw their hat in the ring. As Chris Bickerton says: “The trouble of the European integration does not lie in Brussels, it is in the capitals of the member states.”⁷

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⁷ Chris Bickerton (2019) *The European Union: A Citizen’s Guide* UK: Pelican, p 230



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