

# Liberal Democracy in Estonia: Cracks behind the Seemingly Spotless Façade

Tõnis Saarts, Nikolai Kunitsõn, Raivo Vetik

## *Abstract*

Estonia is often seen as a model student among the post-communist countries. Many renowned think tanks and organizations measuring the quality of democracy (e.g., Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy, Bertelsmann Foundation) often give Estonia the highest scores in the region. However, the seemingly spotless façade hides growing tensions and emergent contradictions. The current paper will focus on the two most worrisome trends that have become evident in recent years, if not even earlier: (1) the limited success in integrating the large Russian-speaking minority and (2) the rise of the populist radical right. The failure to integrate the ethnic minorities would increase frustration and political alienation among Russian speakers, making it more difficult to build a healthy, cohesive democratic community. However, the rise of the populist radical right, namely the remarkable electoral success of EKRE (Estonian Conservative People's Party), has proven to be a bigger challenge because it demonstrates that many Estonians are deeply dissatisfied with how democracy works in their country. The article discusses whether it would be possible for dissatisfied Estonians and Russians to join forces to challenge the current liberal democratic model in Estonia. The analysis shows that even if the initial attempts have failed, one could not entirely rule out that prospect.

**Keywords:** Estonia, liberal democracy, democratization, right-wing populism, the Russian minority.

## **Introduction**

Estonia is, indeed, often regarded as a post-communist *wunderkind*: a country which has not only been renowned for its good economic performance, relatively low level of corruption, and well-functioning institutions but also for its quality of democracy. According to the data provided by Freedom House (Nations in Transit), Varieties of Democracy (V-dem), and Bertelsmann Foundation, Estonia's scores of democracy are higher than those of any other post-Soviet country, including the other Baltic States<sup>1</sup>.

Nonetheless, at a closer look, one can witness several tensions and contradictions in the current model of Estonian democracy. More precisely, two most disturbing trends stand out. First, despite numerous efforts to integrate the Russian-

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Mölder, "Freedom and Democracy," in *The Estonian Human Development Report 2012/2013*, ed. by Mati Heidmets (Tallinn: Eesti Kootöökoda, 2013), 67-73; Kjetil Duvold, Sten Berglund, and Joakim Ekman, *Political Culture in the Baltic States* (Cham: Springer, 2020).



speaking minority into Estonian society, this process has not been as smooth and successful as expected, and thus many Russian speakers still feel like second-class citizens<sup>2</sup>. Second, Estonia has witnessed the spectacular rise of the populist radical right in recent years and now is the home of one of the most successful radical right parties in the Baltic States<sup>3</sup>. In the last national elections (2019), the populist right-wing party EKRE (Estonian Conservative People's Party) got 18% of the votes<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, according to recent opinion polls, the party has become one of the most popular parties in the country<sup>5</sup>. This demonstrates that not only the Russian speakers, but also many ethnic Estonians are dissatisfied with how democracy works in their country.

From this, we can conclude that Estonian democracy has two Achilles' heels behind its seemingly flawless façade: (1) the Russian minority (which is still poorly integrated), and (2) the success of the populist radical right (which would openly challenge the current liberal democratic model).

Furthermore, the recent local elections demonstrated that EKRE did not seek to mobilize only the dissatisfied ethnic Estonian voters, but also tried to make inroads into the Russian-speaking constituencies. Their initial effort to attract the Russian votes ended in failure, but there is no doubt that they continue to work in that direction. If they succeed, it might pose a serious challenge to liberal democracy in Estonia, because the coalition of resentful Estonians and Russians would be large enough to allow EKRE to get the biggest representation in the national parliament and to become a party one cannot ignore while forming the government.

Hence, the goal of the current study is to analyze the two major challenges to the Estonian democracy today: namely, the integration of the Russian-speaking minority and the rise of the populist radical right (EKRE), and to explore how they both, separately or jointly, can undermine the current model of liberal democracy.

From the methodological perspective, the article combines various qualitative and quantitative data sources in order to analyze the current state of Estonian de-

<sup>2</sup> Veronika Kalmus, Marju Lauristin, Signe Opermann, and Triin Vihalemm, *Researching Estonian Transformation: Morphogenetic Reflections* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Vassilis Petsinis and Louis Wierenga, "Working Paper No. 7. Report on Radical Right Populism in Estonia and Latvia," *Report of the Project: Populist Rebellion against Modernity in 21st-Century Eastern Europe: Neo-Traditionalism and Neo-Feudalism*, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Tõnis Saarts, Mari-Liis Jakobson, and Leif Kalev, "When a Right-Wing Populist Party Inherits a Mass-Party Organisation: The Case of EKRE," *Politics and Governance* 9, no. 4 (November 2021): 354–64; "Elections in Estonia," Estonian National Electoral Committee, 2021, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.valimised.ee/en>.

<sup>5</sup> "Erakondade toetus 2018. aastast praeguseni (Support for Political Parties since 2018 until Now)," ERR News Portal, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.err.ee/reitingud>.

mocracy. On the quantitative side, we mostly rely on the data provided by various think tanks measuring the quality of democracy (V-dem, Freedom House, etc.) and also utilize the data from the relevant public opinion surveys. On the qualitative side, we mostly employ qualitative research synthesis<sup>6</sup>, in which we combine different scholarly sources previously produced about the quality of democracy, the Russian minority, and populism in Estonia to make sense of the current situation and the challenges ahead.

This study applies and refers to various theoretical views related to post-communist democratization, ethnopolitics and populism. However, the article is rather of an empirical nature, and therefore not much attention is paid to the theoretical contributions as such. Nonetheless, the study seeks to contribute to the wider literature on post-communist democratization/democracies, while drawing attention to a peculiar case in which democracy is seemingly strongly consolidated but still could be undermined by an unlikely coalition of resentful citizens belonging to different ethnicities.

This article is structured as follows. First, we examine the current state of Estonian democracy by discussing various measures and variables of the quality of democracy, but we also point out some of the contradictions and disturbing trends that have emerged in recent years. Second, we explore the first of these trends, namely the shortcomings in the integration of the Russian-speaking minority, with particular attention to their political integration. Third, we examine the rise of the far-right populist party EKRE – especially the reasons for its success and discuss its possible consequences for Estonian democracy. Finally, we explore the possibility that the resentful ethnic Estonians might join forces with the alienated Russians under the auspices of EKRE, and, thus, both groups would begin to seriously challenge the liberal-democratic consensus in Estonia.

### **Estonia – a model student of post-communist democratization**

Estonia is often viewed as one of the most successful democratizers among post-communist countries, and post-Soviet countries in particular. While various well-known think tanks, such as Freedom House, V-dem and the Bertelsmann Foundation (Stiftung) have measured the quality of democracy and governance in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Estonia always ranks first, being comparable to the best performers in the region, such as Slovenia and the Czech Republic. Moreover, Estonia's scores are higher than those of its Baltic neighbors, Lithuania and Latvia. Unlike many other CEE countries, like Hungary and Poland, there has

<sup>6</sup> Harris M. Cooper, *Research Synthesis and Meta-Analysis: A Step-by-Step Approach*. 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010).



been no democratic backsliding in Estonia in recent years, and few scholars see this outcome as a likely scenario in the near future.<sup>7</sup>

Probably one of the most well-known scores measuring democracy has been provided by the Freedom House *Nations in Transit* project<sup>8</sup>. As one can see in Table 1, Estonia's Democracy Score is the highest in the whole post-communist region, and Estonia is firmly classified as a "consolidated democracy". There have been some minor fluctuations during the recent decade, but one can barely see a downward trend, as it has been evident even in Slovenia and the Czech Republic. There is no need to mention that Estonia's score is considerably higher than that for any post-Soviet country, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia included.

**Table 1.** The Freedom House, Nations in Transit, Democracy Scores in selected post-communist countries, 2011 – 2021.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Estonia	6.07	6.07	6.04	6.04	6.04	6.07	6.07	6.18	6.11	6.07	6.04
Lithuania	5.75	5.71	5.68	5.64	5.64	5.68	5.68	5.64	5.61	5.64	5.68
Latvia	5.86	5.89	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.96	5.93	5.86	5.79	5.82
Czech Republic	5.82	5.82	5.86	5.75	5.79	5.79	5.75	5.71	5.71	5.64	5.57
Slovenia	6.07	6.11	6.11	6.07	6.07	6.00	5.96	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.86
Poland	5.79	5.86	5.82	5.82	5.79	5.68	5.43	5.11	5.04	4.93	4.57
Hungary	5.39	5.14	5.11	5.04	4.82	4.71	4.46	4.29	4.07	3.96	3.71
Ukraine	3.39	3.18	3.14	3.07	3.25	3.32	3.39	3.36	3.36	3.39	3.36
Georgia	3.14	3.18	3.25	3.32	3.36	3.39	3.39	3.32	3.29	3.25	3.18
Moldova	3.04	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.14	3.11	3.07	3.07	3.04	3.11	3.11

**Source:** "Freedom House: Nations in Transit," Freedom House, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit>.

**Notes:** The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democracy. The Democracy Score is a straight average of seven indicators: National Democratic Governance, Electoral Process, Civil Society, Independent Media, Local Democratic Governance, Judicial Framework and Independence, Corruption.

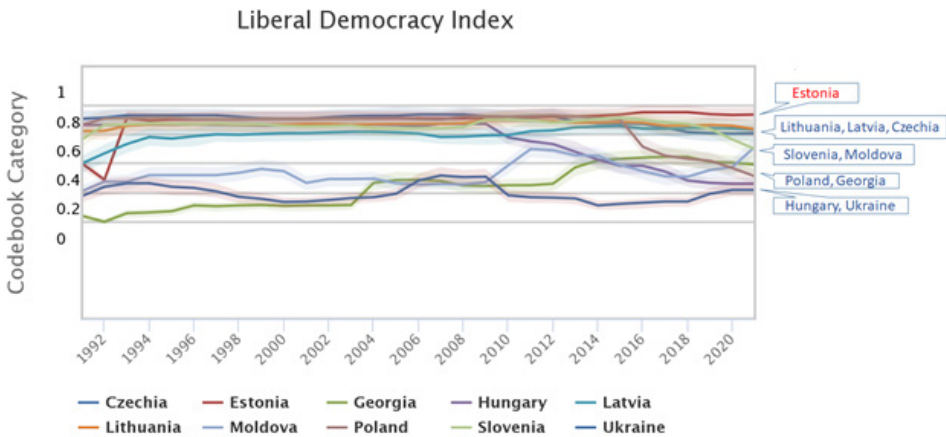
The Varieties of Democracy (V-dem) project offers an even more nuanced and sophisticated approach to measuring the quality of democracy<sup>9</sup>. V-dem's Liberal Democracy Index captures a number of key parameters relevant for modern

<sup>7</sup> Licia Cianetti, "Consolidated Technocratic and Ethnic Hollowness, but No Backsliding: Reassessing Europeanisation in Estonia and Latvia," *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018): 317-36.

<sup>8</sup> "Freedom House: Nations in Transit," Freedom House, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Coppedge, et al., "V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v11.1," Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project 2021, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds21>, or <https://www.v-dem.net/>.

Western-style democratic regimes. Since in our paper we are mainly talking about the threat to liberal democracy, it proves to be an appropriate criterion. In Figure 1, one can see that Estonia again proves to be a top performer among the post-communist countries, in recent years being ahead of even Slovenia and the Czech Republic, as well as its Baltic neighbors.



**Figure 1.** Liberal Democracy Index by the Varieties of Democracy (V-dem).

**Source:** Michael Coppedge, et al., "V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v11.1," Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project 2021, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds21>, or <https://www.v-dem.net/>.

**Notes:** The index shows to what extent the ideal of liberal democracy is achieved. The principle of liberal democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority, the existence of constitutionally protected civil liberties, rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances in the field of executive power.

The third relatively well-known index is the Bertelsmann Transformation Index<sup>10</sup>. In table 2, one can find the Status index, which reflects the overall progress of a transition country (both of its economic and political transition), and the Democracy Status index (also called Political Transformation Index), which measures the quality of democracy. Here Estonia demonstrates impressive results, being ranked first among the post-communist countries and second among the 137 developing and transition countries worldwide. Again, Estonia outperforms Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and its Baltic neighbors.

<sup>10</sup> "Bertelsmann's Transformation Index, 2021," Bertelsmann Stiftung, accessed March 18, 2022, <https://www.bti-project.org/en/home/>.



**Table 2.** Bertelsmann Foundation (Stiftung), Transformation indices in selected post-communist countries in 2022.

Country	Democracy Status	Transformation Status Index
Estonia	9.7 (2nd)	9.5 (2nd)
Lithuania	9.5 (4th)	9.3 (4th)
Czech Republic	9.3 (5th)	9.3 (3rd)
Latvia	9.0 (9th)	8.8 (7th)
Slovenia	8.7 (10th)	8.9 (6th)
Poland	7.5 (24th)	7.9 (14th)
Ukraine	6.8 (36th)	6.8 (26th)
Hungary	6.4 (48th)	6.6 (29th)
Georgia	6.1 (54th)	6.0 (52nd)
Moldova	6.2 (56th)	5.9 (56th)

**Source:** "Bertelsmann's Transformation Index, 2021," Bertelsmann Stiftung, accessed March 18, 2022, <https://www.bti-project.org/en/home/>.

**Notes:** The score is provided along with the country's position among the transition countries (in brackets). The Status Index is aggregated by calculating the average of the total scores given for the dimensions of political (democracy status) and economic (economy status) transformation for the developing and transition countries around the world; Democracy Status (or Political Transformation Index) includes the criteria comprising statehood, political participation, the rule of law, stability of democratic institutions, political and social integration.

Consequently, based on the data provided earlier, there is not much doubt that Estonia has been one of the most successful transition countries in Eastern Europe in building a consolidated liberal democratic regime. Nonetheless, the neat façade hides some inherent weaknesses and deficiencies relating to how democracy really works in Estonia. In order to understand these weaknesses, we have to explore the fourth widely used indicator, The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index<sup>11</sup>. Here, the definition of democracy is more demanding than in previous indices, and the emphasis is on the more substantial and participation-orientated dimensions of democracy. Alongside the electoral process, pluralism, civil liberties, government functioning, political participation and political culture are also taken into account. According to the ranking for 2021, Estonia occupies the 27<sup>th</sup> position in the world – the highest score among the post-communist democracies, but Estonia is still classified as a "flawed democracy". Mostly, this occurs because democracy lacks substance: Estonia has a relatively low level of political participation, trust in institutions, an underdeveloped political culture, a fragmented party system, etc.

<sup>11</sup> "The Economist Intelligence Unit," Democracy Index 2021, accessed March 18, 2022, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/>



Indeed, the Economist's Democracy Index reflects many problems which some other studies about the functioning of Estonian democracy have also pointed out. It appears that, even if trust in political institutions and support for democracy is considerably higher in Estonia than in neighboring Latvia and Lithuania, it is still much lower than in the Nordic countries. This low level of trust is particularly evident among the Russian-speakers and the ethnic Estonians "left behind" (those who have a lower socio-economic status and level of education, live in the rural regions, etc.)<sup>12</sup>. The same patterns appear in cases where the scholars have studied political participation: the urbanized middle class is relatively well engaged in civil society and is aware of the institutions' democratic efficacy, but the Russian-speakers and the less well-off Estonians are excluded in many respects<sup>13</sup>.

These scholarly studies demonstrate that the populist radical right seeks to mobilize the more resentful citizens and those who feel "left behind"<sup>14</sup>. Material insecurity and the perceived loss of social status also play a role in populist right-wing support<sup>15</sup>. Thus, it is expected that EKRE would seek to increase their electoral gains by mobilizing the "left-behind" ethnic Estonians, but not only: there is also a serious potential for them to reach out to the more disillusioned and alienated Russian-speakers.

Furthermore, the studies on populism also show that the populist radical right could threaten liberal democracy through undermining the separation of powers, the rule of law, and minority rights<sup>16</sup>. Hence, that is the reason why we are so concerned about the rise of EKRE. While mobilizing more resentful ethnic Estonians and making inroads into the Russian-speaking constituencies simultaneously, the party could mobilize a sizable electoral coalition that would catapult them to being a dominant party and might allow them to initiate many reforms which would undermine liberal democracy in Estonia.

Many authors believe it unlikely that the ethnic minorities would vote for the populist radical right because those parties, particularly in Eastern Europe, usually target ethnic minorities and depict them as "the other," turning them into major scapegoats<sup>17</sup>. However, recent research has drawn attention to cases where

<sup>12</sup> Duvold, et. al., *Political Culture*; Kalmus et al., *Researching Estonian*.

<sup>13</sup> Tõnis Saarts and Mari-Liis Jakobson, "Civic Engagement in Policy Making Processes in Estonia: A Controversial Success Story," in *25 Years of Development in the Post-Soviet Space: Civil Society and Participatory Democracy*, eds. by Sergiu Musteata and Stefan Schäffer, (Vienna: Böhlau, Der Donauraum Series, 2017), 25–38.

<sup>14</sup> Jens Rydgren. "The Sociology of the Radical Right," *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 241-62.

<sup>15</sup> Rydgren. "The Sociology of the Radical Right."

<sup>16</sup> Takis S. Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Lenka Bustikova, *Extreme Reactions: Radical Right Mobilization in Eastern Europe* (London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).



some right-wing populist parties have gradually changed their rhetoric towards minority groups and have actively sought to win their electoral support, mainly by playing on anti-immigration sentiment or emphasizing conservative values. For example, in Germany the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has been such a party, mobilizing the Russian immigrants living in Germany<sup>18</sup>.

Nevertheless, even if EKRE does not succeed in mobilizing the Russian-speakers, the lower political engagement of the Russian minority and the further failures in integrating them will undermine the quality of liberal democracy in Estonia, in any case. It is complicated to build a well-functioning democracy without a cohesive political community.

### **The Russian minority – An Achilles' heel of Estonian democracy?**

In this section, we explore the issue of the integration of the Russophone minority in Estonia while focusing on some key aspects, like language, citizenship, media, education, socio-economic well-being, and political integration.

The violent annexation and occupation of independent Estonia by the Soviet Union in 1940 disrupted the nation-building process in Estonia. After Estonia regained its independence in 1991, this process continued, but under a new demographic situation: in 1945, the share of ethnic Estonians in Estonia was 97.3%, but by 1989 it was down to 61%<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, as one of the results of the Soviet era in Estonia, two comparatively large language-based communities emerged that had a different understanding of statehood: Aa large share of the Russophone community viewed Estonia rather as an organic part of the Soviet Union, but many Estonians perceived the migrants as an extension of the Soviet power structures, and the question of their integration became a major issue<sup>20</sup>.

According to the first official integration program, the aim of integration was building a multi-cultural society, where people of different nationalities would ideally feel like a part of the Estonian nation and share a common Estonian-language-based cultural space<sup>21</sup>. This means that integration was viewed mostly from the perspective of cultural belonging. Even though the main spheres of integra-

<sup>18</sup> Michael A, Hansen and Jonathan Olsen, "Pulling up the Drawbridge: Anti-Immigrant Attitudes and Support for the Alternative for Germany among Russian-Germans," *German Politics and Society* 38, no. 2 (2020): 109-136.

<sup>19</sup> Raivo Vetik. "Ethnic Conflict and Accommodation in Post-Communist Estonia," *Journal of Peace Research* (1993) 30, no. 3:271–280.

<sup>20</sup> Raivo Vetik (Ed.), *Nation-Building in the Context of Post-Communist Transformation and Globalization. The case of Estonia* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> „Integratsioon Eesti ühiskonnas 2000–2007 (National Program “Integration in Estonian Society 2000-2007)”, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/82230>



tion were not only related to language and culture, but also to the economic and political spheres, the concrete measures were primarily focused on linguistic integration, meaning that socio-economic and political integration were left in the background.

The problems and challenges of integration have been researched consistently in Estonia since the beginning of the 2000s. The Integration Monitoring surveys show that the Russian-language-based community has improved its Estonian language skills step-by-step. For example, the 2020 report shows that, since 2008, the number of people who evaluated their Estonian language skills as good has risen from 31% to 42%<sup>22</sup>. Over the years, the number of people who do not speak the Estonian language at all has fallen considerably, now representing 8% of the Russophone community. Placing those numbers in context, according to the last Soviet-era census, in 1989, only 14% of the Russophone community spoke the Estonian language<sup>23</sup>.

The growing connections and contacts between the two different language communities could be seen as one of the main preconditions for successful integration. It can be argued that, even thirty years after regaining independence, Estonian society still has a long way to go in achieving coherence rather than segregation. For example, people do communicate in languages other than their own, but it happens primarily at work or at school; leisure time is spent mostly communicating with people belonging to the same language communities<sup>24</sup>.

In addition, the language-based divisions have also been obvious in the Estonian media sphere since the Soviet era. Only in the last years can one notice two significant changes. The first is related to the weakening role of the Russian media (official Kremlin TV channels), which had been the dominant media outlet for many Russophones in Estonia for several decades. The high point of the Russian media was reached during the Bronze Soldier crisis, in 2007-08, but its impact has steadily been decreasing since then<sup>25</sup>. The second trend is that the Russophone minority has replaced the Russian media with Estonian Russian-language-based media, especially with web-based news services and public broadcasting companies. Based on the Integration Monitoring survey of 2020, the most salient changes have happened especially in the last years when, for example, the state-sponsored Russian-language-based TV channel ETV+ has become more prominent,

<sup>22</sup> Eve Mägi, Ivan Polynin, Katrina Koppel, Kats Kivistik, Kirsti Melesk, Kristi Anniste, Kristjan Kaldur, Külliki Seppel, Mari-Liis Sepper, Meeli Murasov, Märt Masso, Nawal Shaharyar, Nikolai Kunisõn, Raivo Vetik and Triin Pohla, *Eesti Integratsiooni Monitooring 2020 (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2020)*, <https://www.kul.ee/media/3240/download>.

<sup>23</sup> Vetik, "Ethnic Conflict."

<sup>24</sup> Eve Mägi et al., *Eesti integratsiooni (Estonian Integration)*.

<sup>25</sup> Mägi et al., *Eesti integratsiooni*.



and therefore has provided more information to the Russian minority about what is happening in Estonia<sup>26</sup>. In the long run, one can expect that this will positively influence the political engagement of the Russian-speakers, because it reduces their social and political isolation.

Another key sphere for integration is the educational system. Estonia inherited a bilingual education system from the Soviet time, with a clear-cut curriculum for all public schools, but the instruction language varies by school<sup>27</sup>. The main idea since independence has been to transform the two parallel language-based education systems into one integrated Estonian language-based system. Already in 1993, parliament decided that, by the year 2000, the whole education system should be based on the Estonian language. However, the preparations required for implementing the reform were still in progress. Instead, a new policy was adopted for the interval 2007-2011: the upper high school (grades 10-12) were supposed to be taught according to a 40/60 system, meaning that 60 percent of the subjects should be taught in the Estonian language<sup>28</sup>. The aim was, on the one hand, to better prepare students for integration into society, by improving their language skills and by therefore reducing the socio-economic inequalities in the future. On the other hand, the minorities could still retain their cultural identity.

Unfortunately, the following years have shown that the students' language skills had not improved sufficiently in Russian language schools, and this model still reproduced the segregation of language communities<sup>29</sup>. In addition, studies show that the current linguistically segregated education system reproduces socio-economic inequality and also hinders the development of active democratic citizenship<sup>30</sup>.

Since Estonia regained independence, the citizenship policy has been a highly contested issue<sup>31</sup>. The main question was whether the Soviet-era immigrants had the right to get Estonian citizenship automatically, or if they should abide by the naturalization process. Estonia decided to follow the restitution model, according to which only the former citizens of the inter-war Republic of Estonia and their descendants obtained citizenship automatically.<sup>32</sup> However, because of being So-

<sup>26</sup> Mägi et al., *Eesti integratsioon*.

<sup>27</sup> Nikolai Kunitsõn and Leif Kalev, "Citizenship Educational Policy: A Case of Russophone Minority in Estonia" *Social Sciences* 10, no. 4 (2021): 131, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10040131>

<sup>28</sup> Kunitsõn and Kalev, "Citizenship Educational Policy."

<sup>29</sup> Helen Sooväli-Sepping, *Inimarengu aruanne 2019/2020 (The Estonian Human Development Report)* (Tallinn: Eesti Koostöö Kogu, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Sooväli-Sepping, *Inimarengu aruanne*.

<sup>31</sup> Vetik, "Ethnic Conflict."

<sup>32</sup> Graham Smith, "Democracy Thesis and the Citizenship Question in Estonia and Latvia," *Nationalities Papers* 24, no. 2 (1996): 57-93

viet-time immigrants, a majority of the Russian-speakers did not get citizenship automatically and had to obtain it through naturalization. Many of them are still non-citizens or have applied for Russian citizenship<sup>33</sup>. As a result, many studies show that the non-citizens and the Russian citizens, in particular, have been more alienated from the Estonian political system than other social groups: they do not trust political institutions and are dissatisfied with Estonian democracy<sup>34</sup>.

In the first years after re-independence, the naturalization process was quite rapid. In 1992, when the Law of Citizenship was adopted, around 1/3 of the population did not yet have Estonian citizenship. By the year 2000, 1/4 of the population still had not received Estonian citizenship, and by the year 2000, there still were around 5% of people with non-citizenship status, while around 7% of the population had Russian citizenship<sup>35</sup>. Currently, the naturalization pace has slowed down: less than 1000 people per year acquire Estonian citizenship via naturalization, including all the children in Estonia whose parents do not have any citizenship<sup>36</sup>. Without changes in the legal system, the number of non-citizens will gradually decrease, but their share in the near future will not fall below 4-5%<sup>37</sup>.

Rapid economic and political changes in the 1990s created growing socio-economic inequalities, which were often discernible along ethnic or linguistic lines. Comparative research shows that around thirty years ago, the material well-being and socio-economic position in society were broadly similar between Estonian and Russophone communities. However, during and after the free-market reforms in the 1990s, ethnic inequality rose substantially and has more or less remained stable until today<sup>38</sup>. During the 1990s and 2000s, the differences in salaries between Estonians and Russian speakers reached 20%<sup>39</sup> and are now around 15%<sup>40</sup>, favoring the titular nation. In addition, the labor market participation is lower, and the unemployment rate is higher among the Russian minority. They also evaluate their labor market position and stability lower compared to the Estonians<sup>41</sup>. Economic crises have influenced the Russophone community to a greater extent: fewer people work in managerial positions or as specialists, while

<sup>33</sup> Sammy Smooha and Priit Järve, *The Fate of Ethnic Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (Budapest: Open Society Foundation, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Vetik (Ed.), *Nation-Building*.

<sup>35</sup> Eve Mägi et al., *Eesti integratsiooni (Estonian Integration)*.

<sup>36</sup> Mägi et al., *Eesti integratsiooni*.

<sup>37</sup> Mägi et al., *Eesti integratsiooni*.

<sup>38</sup> Mägi et al., *Eesti integratsiooni*.

<sup>39</sup> Kristian-Olari Leping and Ott Toomet, "Emerging Ethnic Wage Gap: Estonia During Political and Economic Transition," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 36, no. 4 (2008): 599–619.

<sup>40</sup> Mägi et al., *Eesti integratsiooni*.

<sup>41</sup> Kalmus et al., *Researching Estonian*.



many Russians belong to the blue-collar working class<sup>42</sup>. As noted before, socio-economic insecurity, rapid social changes, and the perceptions of one's status loss (the Russian-speakers' social, political, and economic status has been degraded compared to the Soviet period) provide a fertile ground for the rise of radical and anti-liberal parties among this segment of society.

The above-mentioned difficulties and failures in integrating the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia are obvious in the way in which they see democracy and trust institutions. The Baltic Barometer data from 2014, collected by Duvold and his colleagues<sup>43</sup>, demonstrate that there is less principled support for democracy, but also a considerably higher support for strongman rule, among the Russian-speakers (see Table 3). The Russians are notably less satisfied with how democracy really works in Estonia, and they believe that the government does not treat them fairly. Based on different indicators, Duvold claims that 2/3 of the Russian-speakers are rather disillusioned with politics. Furthermore, they tend to trust the key political institutions less than the ethnic Estonians (including courts, parliament, and the government and president in particular). However, they still have higher confidence in other institutions, such as the police, the trade unions, and the church.

**Table 3.** Trust in the Estonian political system among the Russian speakers, according to the Baltic Barometer (2014).

The survey question	Estonians	Russian-speakers
Principled support for democracy as preferable to any other kind of government system	53	41
Support for strongman rule	41	20
Satisfied with the way democracy works	53	35
Government treats people equally and fairly	39	21
Citizens having a pessimistic / disillusioned political attitude	45	63
Trust in institutions		
Courts	60	49
Police	65	51
Political parties	11	13
Parliament	20	15
Government	28	13
President	52	17
Trade unions	42	42
Church	43	61

**Source:** Kjetil Duvold, Sten Berglund, and Joakim Ekman, *Political Culture in the Baltic States* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 44, 108, 119, 170, 174.

<sup>42</sup> Jelena Helemäe and Ellu Saar, "Estonia: Highly Unequal but Classless?" *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 49-58.

<sup>43</sup> Duvold, et al, „Political Culture“.

To conclude, we emphasize the main contradiction in the integration of the Russian-speakers into Estonian society: while the Russophone community's language skills and cultural capital have increased in the last few decades, their socio-economic, material well-being and labor market conditions have not improved at the same pace. In the Estonian Human Development Reports, this situation has been called the "integration trap," which inevitably would increase the political alienation of the Russian-speaking community<sup>44</sup>. The widespread perception that ethnic inequality can be reduced just by learning the Estonian language has not been confirmed either by the current research or by real-life experiences. It is possible to invoke some examples of highly successful people with Russian origins, but this is rather an exception that proves the rule. Briefly, ethnic relations and the failures of the integration policy can be viewed as an Achilles' heel of Estonian democracy.

### **The rise of populism – the song of the angry Estonian men**

Estonia's fast development after re-gaining independence has also been evident in the party system's institutionalization and consolidation<sup>45</sup>. Before the 2015 parliamentary elections, populism had mainly played a marginal role in Estonia, with the exception of a flash-party, Res Publica, in the 2003 elections<sup>46</sup>. However, the situation has considerably changed since then, and Estonia has seen the astonishingly quick rise of the populist radical right<sup>47</sup>.

The Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Estonian: *Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE*) was established in March 2012, when a former agrarian party, the People's Union of Estonia, which had failed to pass the 5% threshold to reach parliament, and the Estonian Patriotic Movement, merged<sup>48</sup>. This merger had a significant impact, since the newly founded party inherited a strong and geographically extensive party organization from its predecessor – the People's

<sup>44</sup> Raivo Vetik, "Kokkuvõte: Eesti arengumudel post-2015" (Summary: Estonian Development model post-2015). In *Eesti Inimarengu Aruanne 2014/2015 (Estonian Human Development Report 2014/2015)*, edited by Raivo Vetik. Tallinn: Eesti Koostöö Koda, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Daunis Auers, *Comparative Politics and Government of the Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the 21st Century* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> Mari-Liis Jakobson, Ilze Balcere, Oudekki Loone, Anu Nurk, Tõnis Saarts, and Rasa Zakreviciute. *Populism in the Baltic States: A Research Report* (Tallinn: Tallinn University / Open Estonia Foundation, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Stefano Braghiroli and Vassilis Petsinis, "Between Party-Systems and Identity-Politics: The Populist and Radical Right in Estonia and Latvia," *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 4 (2019): 431-49.

<sup>48</sup> Saarts et al. "When a Right-Wing."



Union<sup>49</sup>. The popularity of EKRE initially remained quite low, at least for a few years. Still, with the change of leadership (after a charismatic former diplomat, Mart Helme, was elected as chairman), the party took advantage of the current political situation in Estonia. It managed to draw support from various interest groups and to enter parliament after the 2015 elections, with 8% of the votes and 7% of seats<sup>50</sup>. During the next four years, the party stayed in opposition. Still, they managed to mobilize considerable public support for the next elections, in 2019, in which they got almost three times more votes than in the previous elections (i.e., 18% of the votes and 19% of seats).<sup>51</sup>

After the 2019 elections, a controversial coalition government was formed. The left-leaning Russophone-dominated Center Party made a coalition with the right-wing nationalist Pro Patria and the right-wing populist EKRE. The winner of the elections – the right-wing liberal Reform Party and the left-wing Social Democrats – were left in opposition. EKRE's time in government was marked by several scandals and controversial policy initiatives concerning either immigration policy, minority rights issues, foreign policy, or general democratic governance<sup>52</sup>. This resulted in a slight decline in the score of democracy for Estonia, according to the Freedom House *Nations in Transit* report<sup>53</sup>. The government collapsed after a corruption scandal in January 2021, but many believe that this was just an excuse for the prime minister (Jüri Ratas, Center Party) to abandon the right-wing populist EKRE as a coalition partner. EKRE is now back in opposition, and they are viewed as one of the main favorites to win the next parliamentary elections, due in 2023, because, according to several recent opinion polls, EKRE has become the most popular party in Estonia, or a strong second option.<sup>54</sup>

Regarding its ideology, EKRE is not significantly different from the other populist right-wing parties in Western or Eastern Europe<sup>55</sup>. Nativism, anti-immigration sentiment, traditional family values, and hard Euroscepticism are its major keywords. Those values are supplemented by anti-liberal views regarding the minorities and minority rights (e.g., anti-LGBTB rhetoric), and by other elements of populism, such as anti-elite discourses and an appeal to “the people”. In addition,

<sup>49</sup> Saarts et al. “When a Right-Wing.”

<sup>50</sup> “Elections in Estonia.”

<sup>51</sup> “Elections in Estonia.”

<sup>52</sup> Mari-Liis Jakobson and Leif Kalev, “Covid-19 Crisis and Labor Migration Policy: A Perspective from Estonia,” *Frontiers in Political Science* 2 (2020): 1-5.

<sup>53</sup> “Freedom House.”

<sup>54</sup> ERR, “Erakondade toetus.”

<sup>55</sup> Andres Kasekamp, Mari-Liis Madisson, and Louis Wierenga, “Discursive Opportunities for the Estonian Populist Radical Right in a Digital Society,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 1 (2019): 47-58; Stefano and Petsinis, “Between Party-Systems.”



EKRE sees Western-style liberal democracy, and the EU in particular, as foreign enemies and praises the Hungarian and Polish governments for their policies and ostensible independence. In socio-economic terms, it is difficult to classify EKRE either as right-wing or left-wing, because, on the one hand, they propagate quite extensive state intervention in the economy, including increasing wages and social benefits, but, on the other hand, the party proposes lowering taxes.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, the party, in general, does not support the climate policies of the EU and is supportive, conversely, of continuing the oil-shale industry in Estonia, which is a relatively popular policy position among the Russian-speakers living in North-Eastern Estonia<sup>57</sup>. EKRE implements the “Estonia first” approach in foreign policy, meaning that they are against multinational corporations and supra-national unions, like the EU. In the field of defense policy, their main idea is based on the self-reliance of Estonia, but they envisage cooperation with other NATO countries, especially the US and Poland.

In terms of democracy debates, they claim that current democracy is not “real democracy,” and therefore, they support certain measures of implementing direct democracy. This agenda also includes the direct election of judges and introducing referendums on various policy issues (for example, on defining marriage only as a union between members of the opposite sex).<sup>58</sup>

Curiously, at least until 2020/2021, EKRE treated the Russophone minority as “the Other” (along with immigrants and refugees) and regarded them as a potential “fifth column.”<sup>59</sup> Recently, however, the EKRE’s position has changed, as we will see in the last part of the article.

Various issues have contributed to the exceptional rise of EKRE. The aim of this paper is not to point out only one crucial factor. Instead, we focus on several issues, taking into consideration that they have all played their role. Three main clusters of explanations can be advanced: 1) socio-economic reasons, 2) cultural and value-based approaches, and 3) contextual reasons.

Regarding the socio-economic reasons, we emphasize the growing economic inequalities found in Estonian society<sup>60</sup>. While Estonia has implemented the

<sup>56</sup> “EKRE uus majandusprogramm paneb majanduse, palgad ja pensionid kasvama” (EKRE New Economic Programme Will Make the Economy, Salaries and Pensions Grow), EKRE website, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.ekre.ee/ekre-uus-majandusprogramm-paneb-majanduse-palgad-ja-pensionid-kasvama/>.

<sup>57</sup> “EKRE maaelu programm” (EKRE Rural Life Programme), EKRE website, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.ekre.ee/ekre-maaelu-programm/>.

<sup>58</sup> EKRE konservatiivne programm (The Conservative Manifesto of EKRE), EKRE website, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://ekre.ee/konservatiivne-programm/>.

<sup>59</sup> Kasekamp, Madisson, and Wierenga, „Discursive Opportunities“.

<sup>60</sup> Ellu Saar, *Towards a Normal: Actual and Perceived Social Stratification in Post-Socialist Estonia*, *Baltische Studien Zur Erziehungs- Und Sozialwissenschaft* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 2011).



neoliberal Washington Consensus since independence, and while this model has proven to be successful at a macro-economic level, there are still great inequalities in Estonia between the cities and the rural areas.<sup>61</sup> In the public discourse, some even talk about the “Second Estonia”: the sections of Estonian society “left behind”, regarded as losers of the post-communist transition, who are poorly coping with the pressures of globalization.<sup>62</sup> EKRE skillfully mobilized these voters by speaking more openly about regional differences and social inequalities. They claim that they can restore to these people their dignity as members of a larger national community. Analyzing the socio-economic profile of EKRE’s supporters, one can conclude that they are predominantly male (this is why the title of the section refers to “angry men”), reside in rural regions and smaller towns, and have a lower level of education<sup>63</sup>. Curiously, the same studies show no clear-cut correlation between EKRE’s support and social class and income.

The analysis by Siim Trumm<sup>64</sup> demonstrates that a conservative value orientation predicts the electoral support for EKRE even better than socio-economic background variables. Indeed, while the younger generation and the economically well-off urban dwellers embrace liberal and individualistic values, conservative and traditional values are still strongly entrenched in many sections of Estonian society<sup>65</sup>. This, in turn, provides a fertile ground for culture wars and identity politics. For many years, the paramount cleavage in Estonian politics was the ethnic cleavage – the so-called “Russian question”, revolving around ethnicity, language issues, history, and geopolitical orientation<sup>66</sup>. However, the political situation has changed since the Russian-friendly Center Party’s leader Edgar Savisaar was replaced by a more Western-oriented and younger chairman (Jüri Ratas), in autumn 2016<sup>67</sup>. This shift means that the “Russian question” is no longer so strongly present in party politics, which has opened a window of opportunity for EKRE to push the cultural conflict to the forefront.

<sup>61</sup> Helemäe and Saar, “Estonia: Highly Unequal”.

<sup>62</sup> Saar, *Towards a Normal Stratification Order*.

<sup>63</sup> ERR, “Erakondade toetus”; Siim Trumm, “The ‘New’ Wave of Populist Right-Wing Parties in Central and Eastern Europe: Explaining Electoral Support for the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia,” *Representation* 54, no. 4 (2018): 331-47.

<sup>64</sup> Trumm, “The ‘New’ Wave.”

<sup>65</sup> Mare Ainsaar and Tarmo Strenze (eds.), *Väärtused kui inimvara ja nende mõju ühiskonna arengule* [Values as Human Capital and Their Impact on Social Development] (Tallinn: Arenguseire Keskus, 2019).

<sup>66</sup> Tõnis Saarts and Ellu Saar. “When the Ethnic Cleavage Overshadows the Class Cleavage in a Post-Communist Country and Why We Should Care?” *European Politics and Society* (published online, 2021): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1858397>.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Mölder, “Estonia,” *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook* 56, no. 1 (2017): 85–91.

Last but not least, one cannot entirely dismiss the contextual issues and historical contingencies. It seems that two critical events, taking place in 2014-2015, played a decisive role in EKRE's rise to prominence. First, the Estonian parliament ratified the recognition of same-sex unions in Estonia in the autumn of 2014<sup>68</sup>. This was a divisive issue in society, and the bill passed in parliament on October 9, 2014, by a very close margin. At the same time, some implementing provisions required for the law to come fully into force were not adopted, since they required an absolute majority of votes - 51 MPs - and this was not reached. EKRE managed to mobilize the more traditional and conservative voices in society, being the only political party that was actively against the "imposing of the liberal EU agenda" on Estonia. Since society was divided over the issue of same-sex unions, the party gained a lot of popularity due to this action. It is clear that this was a turning point for EKRE. Formerly a fringe party, it became a party that their liberal opponents had to reckon with. The European refugee crisis in 2015 provided new opportunities for EKRE to keep the public focused on value- and globalization-related issues. While the liberal-leaning political elite was united in its attitude towards the refugee crisis, the population was not<sup>69</sup>. EKRE took a hard stance against the refugees by stating that "Our quota of refugees is 0". The discourse claiming that the European Union is forcing refugee quotas on member states found a fruitful ground, amplifying the anti-EU discourse in Estonian society.

Consequently, there is no doubt that EKRE would potentially threaten the liberal democratic order and consensus in Estonia. However, two main reasons make the scenarios similar to Hungary and Poland less likely for Estonia. First, the proportional electoral system in Estonia and the traditionally very fragmented party system make it practically impossible for a single party to gain a majority of seats in parliament<sup>70</sup>. Second, even if EKRE manages to increase its popularity further, it does not mean automatically that other parties would allow them to form a government coalition. There has been a historical precedent in Estonia when the Russian-friendly Center Party was excluded from the government for more than 11 years, despite their electoral success<sup>71</sup>. However, let us imagine that EKRE manages to mobilize a substantial electoral coalition of the citizens "left behind" (both Estonians and Russians). In that case, it could allow them to

<sup>68</sup> Allan Sikk, "Estonia," *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook* 54, no. 1 (2015): 94-100.

<sup>69</sup> Andrey Makarychev and Vladimir Sazonov, "Populisms, Popular Geopolitics and the Politics of Belonging in Estonia," *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 4 (2019): 450-69.

<sup>70</sup> Tõnis Saarts and Marleen Allemann, "The Long-Term Governmental Parties in Post-Communist Democracies," *Problems of Post-Communism* (published online, 2021): 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1906281>.

<sup>71</sup> Saarts and Allemann, "The Long-Term Governmental Parties."



get the biggest representation, by far, in the national parliament (ca. 30-35% of seats, or more), making it difficult for other, more liberal, parties to ignore them while forming a government.

### **The angry Estonian men meet the alienated Russian minority**

As stated earlier, EKRE's rhetoric and policies can be described as anti-Russian, Eurosceptic, pro-family and anti-refugees. However, before the last local elections, in October 2021, EKRE changed its rhetoric toward the Russian population. For example, the former chairman of the party, Mart Helme<sup>72</sup>, said that the Russians were a "civilization", not a nation, and he openly stated in his interview to the public broadcasting company of Estonia that Russian-speaking voters were "a potential, untapped source for Estonia".<sup>73</sup> Although this may seem surprising, it is actually quite a logical step, based on several assumptions, which we will now dwell on.

In general, the Russophone minority has more conservative values than the ethnic Estonians<sup>74</sup> – at least considering the classical conservative-liberal divisive issues in Estonia, like tolerance towards refugees or same-sex couples' cohabitation. Thus, the Russophone community, in general, has more common ground with the perceptions of EKRE, rather than with the liberal elites. In addition, as we have demonstrated, there is still a substantial socio-economic gap between the Estonians and the Russophone community: the latter were the "losers" of the transition in the 1990s and can still be seen as a part of the so-called "Second Estonia." As noted before, socio-economic grievances and the loss of status provide fertile ground for populist right-wing support. Last but not least, the Russophone community is also more Eurosceptic<sup>75</sup>, which aligns them with the ideas of EKRE.

There are several reasons why the Russophone community is more conservative than the Estonians, but one of the most crucial is the Russian-speaking media from Russia, which is also Eurosceptic and conservative. As it was mentioned before, many of the Russophone community members follow the Russian state media for various reasons, including because of their lack of proficiency in the Estonian language. The Center Party has previously exploited that issue, managing to use different discourses towards their Russian-speaking and Estonian supporters for years. EKRE has used the same strategy by saying different things in a different language to separate communities.

<sup>72</sup> The new chairman of EKRE is Mart Helme's son, Martin Helme, who was elected in July 2021.

<sup>73</sup> "EKRE leader on education, Russian votes and possible coalition partners", ERR <https://news.err.ee/864400/ekre-leader-on-education-russian-votes-and-possible-coalition-partners>

<sup>74</sup> Ainsaar and Strenze, *Väärtused kui*.

<sup>75</sup> Duvold et. al., *Political Culture*.

In addition, in local elections, all people with permanent residence permits can vote, no matter their citizenship<sup>76</sup>. There are around 100 000 people in Estonia who have Russian citizenship or are non-citizens<sup>77</sup>. Thus, at least potentially, EKRE could be quite successful in mobilizing the more conservative and resentful sections of the Russian electorate.

Nevertheless, EKRE is still a right-wing nationalist party. So, how does becoming more Russian-friendly align with nationalist tendencies? As already mentioned, one of the ways to overcome this dilemma is by exploiting the different media preferences of the population. Also, EKRE managed to mobilize the Russian-speaking minority against immigration: mostly against Muslims and racial minorities, but also, in more practical terms, against Ukrainian workers, whose number was estimated at around 20 000 before the Russian war against Ukraine started<sup>78</sup>. The Ukrainian guest workers often work in low-skill areas. They were willing to work for smaller salaries than local people and lived in harsher conditions. Thus, they were “taking the jobs” from “our Russians,” as EKRE’s perspective on this issue would have it.

As one can see in Figure 2, the support for EKRE started to increase steadily in early spring 2021 and reached its peak right before the elections, during which 21% of the Russian-speakers were ready to support EKRE. Thus, the party leadership had high expectations regarding the Russian voters, and they started campaigning in the Russian language in majority Russian-populated areas. Several high-ranking EKRE politicians ran for office in the Tallinn area, which is home to the majority of the Russian-speaking population.

Although EKRE, in general, proved to be successful in the municipal elections of October 2021, in which they nearly doubled their previous vote share, from 6.7% to 13.2%<sup>79</sup>, their “Russian strategy” ended in failure. They did not reach the 5% threshold in North-Eastern Estonia (Ida-Virumaa County), where the majority of the population is Russian speaking<sup>80</sup>. Thus, their candidates did not get any seats in the municipal councils in Ida-Virumaa’s bigger cities (including Narva)<sup>81</sup>. In the subdistrict of Tallinn, they got only 6.3% of the vote, which resulted in

<sup>76</sup> Auers, *Comparative Politics*.

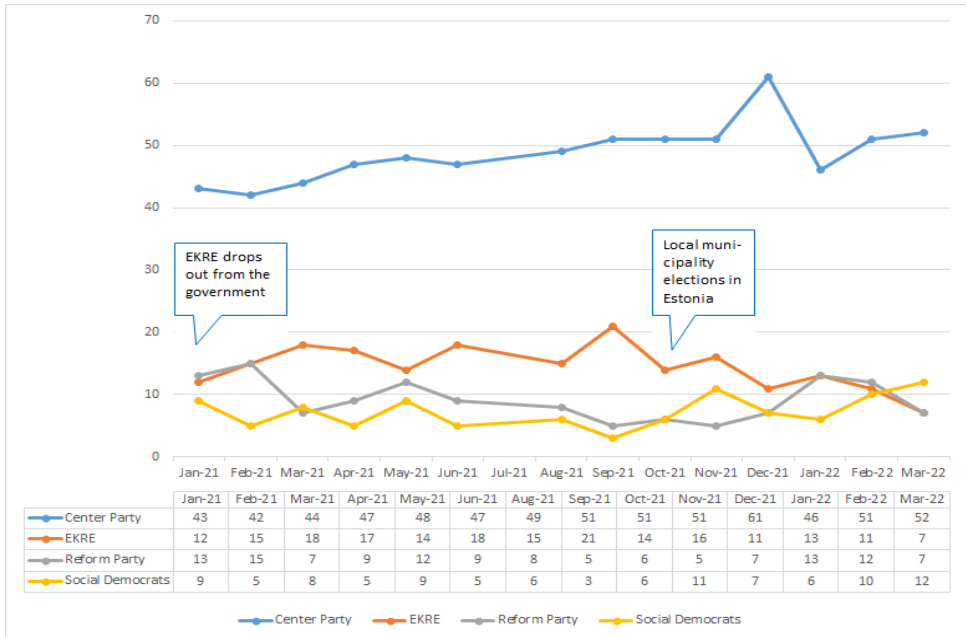
<sup>77</sup> Auers, *Comparative Politics*; Mägi et al., *Eesti integratsiooni*.

<sup>78</sup> “Estonian Statistics, 2021”, RV022U, accessed March, 22, 2022, [https://andmed.stat.ee/et/stat/rahvastik\\_\\_rahvastikunaitajad-ja-koosseis\\_\\_rahvaarv-ja-rahvastiku-koosseis/RV0222U/table/tableViewLayout2](https://andmed.stat.ee/et/stat/rahvastik__rahvastikunaitajad-ja-koosseis__rahvaarv-ja-rahvastiku-koosseis/RV0222U/table/tableViewLayout2)

<sup>79</sup> “Elections in Estonia.”

<sup>80</sup> “Elections in Estonia.”

<sup>81</sup> “Elections in Estonia.”



**Figure 2.** Support for EKRE among the Russian speakers (percent), 2020 – 2022.

**Source:** "Erakondade toetus 2018. aastast praeguseni (Support for Political Parties since 2018 to the Present)," ERR News Portal, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.err.ee/reitingud>.

**Note:** The Center Party has traditionally been the party most widely supported by the Russian speakers in Estonia; the Reform Party is a liberal party and the second largest party in Estonia, currently forming a government together with the Center Party; the Social Democrats are included because minorities often support left-wing and pro-welfare-state parties.

only one seat out of 15<sup>82</sup>. In figure 2, one can also see how the EKRE’s popularity among the Russian segment plummeted after the local elections.

Most commentators argue that the major reason behind EKRE’s failure was that they could not field well-known candidates in the Russian-speaking districts, politicians that the local Russian people could trust<sup>83</sup>. Here the Center Party fared better, because they have worked for decades in creating their own pool of Russian-speaking candidates, some of which are now very prominent.

Nonetheless, we cannot conclude that the setback described above may force EKRE’s leadership to abandon their aspiration to attract Russian voters. There

<sup>82</sup> "Elections in Estonia."

<sup>83</sup> Tõnis Saarts, "Protestiparteid Kohtuvad Valimisreaalsusega (The Protest Parties Meet the Reality of the Local Elections)." *Postimees*, October 21, 2021, <https://arvamus.postimees.ee/7365488/tonis-saarts-protestiparteid-kohtuvad-valimisreaalsusega>.



are no signs that this has happened. On the contrary, based on a personal communication with a prominent member of EKRE<sup>84</sup>, it appears that they are busily preparing for the next parliamentary elections in 2023. The Russian-speakers are not being forgotten as one of the important target groups in the upcoming campaign. Moreover, the party's main webzine, *Uued uudised*, now also has a Russian-language version.<sup>85</sup>

Hence, probably EKRE would make new attempts to gain Russian votes in the near future. As it was shown earlier, it is a worrying tendency because, if EKRE manages to combine the two disgruntled groups in society – the angry Estonian men and the “left-behind” Russophone community – they could amass a sizable electoral coalition which could not be ignored during government formation. Once in power, there is no doubt that the EKRE would work to undermine the liberal democratic regime and its key institutions in Estonia.

Nevertheless, the current war in Ukraine will certainly affect the EKRE's chances to mobilize the Russian voters. On the one hand, it would make it more difficult to get votes from the pro-Putin section of the community, but, on the other hand, their opposition to the Ukrainian refugees would make EKRE even more attractive in the Russian-speakers' eyes. Yet, it is difficult to speculate on the impact of the Ukrainian war upon Estonian domestic politics in more detail, but it is clear that its effect would be profound.

### Conclusion

The current analysis demonstrated that even the most advanced and seemingly resilient democracies in the post-communist world, such as Estonia, could potentially be subject to democratic erosion. As it was shown, the current liberal-democratic model in Estonia has two major Achilles' heels: (1) the limited success in integrating the Russian-speaking minority, which sows the seeds of resentment among the minority groups, who might feel like “second-rate citizens”; and (2) the rapid rise of the populist radical right (EKRE), which demonstrates that even many ethnic Estonians are not satisfied with how democracy really functions in Estonia. A real danger to liberal democracy arises if those two resentful groups might form a joint coalition under the auspices of EKRE. Although the first attempt to form such a coalition for the local elections of 2021 failed, there is little room for optimism or for hopes that EKRE's leaders will simply abandon the plan.

<sup>84</sup> EKRE prominent party member, Personal communication – the party member wished to remain anonymous, March 6, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> „Uued Uudised (The New News)”, *Rahvuskonservatiivne uudiste ja arvamusportaali* (The National-Conservative Opinion and News Portal), accessed March 22, 2022, <https://uueduudised.ee/>.



The paper sought to make a contribution to several strands of specialized literature. First, while demonstrating the inherent fragility of some – even the most developed – post-communist democracies, we hope to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate on democratization and democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe. Second, while studying ethnic minorities in the context of the rise of right-wing populism, we have demonstrated that the possible scenarios are not always predictable and straightforward: the populists could, in some cases, seek an alliance with the ethnic minorities and with the immigrant population in order to expand their voter base and to realize their political ambitions (i.e., to get into government). Such patterns of behavior and the consequences of such strategic choices have generally been poorly understood by scholars.

Nevertheless, the main limitation of the current research is that we are examining an ongoing process, which is still unfolding, and we do not know exactly to what extent EKRE will succeed in mobilizing the Russian minority in the forthcoming years. Thus, we can draw attention to this emerging phenomenon and map the possible risks, but we can only speculate on the possible outcomes.

However, one cannot interpret the rise of EKRE and its attempts to mobilize the Russian-speakers, along with the Estonians, solely in a negative light. This tendency could be treated, rather, as a wake-up call for the Estonian liberal elites. It demonstrates that the Russian speakers' integration, coupled with the issues of social inequality, regional disparities, political alienation, and distrust in liberal democratic institutions are real and pressing problems and challenges. They must be taken seriously and addressed systematically in the near future.

### **List of illustrations (figures and tables)**

Figure 1. Liberal Democracy Index by the Varieties of Democracy (V-dem).

Figure 2. Support for EKRE among the Russian speakers (percent), 2020 – 2022.

Table 1. The Freedom House, Nations in Transit, Democracy Scores in selected post-communist countries, 2011 – 2021.

Table 2. Bertelsmann Foundation (Stiftung) Transformation indices of selected post-communist countries in 2022.

Table 3. Trust in the Estonian political system among the Russian speakers, according to the Baltic Barometer (2014).

## Rezumat

Estonia este deseori văzută ca un „elev-model” printre statele post-comuniste. Multe dintre renumitele think tank-uri și organizații care măsoară calitatea democrației (de exemplu, Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy, Bertelsmann Foundation) îi acordă, în mod frecvent, Estoniei cele mai înalte calificative din regiune. Totuși, această fațadă aparent imaculată ascunde tensiuni tot mai mari și contradicții emergente. Prezentul articol se axează pe cele două tendințe deosebit de îngrijorătoare care au devenit evidente în ultimii ani, dacă nu chiar mai devreme: (1) succesul limitat al integrării importantei minorități rusofone în societatea estoniană și (2) recrudescența extremei drepte populiste. Eșecul integrării minorităților etnice ar putea duce la creșterea frustrării și înstrăinării politice în rândurile comunității rusofone, făcând mai dificilă sarcina construirii unei comunități democratice sănătoase, unite și consolidate. Cu toate acestea, creșterea influenței dreptei populiste și radicale, anume succesul electoral remarcabil al partidului EKRE (Partidul Conservator Popular Estonian) s-a dovedit a fi chiar o provocare mai importantă, deoarece acest fapt demonstrează că mulți estonieni sunt profund nemulțumiți de modul în care funcționează democrația în țara lor. Articolul discută, în ce măsură ar fi posibil scenariul, în care estonienii și rușii nemulțumiți de situația actuală și-ar putea uni forțele pentru a pune sub semnul întrebării actualul model de democrație liberală din Estonia. Analiza noastră demonstrează că, chiar dacă încercările inițiale de a face acest lucru au eșuat, un asemenea scenariu nu poate fi completamente exclus, în viitor.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Estonia, democrație liberală, democratizare, populism de extremă dreaptă, minoritatea rusă.

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