

from **Corinne Deloy**
*Translated by Helen Levy***ANALYSIS**1 month before
the poll

General Elections in Estonia, 6th March 2011

On 29th November the Estonia President set the next general election date for 6th March 2011. This Baltic country has one million voters. 46,000 Estonians living abroad will be able to take part in the elections. Early voting can take place between 28th February and 2nd March and on-line voting (via computer or mobile phone) between 24th February and 2nd March. The rise in turnout in the European elections on 7th June 2009 (58,669 e-voters, i.e. 14.9% of the total number of voters), in the local elections on 18th October 2009 (when 104,415 voters, i.e. ten times more than in the previous regional elections of 16th October 2005 used the internet to vote) and finally the last elections on 4th March 2007 were believed to be a success in terms of e-voting. In that election turnout was four points higher than in the previous general elections of 2003, almost equivalent to the rise in the share of the electronic vote across all voting (3%).

Internet voting does raise a few questions however with regard to security and the confidentiality of the vote likewise the supervision of the procedure. In order to fulfil his civic duty electronically a citizen must firstly have the following equipment: apart from a computer (or a mobile phone) on which a special programme is installed, he must also have an electronic ID card and two pin codes; the first enables him to identify himself at the beginning of the voting procedure, the second allows him to add his electronic signature. The voter then has to log into the site www.valimised.ee managed by the Estonian Electoral Commission which is in charge of internet voting, then he can post his electronic envelope. E-voters can change their vote as many times as they want or decide in fact that they want to go to their polling station and put their vote in the ballot box on the official day of voting: in this case the slip they put in the box cancels their previous vote. On 6th March the Estonians will be able to appoint their MPs using their mobile phone; the government's spokesperson has guaranteed that the mobile phone vote enables a better identification of the digital signatures and was the safest mode of voting.

Estonia, which created Skype, the software which allows people to telephone free via the internet is one of the

most connected countries in Europe. This has not happened by chance but is the result of a specific policy to develop ITC's (information technology and communications) and high involvement by the public authorities thereby enabling citizens to access many administrative services on-line. Since 2000 1% of the Estonian budget has been devoted to the development of information society. Estonia is on the leading edge of e-government: paper was banished 11 years ago in all of the coalition government's work meetings, which incidentally is one of the youngest in Europe, an important detail in this instance. Since 2002 each Estonian aged 15 and over owns an electronic card which enables him to undertake most administrative formalities (paying for public transport, paying for parking etc.) and also to vote. Just one month before the election the Reform Party (ER) of outgoing Prime Minister Andrus Ansip is the main favourite. Political analysts are expecting the head of government to be re-elected as head of the country. It remains to be seen with whom he will govern.

The Estonian Political System

The Riigikogu, the only chamber in Parliament comprises 101 members elected every four years by propor-

tional voting within 12 multi-nominal constituencies, comprising a minimum of 5 seats as in the constituency of Western Virumaa and a maximum of 14, such as in Harjumaa and Raplamaa, or Centre, Lasnamae and Pritita in Tallinn.

Candidates must be aged at least 21 and pay a deposit of two month's salary or 8,700 crowns (i.e. 556€) which is given back to them if they are elected and if they win the number of votes equal to the quota defined for his district or if the party to he belongs wins at least 5% of the vote nationally. All political parties must win a minimum of 5% of the votes cast in order to be represented in Parliament. 789 people had registered as candidates in the election by the Electoral Committee of Estonia Commission on 20th January i.e. 186 less than in comparison with the previous election on 4th March 2007.

The partisan system resembles the Scandinavian one and is split into four trends which share almost equal importance: the conservatives, the liberals, the social-democrats, and the agrarians. The country does not have any significant party either on the far right or far left. Six political parties are represented at present in the Riigikogu:

- the Reform Party (ER), led by Prime Minister Andrus Ansip in office since April 2005 . Founded in 1994 by former chair of the Estonian Central Bank and former Minister (2002-2005) it has 31 MPs;
- the Centre Party (K), the leading political party in terms of the number of its supporters. Created in 1991 it is led by the current Mayor of Tallinn and former Prime Minister, Edgar Savisaar. It lies to the centre-left of the political scale the party is extremely popular amongst the Russian speakers and has 29 seats;
- Pro-Patria Union -Res Publica (Res), an alliance of two liberal parties founded on 4th June 2006 and led by former Prime Minister 1992-1994 et 1999-2002) Mart Laar. Member of the Andrus Ansip's outgoing government it has 19 MPs
- the Social Democratic Party (SDE) former Popular Party of Moderates (M), created in 1990 and party of the present President Toomas Hendrik Ilves. It has been led since 16th October 2010 by former Defence Minister Sven Misker; it has 10 seats
- the Greens of Estonia (EEE) created in 2006 the three leaders of which are Aleksei Lotman, Toomas Trapido

and Trin Veber ; it has six seats ;

- the Estonian People's Union (ERL), an agrarian party founded in 1994 under the name of the Party of the Rural People of Estonia (EME) and led by Andrus Blok, it has six seats.

In Estonia the President of the Republic is elected for five years by indirect suffrage, i.e. by the parliament, (if the MPs do not agree on a name) by an electoral college rallying the 101 members of Parliament and the representatives of the local councils. Toomas Hendrik Ilves was elected as Head of State on 23rd September 2006 in the first round of voting by the assembly that brought together MPs and local representatives.

The Campaign and the Election Issues

The Reform Party

Outgoing Prime Minister Andrus Ansip will be standing in the district of Harju and Rapla as on 4th March 2007. Re-elected as head of the country on this occasion – his party recorded a 10 point increase in comparison with the previous general election on 2nd March 2003 – the head of government is relying on his results in the hope of maintaining his post. In spite of the economic crisis that has affected the Baltic Republic, like the rest of the world, 2010 was a year of economic success in Estonia. Indeed on 9th December last the country became the 34th member of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). *"Estonia's entry into the OECD confirms the success of our economic policy and the stability of the country's economic environment; it makes our country more attractive and raises its profile amongst investors. Being invited and accepted as a member of the OECD is true acknowledgment,"* declared Foreign Minister Urmas Paet (ER).

On 17th June 2010 Estonia also got the go-ahead from Brussels to join the Euro Area. The Riigikogu signed the document finalising the adoption of the single currency on 14th November. On 1st January 2011 the country therefore became the 17th member of the Euro Area. *"Estonia transferred over to the euro thanks to its rigorous budgetary policy. We are now the poorest country in the euro area. We have a great deal of work to do now that our goal of joining these countries has been reached,"* said President Toomas Hendrik Ilves. Finally the President of the European Commission, José

Manuel Barroso said *"that with the entry of Estonia into the Euro Area more than 330 million Europeans would now be using euro notes and coins"*, adding *"this reflects the attraction and stability of the euro for the EU Member States."* Opposition leader Edgar Savisaar said *"that the euro represented major sacrifices for the Estonians who have been forced by the government to adopt the single currency."*

In May 2010 Estonia was ranked as the 12th most competitive country in the world by the World Economic Forum. As a comparison its Baltic neighbours, Latvia and Lithuania, with which Estonia is often compared occupy the 20th and 22nd places respectively. After a 14% recession in 2009 the Estonian GDP recorded growth of 5% between the third quarter of 2009 and that of 2010. According to the country's Central Bank this rise is due to continue to reach 4.2% this year, i.e. the highest rate in the EU. Although domestic demand has collapsed, exports, notably to Nordic countries, increased sharply in 2010 encouraging renewed growth. The government might however decide to continue its policy to freeze wages to maintain economic recovery. Finally the Estonian public deficit is below 3% and the country has the lowest debt rate in the EU. Unemployment is still high however. It lay at 10.2% of the working population mid-January 2011.

Outgoing Prime Minister Andrus Ansip believes that socio-economic issues are the main issue at stake on 6th March. *"What is the question upper most in the Estonians' minds? Economy because it is the base of everything. The creation of jobs, stability of growth, higher pensions and services for the families, the security of every one of us and the quality of our education which we want to bring up to the level other Nordic countries – all of this depends on the economy,"* he declared.

Andrus Ansip has totally rejected the idea of governing in coalition with the Centre Party led by Edgar Savisaar. *"We are excluding this scenario completely since we are totally against the introduction of a progressive income tax which would paralyse the Estonian economy and make the Estonians the poorest by penalising those who want to work more. Edgar Savisaar's style in Tallinn goes totally against our culture of honesty and transparency based on common sense,"* said the outgoing Prime Minister. *"The tax Edgar Savisaar wants to introduce would create poverty, scare off investors*

and counters the creation of new jobs. The tax system must foster growth and the creation of jobs," repeats Andrus Ansip.

The Centre Party

Edgar Savisaar has been repeating offers to work with other political parties. In his opinion the recent comments by the Prime Minister are irresponsible: *"Andrus Ansip does not work with the opposition. But he does not work with the unions or the management nor with the National Audit Bureau either. He also does not take into account the recommendations made by the international institutions which he ignores. At a time when scientists, union members, the management and politicians are wondering how to help the country the members of the Reform Party prefer to tell us with whom they won't work after the general elections. This kind of withdrawal is of benefit to no one. What has Andrus Ansip done for the country? How many jobs has he created? Has he helped reduce poverty?"*

"The increase in VAT and consumer taxes, together with the budgetary cuts have weakened the Estonian economy and affected the population's financial situation. I think that the sacrifices the Estonians have been forced to make were too much and that the country is entering the Economic and Monetary Union too quickly. In comparison Poland, which has been less affected by the international economic crisis, adopted a wait and see attitude with regard to the euro," declared Edgar Savisaar. He also condemned the use, which he qualifies as cynical, made by the government of the adoption of the euro to introduce an economic and social policy which *"no longer has anything in common with European values."*

Price rises and unemployment are the central issues at stake in the electoral campaign undertaken by the Centre Party whose programme puts forward a VAT reduction on medicines and foodstuffs as well as a control of the price of electricity.

Edgar Savisaar was affected badly by the publication of a report on 21st December by the Kaitsepolitsei (security police, the Estonian secret services) which indicated he had asked for funds from Russia for his party's electoral campaign. According to the report the Chairman of the Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin accepted to fund the Centre Party to a total of 1.5 million € during

the campaign (one third of which was due to be paid in cash) and 1.5 million € for the construction of an orthodox church in Lasnamae.

There have even been calls for Savisaar's resignation from within his own party. A truth committee which focused on the scandal caused by the church was appointed in order to discover all the necessary information about these accusations. At the end of December the party's political bureau finally allowed Edgar Savisaar to retain his post as party chair and as Mayor of Tallinn and rejected all of the accusations which intimated that their leader was "*an agent working under Russian influence.*" The party's central organisation believed that the intervention of the special services in the electoral campaign "*went totally against the principles of the political culture established in Europe.*" Moreover it said that the funding of the church with money from abroad was a widespread practice in Estonia.

In spite of the declarations made by the party's Deputy Chair Ain Seppik who maintains that the party is not threatened with collapse the accusations against Edgar Savisaar have revealed the internal divisions in the Centre Party. Opposition to the present party leader is led by Ain Seppik, former Home Minister (2005-2007), Kalle Laanet and Jüri Ratas, leader of the parliamentary group in the Riigikogu. Ain Seppik has never concealed the fact that he wanted to replace Edgar Savisaar with Jüri Ratas, which would make an alliance with the Reform Party possible after the election on 6th March. Kalle Laanet has said that *there was no reason not to believe the security services' report and that the Centre Party should choose a new leader.*

"*People have the right to know,*" declared outgoing Prime Minister Andrus Ansip. "*The security services' information must be made public. In my opinion asking for money in this way is terrible and disgusting. When the chairman of a political party asks for money from a former KGB officer to settle the elections, what does this mean exactly? The Estonians have to know. Even if things cannot legally be proved even if it is only suspicion. They have the right to know,*" said the head of government. President Toomas Hendrik Ilves also disapproved of Edgar Savisaar's activities. "*If the Centre Party does not condemn the request that was made of Russia for the electoral campaign and if the people accused in this affair do not leave the party, the Centre*

Party will not be able to take part in any future governments," he declared.

The consequences of the Edgar Savisaar affair have meant that the Social Democratic Party, his ally in Tallinn withdrew from the town coalition on 23rd December after the declaration of support written by the party's political office.

Pro-Patria Union-Res Publica

The Reform Party's present partner in power Pro-Patria Union-Res Publica is fighting to prevent the entry of a leftwing government after the elections on 6th March. In its programme it commits to maintaining the country's budget in balance (an obligation it wants to be included in the Estonian Constitution) and to provide new impetus to businesses by reducing tax on labour and by supporting exports. The party is counting on growth to reduce unemployment, create jobs and see increases in salaries. Pro-Patria Union also wants to introduce a retirement pension for mothers and widows. A mother of two children (or more) would receive a thirteenth month in pension. Jurgen Ligi (ER), Finance Minister criticised this project arguing that it meant fostering parents to the detriment of childless couples and above all a measure like this went against the goal of budgetary savings which the government has set.

The Social Democratic Party

Former Centre Party member Sven Mikser was elected on 16th October last as the head of the Social Democratic Party and replaced Pihl Jüri who announced that he would not run on 6th March. "Although many people believe that such a change in leadership before the elections is damaging for the party and that the latter is suffering a crisis I think the contrary. Events have encouraged people to act and for the first time during the election of our leader we had several candidates who expressed different points of view, which is a good thing," declared Vice-President Katrin Saks.

Many political analysts believe that Sven Mikser's youth (37) and his stances in support of the population's interests may attract many voters, notably amongst Reform Party supporters. However 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall the Estonians are still suspicious about parties on the left of the political scale which they often assimilate with Soviet Socialists. Since the country's

independence on 20th August 1991 the parties on the right have always been in power in Tallinn. Believed to be more credible than their left wing counterparts they can rely on their experience to take advantage of what has been achieved over the last 20 years. Many political observers believe that the social-democratic leader is trying to position himself for the election in 2015.

Sven Misker will be standing in the country's biggest constituency, Jarva and Viljandi where he was elected on 4th March 2007.

The Social Democratic Party is suggesting tripling the family allowance received for all children under 19. It also wants to guarantee each child a place in nursery and to increase the salaries of childcare assistants so that they are in line with those of primary school teachers. The party continues towards its goal which means that finally education will be totally free in Estonia.

Sven Mikser believes that his party has a good chance being able to govern with the Reform Party after the elections on 6th March simply because Pro-Patria Union-ResPublica is putting forward ideas that are increasingly populist and therefore difficult for Andrus Ansip's party to accept. An alliance between the Social Democratic Party and the Reform Party would not be easy to achieve however since the leftwing party wants to re-introduce progressive income tax, increase family allowance (by bringing it up from 19 to 60€/month per child) and reduce VAT on foodstuffs.

The Other Parties

The Estonian People's Union is the only party not to have rejected an alliance with Edgar Savisaar. "*Estonia is a small country, we should all be able to cooperate,*" declares its leader Andrus Blok who is also refusing to comment on the Kaitespolitsei's report on the centrist leader. The Estonian People's Union has been losing ground since the conviction of its former leader, Villu Reiljan for corruption in 2009.

The Unified Left Party (EVUP) hopes to rally more than the Russian-speaking minority it represents. "*A growing number of people have understood that this country leans far too much to the right,*" declared its co-chairman Sergei Jurgens.

Dimitri Klenski, journalist and leader of the Russian youth movement Nochnoi Dozor (Nightwatch) is leading the Russian party's list under the banner "To-

gether", party chair Stanislav Tserepanov will stand second on the list. The party is fighting for all Estonian inhabitants to have the right to vote. Estonia has 1.3 million inhabitants 387,500 of whom are not Estonians (most are Russian speaking) i.e. 29.8% of the population. Around 136,000 people living in the country mostly Russian speakers do not have the Estonian nationality but since they are not citizens of any other country find themselves without a nationality. They are allowed to live in the country and have access to social services but non-citizens cannot vote in either the national or local elections.

32 independent candidates have been registered for the election on 6th March – an historic record. 25 chose to stand under this label in 1993, 19 in 1999 and 7 four years ago. In 2007 those 7 candidates won 563 votes in all. In 2003 independent candidates won 2,161 votes, in 1999 7,058, and in 1995 1,044 votes. None have ever won a seat in parliament.

This enthusiasm for the status of independent can be explained in part by the success of Indrek Tarand in the European Elections on 7th June 2009. He came second with 25.81% of the vote, which was not many votes less than the Centre Party (26.07%). The son of a Social Democrat MEP Andres Tarand and present curator of the War Museum of Estonia, the candidate rallied a great number of protest votes. The elections are not however comparable and Indrek Tarand's achievement is not easy to repeat. The independent candidates often enjoy great media coverage during the electoral campaign.

Amongst those who are standing on 6th March are the representative of the saviours, Andreas Reinberg; singer Siiri Sisak; Valdo Paddar, member of the Farmer's Assembly (not represented in parliament) who is standing in the constituency of Jarva and Viljandi; Leo Kumas, a reserve lieutenant colonel who is standing in Harju and Rapla; farming entrepreneur Raimond Allik who will try to win votes in Hiiumaa Laane and Saaremaa. If the numbers of voters is equivalent in a month's time to that of the previous election of 4th March 2007 independent candidates will have to win between 4,500 and 6,000 votes to be elected to the Riigikogu.

According to a poll by TNS Emor at the end of January turnout in the general elections on 6th March next might be almost the same as that recorded in the previous elec-

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tion. Indeed 62% of those interviewed said they were going to vote. More of the youngest voters and Russian speakers are due to turn out than four years ago.

The Reform Party leads in the most recent poll undertaken by Turu uuringute AS with 22% of the vote. It is followed by the Centre Party which is due to win 16%, the Pro-Patria Union-Res Publica 12% and the Social Democratic Party 8%. The Greens are due to win 3% and would not be represented in the next parliament. Another poll by TNS Emor reveals that 40.5%

of Estonians would appoint their outgoing head of government, Andrus Ansip as the best Prime Minister for the country. Nearly three in ten (29.3%) prefer Sven Mikser, 16.8% Mart Laar and 13.4% Edgar Savisaar. Just one month before the election the Estonian Prime Minister is due to follow the example of his Latvian neighbour Valdis Dombrovskis (New Era, JL) who was re-elected in the general elections on 2nd October 2010 and will return to his post on 6th March next.

Reminder of the General Election Results of 4th March 2007 in Estonia

Turnout: 61 %

Political Parties	No. of votes won	% of votes cast	No. of seats won
Reform Party (ER)	153 044	27.8	31
Centre Party (K)	143 518	26.1	29
Pro Patria Union -Res Publica (IRL)	98 347	17.9	19
Social Democratic Party (SDE)	58 363	10.6	10
Greens (EEE)	39 279	7.1	6
The Estonian People's Union(ERL)	39 215	7.1	6
Independents	563	0.1	0
Others	17 884	3.2	0

Source : Estonian Electoral Commission <http://www.vvk.ee/index.php?id=11535>

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