

## ESTLAND

THOMAS SCHNEIDER  
MEELIS NAABER

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# Voting behaviour in the Estonian parliamentary elections of 2011

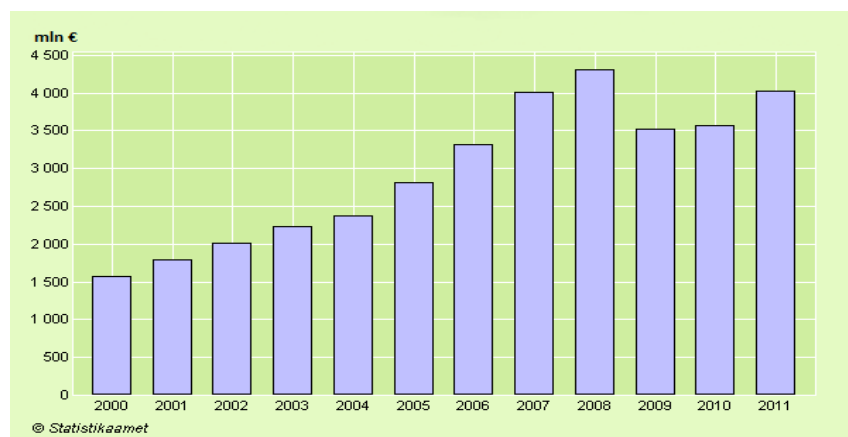
RESEARCH PAPER

Results of Estonia`s 2011 general elections were in accordance with political developments and major trends from the start of election cycle in 2007. During the years 2009-2011 Estonia went through one of the severest financial and economic crises in the whole of Europe and despite harsh and even radical budget cuts which were hard to absorb for the society, media and popular estimation was rather univocally positive towards policy measures implemented by liberal-conservative coalition. This fact definitely created for the coalition parties excellent ground for building up a campaign based on key messages such as the statesmanship and "ability to manage". Almost all polls before the elections showed a confident lead for the liberal *Reformierakond* (RE) and a continuous support for the continuation of coalition with the conservative *Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit* (IRL).

## Estonia`s economic and social status before elections

From the socio-political point of view, sudden decrease of GDP due to the financial crisis came unexpectedly as "cold shower for most of Estonians. Chart 1 shows the steepness of the fall.

Chart 1 GDP of Estonia 2000-2011, data from the II quarter



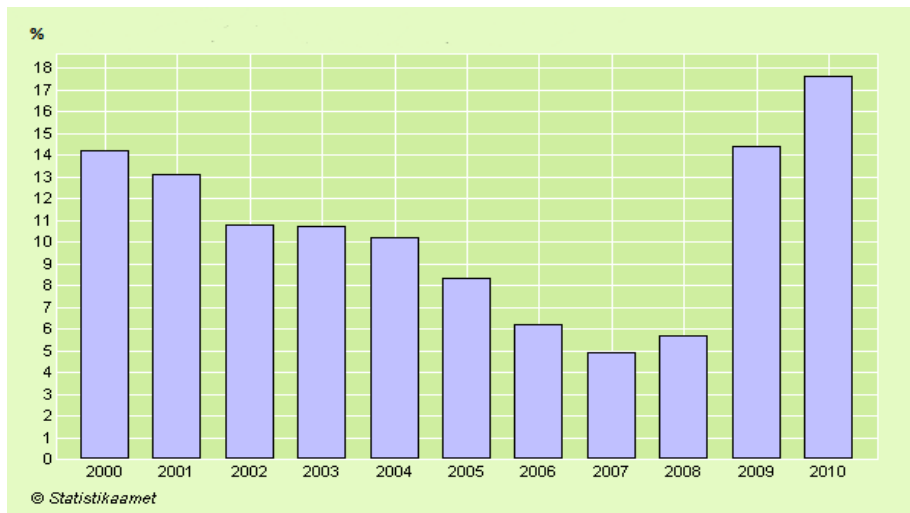
Source: Estonian Statistical Office<sup>1</sup>

For the sake of ruling government, relative recovery was surprisingly quick as an increase of GDP occurred already in 2010 and continued in 2011.

<sup>1</sup> <http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/Dialog/Saveshow.asp>

On the other hand, the transfer of relative successes in macro-economic numbers, didn't reflect in the actual social wellbeing. For example the rate of unemployment has been one of the main problematic issues during last years. Chart 2 shows the rate of unemployment from 2000 until 2010.

Chart 2 Rate of unemployment in Estonia



Source: Estonian Statistical Office<sup>2</sup>

As can be seen from chart, there was a rapid growth of unemployment in 2009 which even accelerated in the first quarter of 2010. By the first quarter of 2011 rate of unemployment had decreased to 14.4%.

Estonian political scientist Oudekki Loone distinguishes parties related to the working class and parties related to the entrepreneurial part of the electorate.<sup>3</sup> According to her findings, the parties oriented to the working class, Social Democratic Party (SDE) and Centre Party (KE) gained some votes due to the high rate of unemployment and the "capitalist" parties RE and IRL gained some votes due the economic growth in late 2010. As nearly half of the unemployed were manual or skilled labourers, most of the votes should have been given to SDE or KE. Accordingly, SDE did receive a very good result and gained an additional 6.5% of votes when compared to 2007, but considering the amount of unemployed people in the electorate, it is still modest. The reasons behind the fact that Centre party did not succeed to attract extra votes from the social crises, will be discussed below.

Another important matter, affecting public mood prior elections was the fact that just three months before the elections, Estonia introduced the Euro. Coalition parties presented the Euro introduction as accomplishment based on their policy measures. Though it must be said, that especially liberal Reformparty designed euro to be their campaign horse, conservative IRL was definitely more modest, being afraid that price increases in shops could result with voter pessimism. One could however conclude that Reformparty's strategy to profile themselves explicitly as the party behind the euro, paid off positively on an election night. Obviously, the price shock arrived months later, at the time of elections society still lived in a euro-euphoria bubble. In the end, it turned out to be a symbol of government's right fiscal policy course.

<sup>2</sup> <http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/Dialog/Saveshow.asp>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.riigikogu.ee/rito/index.php?id=14462>

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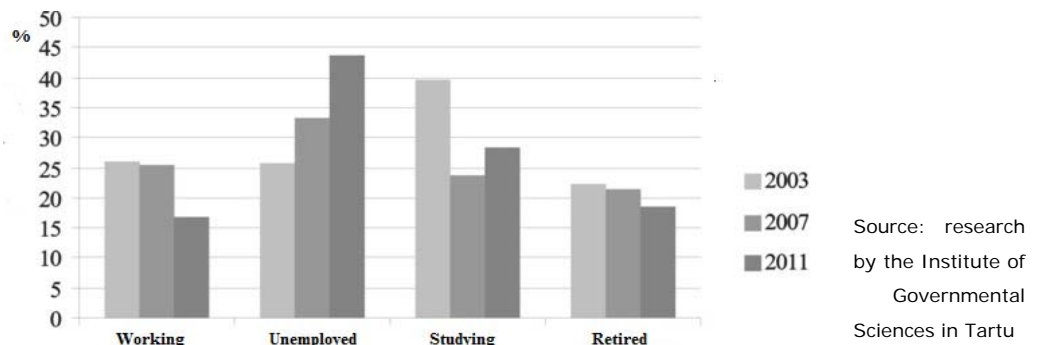
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The amount of people who changed their preferences in the elections was monitored in the research carried out by Tartu University Institute of Governmental Science. As the preliminary data showed, compared to the elections in 2007, the volatility index was on the same scale as in other western European countries.<sup>4</sup> The most loyal were the voters of KE, 70% voted again for their party. But only 55% of the voters of IRL and RE remained loyal to their party. But RE compensated successfully lost votes by mobilising those who did not vote in 2007 as well as first time voters, overtaking voters from small parties and individual candidates. IRL gained votes among previous voters of RE and also by mobilising the ones who did not vote in 2007. Given that KE has a loyal electorate and given that they did not gain any new votes, the reason for their loss is probably the incapacity to mobilise their traditional voters.

*Who does not vote?*

The most significant group among the people who did not vote were unemployed. Charts 3 indicate their proportion in the overall electorate who did not vote.

**Chart 3 Socio economic profile of non-voters**



As seen, the proportion of unemployed who did not vote is significantly high - 43 % of the people who did not vote, were unemployed. That amount of passivity could be the reason why their voice was not so clearly under expressed and the coalition gained even more votes than in 2007.

**The geographical, ethnical and demographical divisibility of votes**

*The geographical aspect*

Estonia is divided into 12 districts, notably, capital city of Tallinn into three different electoral zones.

In most of the districts RE was the winner. Only in two the districts in Tallinn and in *Ida-Virumaa* KE was the winner. It can be clearly explained with the ethnical aspect - those areas are mostly inhabited by Russian-speakers.

Insight into the geographical division of votes in principal can be explored in Rein Toomla's book *Estonian parties 2000-2010*. Toomla first distinguishes the proportion of different urban and rural areas in parties' constituency. Data from 2010 is shown in Chart 4.

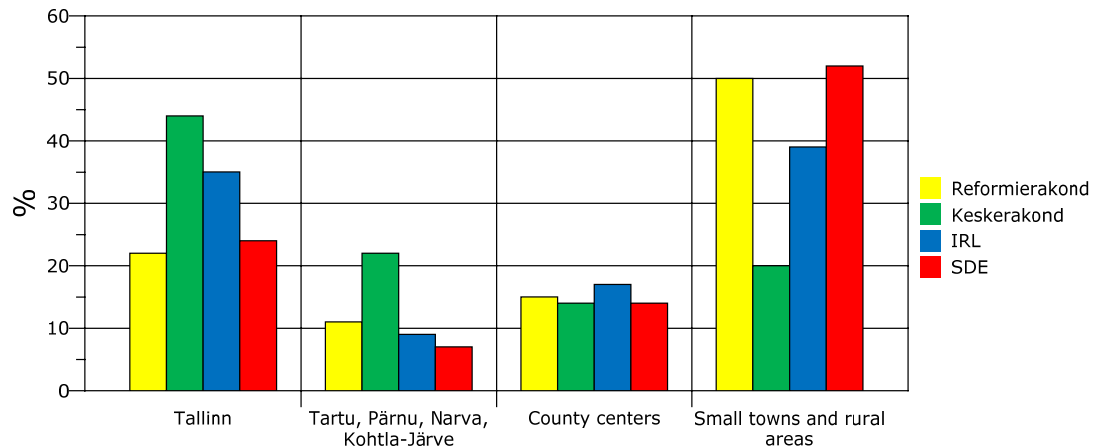
<sup>4</sup> <http://www.riigikogu.ee/rito/index.php?id=14460>

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Source: *Estonian Parties 2000-2010*, Rein Toomla, University of Tartu Publishing, 2011, p 229-233

The most significant aspect is that 50% of the supporters of RE and SDE are from small towns or rural areas and so are nearly 40% of the supporters of IRL. In case of KE, nearly half of their voters are in Tallinn.

*The ethnical aspect*

The study by the Institute of Governmental Sciences in Tartu showed the following results related to the ethnical aspect of the electorate of the parties. (Table 3)

**Table 1 Proportion of voter's identity**

|                      | Considered themselves Estonian % | Not consider themselves Estonian % |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Voters of RE</b>  | 1,2                              | 98,8                               |
| <b>Voters of KE</b>  | 34,3                             | 65,7                               |
| <b>Voters of IRL</b> | 5,8                              | 94,2                               |
| <b>Voters of SDE</b> | 4,3                              | 95,7                               |

Source: "Hääle vahetamine 2011. aasta Riigikogu valimisel", Mihkel Solvak<sup>5</sup>

The ethnic cleavage based on Estonian and Russian speaking voter behaviour is even after 20 years of gaining re-independence still obvious. Strikingly, nearly 90% of Russians consider themselves as supporters of KE. Although the data is from 2010 and by now that percentage could be slightly smaller, the dominance remains crystal-clear in 2011.

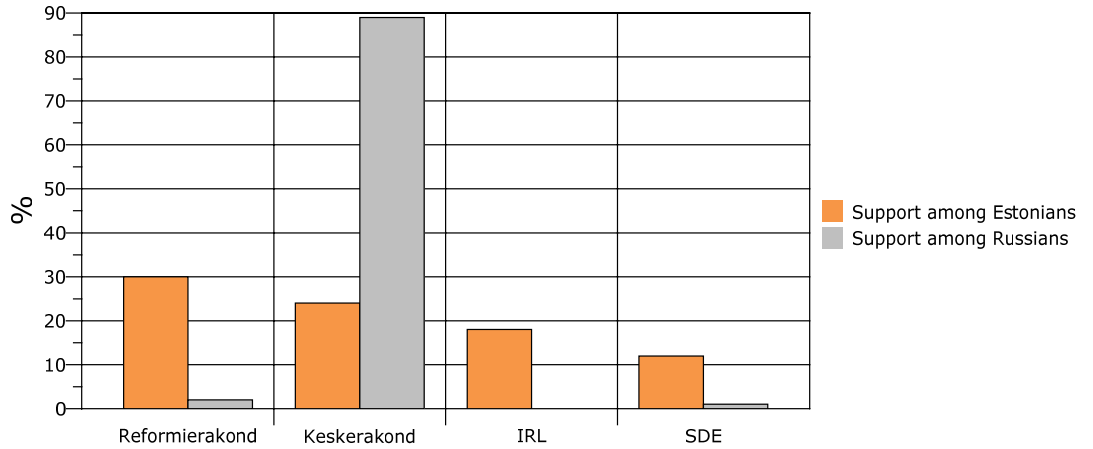
<sup>5</sup> <http://www.riigikogu.ee/rito/index.php?id=14460>

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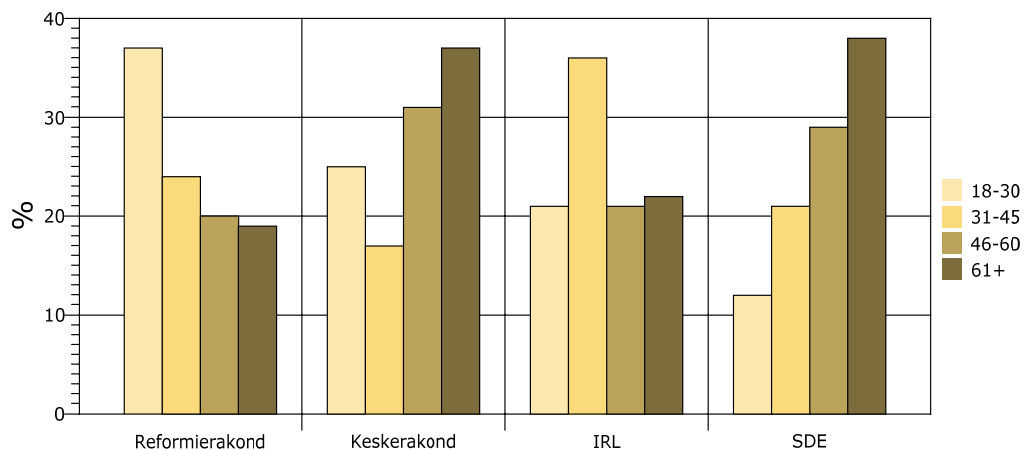
Source: *Estonian Parties 2000-2010*, Rein Toomla, University of Tartu Publishing, 2011, p 200-201

*The demographical aspect*

Mihkel Solvak also refers in his article about the results to some aspects of the demographical cleavage.<sup>6</sup> According to him, the average voter for the coalition is clearly younger than the voter of the opposition. Additionally, the average age of voters is the lowest in RE electorate- the amount of voters aged 18 to 25 among the voters of RE was 20,6%, IRL 16,7%, KE 4,6% and SDE 15,3%. In the next age group, 26-40, RE also has the leading position. In the other end of the line, among voters aged 65 and older, only 16,4% are RE voters, 21,2% IRL, 31,2% KE and 19,6 % SDE. From that we can conclude, that the coalition parties have the youngest electorate and KE the oldest.

Additionally, we can look at the analogues data from 2010.

**Chart 6 Proportion of age groups in parties' supporters**



Source: *Estonian Parties 2000-2010*, Rein Toomla, University of Tartu Publishing, 2011, p 188-190.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.riigikogu.ee/rito/index.php?id=14460>

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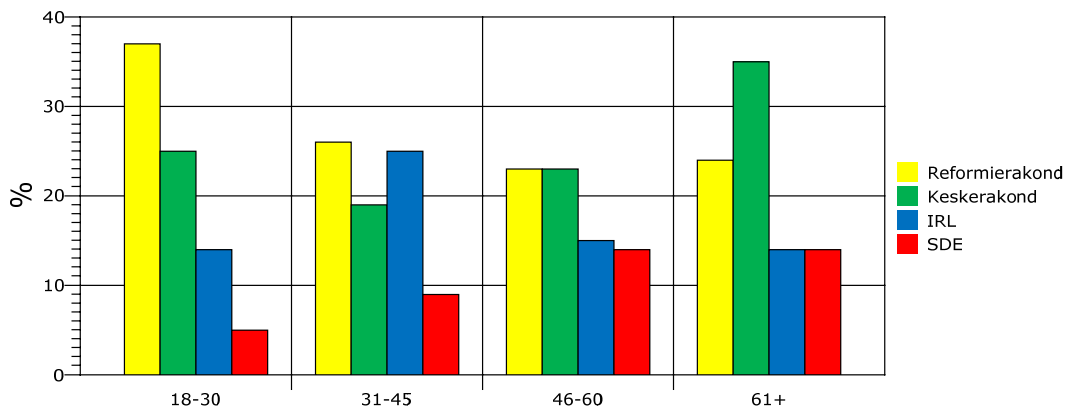
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The RE and IRL have a significantly younger supporters than KE or SDE and less voters in older age groups

Chart 7 shows us the preferred parties in age groups. Surprisingly KE holds the second position after RE among the youngest voters. Then again, before elections KE might have lost their young supporters due to the financing scandal elaborated below. In other age groups the results were quite expected and in line with our previous assessments.

**Chart 7 Preferred parties by age groups**



Source: *Estonian Parties 2000-2010*, Rein Toomla, University of Tartu Publishing, 2011, p 188-190

**Important factor - so called Kremlin money scandal**

From the point of view of the media, most important event influencing the results of the elections was undoubtedly the financing scandal of the KE and especially its chairman, Edgar Savisaar. In December 2011, a journalist of "Postimees" published a story about the rumours that the Estonian Secret Police (KAPO) considers Edgar Savisaar a threat to the national security.<sup>7</sup> This was due to the plans to ask and receive money from high authorities of Russia to finance the election campaign of KE.<sup>8</sup>

Later KAPO revealed parts of documents including surveillance material which confirmed their previous warnings about Savisaar`s intentions. As KAPO intervened before the transaction happened, no charges were made and the situation attained a status of moral discussion Although Savisaar did not confession what he was accused of, the party`s reputation was severely damaged, especially among its Estonian-speaking electorate.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.postimees.ee/358114/vastuluure-kirjeldab-edgar-savisaart-venemaa-mojuagendina/>  
<sup>8</sup> <http://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/27582/>

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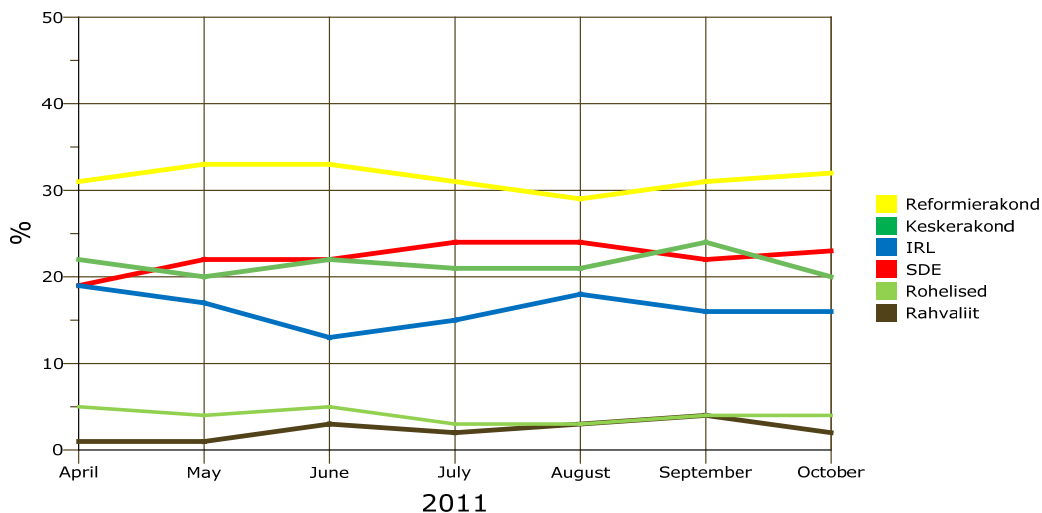
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According to a public opinion survey by TNS Emor, the support dynamic for parties since the election until October 2011 has been following (Chart 8).

**Chart 8**

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Source: TNS Emor

Since the election, SDE has continued its rise and is taking over the second place from KE. IRL has fallen to fourth place. The latest support percentages are RE 32%, SDE 23%, KE 20%, IRL 16%, Rohelised 4% and Rahvaliid 2%.

**Conclusion**

It is not common at all that in a country with a double digit GDP decrease and an unemployment rate of over 10%, the ruling government parties get re-elected with overwhelming majority. But as already elaborated before, by the start of 2011 the economic situation in Estonia had started seemingly to improve: GDP was again in rise and the unemployment rate decreasing significantly. That, plus the success of entering the Eurozone, brought the governing coalition back to power. The inability of the opposition also helped: the small parties were going through internal which had a fatal effect on them. Notably, KE reputation was severely damaged by the party- financing scandal. So, even the people who did not quite agree with the coalition had very few other choices. Large part of them probably did not vote at all - as shown, nearly 45% of them who did not vote were unemployed. Two of the small parties being represented in parliament after 2007 elections, greens and rural party Peoples Union, almost collapsed and did not come over threshold, their seats in the parliament were left free. RE gained support mostly among young Estonian people, in small towns and rural areas. IRL did the same in small towns and rural areas but with a focus on age group 31-45. SDE gained votes in all regions with a slightly stronger profile among older age groups. KE was able to hold their second place with the support of Russian-speaking voters, mainly in Tallinn.

To conclude, the parliamentary elections were held at a very suitable time for the governing coalition. The reputation of opposition parties was relatively low and the economic situation in comparison to some other neighbouring countries rather good.