

## 100 years of the Republic of Estonia

**On 24 February 2018, Estonia celebrated its official anniversary .100 years earlier, the country's first tentative government congregated in Tallinn. The independence celebrations consisted of nation-wide flag ceremonies in the morning, a military parade in the capital Tallinn and the reception of the Estonian president in the evening, which shall continue until 2020.**

After the Revolution of February 1917, and the end of the Russian Empire, the Government of Estonia, which belonged to Russia since 1721, had been granted autonomous self-government rights. In May and June, the first elections for the tentative Parliament took place, and in November, after the October Revolution in Russia, the state legislature declared itself the supreme legislative power in Estonia, but was shortly thereafter forcibly dissolved by the Bolsheviks .In February of the following year, Estonian politicians took advantage of a short-lived vacuum of power in the country, during which the Russian forces were already in retreat from the German army, which had not yet taken over the country (completely). After several failed attempts, on the evening of February 23, 1918, Estonian independence was proclaimed in Pärnu, and on 24 February the tentative government of the country congregated for the first time.

Until the end of the First World War, the country remained under German occupation, after which Soviet Russia launched a military offensive to conquer the Baltic. The Estonian War of Independence ended in February 1920 with the Peace of

Tartu, during which Russia officially recognised Estonian independence. Almost two years had passed since the original declaration of independence.

### Varied program until 2020

The official anniversary celebrations reflect the long process of Estonian independence: It began last year and lasts until February 2020, the 100th anniversary of the peace of Tartu. To organise this major project, the Estonian government established the *Estonia Committee 100* .Like many major events in Estonia, being the country considered as the pioneer in digitised administration and business, this great anniversary program is also organised online by means of an extensive website, where users can compile their individual event calendars and contribute their own ideas and actions to the program; sort of like birthday gifts to the country.

Many famous Estonian artists and art groups have created new pieces especially for the anniversary. For example, various theatres in the country are presenting twelve new plays on Estonian history between August 2017 and July 2018. A number of new films are also celebrating their premiere as part of the anniversary celebrations, and there are plans to publish a 43-part series of books on Estonia. The official *Estonia 100* logo can also be seen on the anniversary products and special offers of many national companies. In addition, government funding for major initiatives have been made available, such as for better equipment for music schools and architectural competitions to redesign public spaces in multiple cities.

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## LÄNDERPROJEKT ESTLAND

ELISABETH BAUER  
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### Estonia in the heart of Europe

Estonia's first EU Council Presidency took place during the early part of the festivities in the second half of 2017. Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid described this position "at the heart of Europe" at the beginning of the Council Presidency, as a unique opportunity to present Estonia not only as a geographical, but also as a political part of Europe. Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker praised the Estonian Chairmanship in January as one of the most organised Presidencies he could remember, particularly due to the progress made in the area of digitisation. In Estonia itself, the presidency was largely positive: according to a study conducted by the Estonian government, 60 percent of Estonians consider the presidency a success, and nearly 80 percent support their country's EU membership.

### "Birthday Week" for the stages of the Declaration of Independence

In the run-up to the Independence Day on 24 February, there have been nationwide events throughout the week to commemorate events just prior to the founding of the state and the birth of the Declaration of Independence. This so-called "birthday week" included the inauguration of new memorials and the unveiling of commemorative stamps and coins on the occasion of the anniversary, as well as current government members visiting the birthplaces of 14 important co-founders of the republic. Prime Minister Jüri Ratas held his traditional appeal for independence on Thursday 22 February, at the Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu, the country's oldest Estonian-speaking theatre. He pointed out in his speech that the Declaration of Independence in 1918 was explicitly addressed to all residents of Estonia. With regard to the country's large Russian-speaking minority, which accounts for about a quarter of the total population, Ratas called upon the Estonians to be aware of their "common patriotism" despite their linguistic and cultural differences, and praised the minority's contributions to the celebrations.

Because 24 February fell on a Saturday this year, the organisers of the Estonia 100 called on Estonian companies to grant their employees a day off on the Friday before. On the eve of the National Holiday, the Declaration of Independence was read in Pärnu, the place where it had been proclaimed for the first time 100 years earlier. At sunrise on 24 February, there were celebratory flag ceremonies in several large cities. In Tallinn, some 1,100 soldiers and 100 army vehicles took part in the ensuing traditional military parade, including members of NATO-based troops. Despite negative temperatures in the double digits, several thousands of people came together for the parade in the city centre. The Estonian Chief of Staff Riho Terras looked back on the military history of the country in his speech at the Tallinn Freedom Square. Even 27 years after regaining independence, he warned that this should never be taken for granted.

President Kaljulaid, whose official reception took place on the evening of 24 February at the Estonian National Museum in Tartu, placed importance on the country's achievements since 1991 and its quest to be a "dignified state" during her speech. The Estonian state today is as powerful and internationally recognised as never before, she said.

### Estonia and Estonians worldwide

Celebrations for the purpose of the anniversary will take place not only in Estonia, but also in Europe, and across the world. All in all, the international program will include almost 140 concerts, exhibitions and other events by the end of this year. Many foreign heads of state and government congratulated Estonia on their big anniversary. Worldwide, well known buildings from various countries, including the Cristo Redentor statue in Rio de Janeiro and the Canadian National Tower in Toronto, illuminated the Estonian national colours.

The Estonian communities outside the country are also called upon to participate in the state anniversary. As a result of

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several major emigration waves since the end of the 19th century, about 200,000 ethnic Estonians (Estonian emigrants and their descendants who still identify themselves as Estonians) now live abroad; especially in Finland, Russia, Sweden, Canada and the USA. Regardless of the emigrant's current nationality, Estonia remains very involved with this group, also in view of the country's current demographic development. As part of the *Estonia 100* program, special events have been sponsored by Estonian language and cultural organisations around the world.

the period of the next *Estonia 100* celebrations. It will only then become clear whether the current coalition government could exploit the momentum and optimism of the state anniversary. According to polls of the *Postimees*, approval of the three coalition parties (the centre-left oriented centrist party that represents the prime minister, the social democrats and the conservative IRL) was under 40 percent at the most recent time.

### Heading into the next century with optimism?

Until the end of the year, the *A Party in Every Village* initiative invites every Estonian village to organise their own "birthday celebration" for the country, and in 2019 and 2020, Estonia will also celebrate the centenary of other important events from the founding period. Although the festivities last another two years, this year's national holiday was the undisputed highlight. For example, writer Peeter Helme wrote in the daily *Eesti Päevaleht* that no previous celebration held on 24 February in the country's history would have had the same significance as this year's, and that most Estonians would not experience a comparable national holiday during their lifetime. The optimistic speech of The President, on the other hand, was received with mixed reactions. Helme described them as "boring," and Rain Kooli from the Estonian Radio-broadcasting station described the speech as an attempt to hit the "golden mean", which would inevitably lead to discontent among those further away from this "centre". Columnist Kaire Uusen of the daily *Postimees*, on the other hand, found that eliminating old, definite historic enemies, problems and dreams, makes it more difficult today to pinpoint the clear character and future direction of the country, but also found that Kaljulaid's optimistic tone is nevertheless appropriate in the face of these new challenges.

The next parliamentary elections, scheduled to be held in March 2019, also fall within