

ARTICLE

Political Data Yearbook 2011

Estonia

Allan Sikk

University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies

Table 1. Cabinet composition of Andrus Ansip III

A. The party composition of Andrus Ansip III
Formalised in office: 4 June 2009 (see Pettai 2010: 955).

Party	Number and percentage of parliamentary seats		Number and percentage of cabinet posts	
<i>Reformierakond</i> – Reform Party (RE)	32*	(31.7%)	7	(53.8%)
<i>Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit</i> – Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL)	19	(18.8%)	6	(46.2%)

Note: * including a nominally independent MP who switched to the Reform Party according to Estonian law could not officially change his party group.

B. Cabinet members of [name Prime Minister]
For the composition of Ansip II on 1 January 2010, see Pettai (2010: 955).
No changes during 2010.

Issues in national politics

Following a severe recession in 2009, Estonian economy started to recover in 2010. By the second half of the year growth returned, recording the second highest annual GDP increase in the EU in the third quarter. The economic outlook was further brightened in May by the country’s accession to OECD and the invitation from the European Commission to join the Eurozone from 2011. The government also managed to stick to its doctrine of balanced budgets and keep the deficit for 2011 below the 3 per cent level as required by the Eurozone rules. However, despite the economic upswing, unemployment remained one of the highest in the EU.

Politically, the year was fairly uneventful; no elections or changes in the composition of government took place in 2010. On 12 March, the minority government of Andrus Ansip (Reform Party, RE) effectively regained parliamentary majority that it had lost in 2009 after the exit of Social Democrats (SDE) from the coalition (see Pettai 2010: 956). Tarmo Mänd – former director President’s office – left the crumbling People’s Union (RL, see below) and joined RE, unable to change his party group as that is not allowed by Estonian law. As the

majority remained slim, the coalition continued to seek support of the six Green (ER) MPs on key parliamentary votes, such as the 2011 budget.

The support for the two governing parties – the Reform Party and Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL) – remained sturdy in public opinion polls. Their persistent popularity was aided by the apparent return of economic growth and the invites to join OECD and, in particular, the Eurozone – that had been an important pledge of RE. Perhaps the biggest challenge faced by the Reform Party was the media backlash to the law proposed by Minister of Justice Rein Lang (RE) that enabled legal action against media outlets for publishing compromising materials or intruding on privacy. The country's biggest newspapers printed blank front pages on 18 March in protest against the so called "source protection" bill that they believed would make it too easy to force the media to reveal their sources and thereby pose a serious limitation on investigating journalism. The bill also drew criticism from abroad – World Association of Newspapers warned about the effects in an open letter to President Ilves. The government introduced some changes to moderate the bill and it was finally passed by the parliament in November, amidst residual criticism from the media; however, the affair did little to affect the government ratings amongst the population at large. At the beginning of the year, moderate in-fighting between different factions surfaced before the congress of Pro Patria and Res Publica Union on 31 January. Up against each other were blocks of former members of the two constituent parts of the party and the supporters of Minister of Defence Jaak Aaviksoo. While the former Prime Minister Mart Laar (formerly Pro Patria) remained at the helm of the party, Aaviksoo was voted out as one of the deputy leaders and there was a general perception that the Res Publica wing – lead by the Minister of Economy Juhan Parts and the new Secretary General of the party Ken-Marti Vaher – had taken control. Nevertheless, the conflict did little overall damage – notably, no prominent members quit the party.

Meanwhile, all opposition parties faced changes or turbulent times. The least destructive was the leadership change in SDE. On 16 October, the party chose the popular former Minister of Defence Sven Mikser as its new leader to replace Jüri Pihl who had arranged a somewhat divisive municipal coalition with the Centre Party (KE) in Tallinn. Following his defeat, Pihl – former chief of the Security Police and Attorney General turned politician – stood down from his post of deputy mayor and eventually decided to leave politics. While Mikser was only marginally more sceptical of the power-sharing arrangements in the capital, the coalition broke apart following the party financing scandal that battered the Centre Party at the end of the year (see below). Meanwhile, the new leader – youthful (36 years old) and with clearer centre-left credentials than Pihl – managed to give a badly needed boost to the party's popularity in the run-up to 2011 parliamentary elections.

In April, the People's Union – troubled by corruption scandals involving its former leaders (see Pettai 2009: 952) – began merger negotiations with the Social Democrats. While Karel Rütli, the modernizing party leader, and most of the leadership were in favour of the merger, the issue split the party. Most notably, Arnold Rütel, the party's honorary chair and former President of Estonia was outspoken in his opposition to the merger (or takeover, as his wing saw it). Hence, following successful negotiations by the leaders, the party congress blocked the planned merger on 23 May. Three days later, the Estonian Supreme Court upheld a verdict against Villu Reiljan – long-term leader of the party – for taking bribes when serving as the Minister of Environment (see Pettai 2009: 952). While some prominent politicians – including the former Minister of Finance Aivar Sõerd – had left the party earlier, after the congress the party effectively disintegrated. Three of its MPs joined the Social Democrats (including Rütli, the party leader until 25 May); former Minister of Agriculture Ester Tuiksoo joined the Centre Party in November, leaving the dwindling People's Union with only one representative in the parliament and poor chances of clearing the five per cent threshold in 2011 *Riigikogu* elections.

Internal strife also ravaged the Greens (ER) who had only been established in the run-up to 2007 parliamentary elections when they secured six seats in *Riigikogu*. Dissatisfaction with leadership escalated following poor results in 2009 European and local elections. In November 2009, the internal opposition took over the party board and side-lined the original initiator of the party Marek Strandberg and his allies who dominated the parliamentary group. Following a legal challenge to the board election results, Strandberg and his allies managed to re-institute the pre-congress party board; 20 members linked to internal opposition were expelled and only later reluctantly re-admitted on the condition that they would not run for positions of leadership. None of them went on to be candidates for the party in 2011 parliamentary elections while few other former Greens decided to run as independent candidates. Desperate to win back popular support, the party started to recruit popular figures to run as independent candidates (so called “freemen”) on its list.

In December, the Centre Party, the main party of the opposition, faced serious allegations. On 16 December Edgar Savisaar, the mayor of Tallinn and the long-term leader of the party, was accused in an article in the biggest Estonian daily of soliciting illegal funds for his party from Russia and being Russia’s “agent of influence”. Following a week of mounting speculations, a press release from the Estonian Security Police on 21 December incriminated him of soliciting money from Vladimir Yakunin, the president of Russian Railways and purportedly a former KGB officer. Savisaar denied the allegations claiming that he had approached Yakunin regarding a donation from Andrei Pervozvanny Foundation for the construction of a major new Russian Orthodox church in Tallinn. As with the conflicts and scandals surrounding the other opposition parties, the “agent of influence” scandal (or “church scandal” in the parlance of Savisaar) might have been symptomatic of the gathering pace of election campaign in the run-up to March 2011 parliamentary elections. However, it was difficult to judge whether or how badly the party was hurt by the accusations. It did lead to the collapse of municipal coalition with the Social Democrats on 23 December, and draw open and direct criticism from within the usually monolithic party – most crucially from two influential former Ministers of Interior. On the other hand, the big yet short-lived scandal brought into limelight the party’s relatively good relations with Russia and the construction of an Orthodox church that might have even helped to solidify the strong support for the party amongst ethnic Russian voters. Indeed, some political opponents believed that Savisaar himself or his intra-party opponents stood behind the initial leaks that eventually led to the Security Police being dragged into daily politicking.

The scandal was somewhat ironic as the changes to the Political Parties Act approved by the parliament on 25 November were portrayed by parties as a significant step towards improving the transparency of party funding. The amendments had been in the making for a long time. In 2006, the Chancellor of Justice Allar Jõks called on the parliament to tighten the rules governing the oversight of party funding. In 2007, he referred the law for constitutional review to the Estonian Supreme Court that partly supported his positions (see Pettai 2009: 952-953). According to the amended law, the oversight of party funding was transferred from a parliamentary select committee to a special body which comprises of representatives of parliamentary parties and members nominated by the Chancellor of Justice, the National Electoral Committee and the State Auditor. Also, the amended law extended regulations to electoral coalitions (that can only contest local elections) and regulated loans made to political parties – that had allegedly been used as a means to circumvent the ban on anonymous and corporate donations. Whether the relatively modest changes manage to lead to more effective oversight remain to be seen at the time of writing.

Another significant institutional change regarded the rules for European Parliament elections. The first European elections in 2004 employed open party lists, where preference votes determined the eventual ranking of candidates within party lists. In 2006, the parliament decided to employ closed rather than open lists – the first time a closed list had been used in Estonia since gaining independence. The change proved to be highly

unpopular and contributed towards the remarkable success of anti-partitocracy and mildly anti-establishment independent candidate Indrek Tarand who won more than a quarter of all votes in 2009 (see Pettai 2010: 960). On 10 February, the parliament unanimously decided to revert back to open party lists with limited public debate.

Source and further information

Pettai, V. (2010). Estonia. *European Journal of Political Research* 49(7-8): 955-963.

Pettai, V. (2009). Estonia. *European Journal of Political Research* 48(7-8): 951-955.