

## **2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 21 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN ESTONIA JUNE 12 2004**

**Evald Mikkel  
University of Tartu  
Email: emikkel@ec.ut.ee**

### **Key points:**

- Estonia's peripheral location apart from 'core Europe', post-communist legacy, and pre-occupation with issues related to nation- and state-building have left the Estonian public with relatively fewer assets to deal with complex issues relating to the European Union.
- The June 2004 elections to the European Parliament were characterized by the lowest turnout since Estonia regained independence.
- In line with most other EU countries, the anti-government vote dominated voters' intentions producing an apparent shift to the left.
- Political actors representing the Russian-speaking minority failed once again to co-operate and present a clear alternative leaving their specific voters' interests in Europe to be represented by Estonian politicians.

### **Background**

Estonian accession to the European Union has been characterised by a high discrepancy in the positions of political elites and ordinary citizens. On the one hand, Estonian elites have been pushing for fast entry to the EU, using all possible means to speed up Estonian membership in a tough competition with other potential candidates. Remarkable efforts were introduced to build up a specific image of Estonia as an exemplary and most promising candidate. As a consequence, no mainstream party seriously questioned EU membership. Even those parliamentary parties that flirted with Euroscepticism, especially during the period when public opposition to EU membership was growing, soon returned to their pro-EU stances. The only media attention on the EU issue focused on the somewhat vague position of the Centre Party that avoided making a clear statement on the EU during the last national elections and EU accession referendum. However, strong support to the 'Yes' vote dominated clearly among the political

establishment during the referendum campaigning period.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the Estonian public was one of the most sceptical about the European Union project among the candidate countries, showing serious doubts in relation to early membership in the light of its negative historical experience of being part of Soviet Union and highly valuing its recently regained independence.<sup>2</sup>

Estonia's peripheral location apart from 'core Europe', its post-communist legacy, and pre-occupation with issues related to nation- and state-building have left the Estonian public with relatively fewer resources and assets to deal with the complex aspects of the European Union. Hence, there is little public knowledge of, and even interest in, EU affairs compared to most of the other accession countries. As a consequence, the EU topic had a low salience during the last national elections in March 2003.<sup>3</sup> Estonia's small size has added an additional specific element to the public discussion on the EU topic, characterized by the few qualified experts and journalists (not to mention politicians) who can deal with this complex issue properly. The whole tenor of the discussion on EU matters was far too superficial and flippant, with politicians playing with empty slogans and symbols, and simple facts far outweighing serious arguments and comprehensive elaboration.

The Estonian electoral process shows, in general, similar patterns common to the rest of post-Soviet environment. Massive fission and fusion of parties, domination of leaders and a candidate-centred process, relatively low turnouts, apathetic and disappointed voters, weak party identification, and high volatility are familiar elements to all Eastern European societies. Some recent studies have shown clear signs towards stabilization in electoral behaviour. However, the most recent elections in all the Baltic states raise serious doubts to the presumed stabilization of their party systems. The time proved to be ripe for the emergence and astonishing success of new party players underlying the immature character of the post-Soviet political process.

However, there are some specific features that still make the Estonian case somewhat divergent in terms of electoral process. In contrast to other Eastern European countries, the Estonian party system diverges from the mainstream in two important ways. Firstly, the general weakness of the left wing parties and specifically the marginal role of the communist successor party. The communist successor Estonian Social Democratic Labour Party made only a brief appearance in parliament following the 1999 elections, in a joint list together with the United People's Party of Estonia. The Moderates, who claimed to have a modern social democratic ideology, were struggling with identity problems, participating in the previous right-wing governments throughout the 1990s and backing all of their neo-liberal policies. Only a very poor result in the most recent (2002) local elections and bleak prospects for crossing the required 5% threshold for parliamentary representation forced the Moderates to make serious efforts to move towards the

---

<sup>1</sup> See E. Mikkel, 'The Estonian EU Accession Referendum, 14 September 2003', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Referendum Briefing No 11* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernbrefest.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See: European Commission. *Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2003.3*, Brussels: European Commission. 2003; European Commission. *Applicant Countries Eurobarometer*, Brussels: European Commission. 2001; and E. Mikkel and A. Kasekamp. 'Emerging party realignment? Party-based euroscepticism in Estonia.' Paper prepared for the 30th ECPR Joint Session workshop on 'Opposing Europe: Euroscepticism and Political Parties,' Turin, Italy, March 22-27, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See: E. Mikkel, 'Europe and the Estonian Parliamentary Elections of 2 March 2003', *Opposing Europe Research Network/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 11* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/oernestonianbp11.pdf>.

left, not only in their programmatic statements but also in their real political behaviour. This sudden shift in positions probably did not do much to help save them in the 2003 national elections, leaving voters confused and the party with a bleak 7% in support (compared to 15.2% in 1999). Anyway, the Moderates survived and their continuous gradual move towards the left, change of the name to the Social-democratic Party, sending a strong symbolic value and clear message to the electorate, established the basis for the surprising outcomes of the election to the European Parliament.

The second peculiarity of the Estonian party system is related to the heterogeneity of Estonian society inherited from the Soviet past providing a potentially strong basis for the emergence of the ethnic divisions between parties. In fact, ethnic Russian parties have found it extremely difficult to cross the 5% threshold in every election since independence. Even in the 1995 and 1999 elections, when those parties were able to secure parliamentary representation, their share of the vote was still far below the size of the Russian speaking electorate.<sup>4</sup> One important factor which should have increased support for the Russian parties in the European elections was the opposite trends among Estonian- and Russian-speakers in terms of their attitudes towards the EU membership shown in September 2003 EU accession referendum. It turned out that support for EU membership was gradually increasing among Estonian-speakers and decreasing among Russian-speakers during the run up to the referendum.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, one should not underestimate the importance of timing: that the distance between EU accession referendum and elections to the European Parliament was barely nine months. This combined with the low salience and weak knowledge on European affairs, left voters with serious doubts about the rationality of participation in these elections.<sup>6</sup>

## **Electoral Design**

Until 2003 Estonian electoral engineering was characterised by moderate attempts to modify and improve the existing electoral system as a response to complaints about its performance.<sup>7</sup> With the emergence of new significant political players, in particular the populist Res Publica party, Estonia moved into a new stage involving direct institutional manipulation aimed at improving prospective electoral performance and gaining additional popular support on the basis of playing with supposedly ‘increasing democratic means’ by delivering more power to the people. This was to be achieved by introducing a direct presidential vote and converting votes into seats according to the personal votes obtained by candidates in elections (in contrast to the closed party lists). Res Publica entered the electoral market with simple and catchy slogans of ‘new politics’ and ‘choose order’ and, after taking power, found that the easiest way to realize its promises relating to increasing ‘people’s power’ was by introducing those symbolic elements of direct voting.

---

<sup>4</sup> According to the 2000 Population and Housing Census, the share of Russian-speaking citizens was about 15%, while ethnic Russian parties gained 5.9% of the vote in 1995, 8.2% in 1999 and only 2.4% in 2003.

<sup>5</sup> See: ‘The Estonian EU Accession Referendum, 14 September 2003’; and E. Mikkel and G. Pridham 2004. Clinching the ‘Return to Europe’: The Referendums on EU Accession in Estonia and Latvia. *West European Politics*. 27:4. pp. 716-748.

<sup>6</sup> Elections to the European Parliament were actually the fourth Estonian elections in a row during a relatively short period of 20 months.

<sup>7</sup> See: E. Mikkel and V. Pettai. ‘The Baltics: Independence with Divergent Electoral Systems,’ in J. M. Colomer (ed.) *The Handbook of Electoral System Design*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2004, p. 339.

Gambling around the rules for the first elections to the European Parliament provide a good example of Res Publica's intentions to experiment with the institutional framework.

The legal basis for the elections to the European Parliament was established by the European Parliament Election Act passed in parliament as long ago as December 18 2002. According to the formal logic of the Estonian legislative process laws require presidential proclamation within 14 days and enter into force on the tenth day after their publication. All this means quite a prolonged process which, in this particular case, ended on 23 January 2003 when the European Parliament Election Act entered into force. This law provided for a PR system where mandates were distributed according to the d'Hondt method in a single constituency. Winning seats were allocated to the parties according to their nominated candidate lists (closed party lists). The specific intentions of the new constitutional designers in Res Publica found understanding among the Fatherland Union and some other established parties and *Riigikogu* adopted new rules, determining the allocation of seats according to the popularity of candidates (open list vote), smoothly on 11 February 2004. Opposition to the amendments came, surprisingly, from Res Publica's two coalition partners, the Reform Party and People's Union, on the grounds of the apparently too short time period left until the elections, in conditions when some parties had already started their campaigns; hence, confusing and destabilizing the whole electoral process. On these grounds President Arnold Rüütel refused to proclaim the amended electoral rules and returned the law to the *Riigikogu* for a new debate and decision. However, the President's arguments did not convince the fighters for 'a real democracy' too much and a parliamentary majority passed the law again without any hesitation. To avoid potential complications relating to the proper timing of the elections the President proclaimed the new electoral law on March 12 2004, leaving a short, barely three month, period for preparation for the elections.

## **The Campaign**

Emotional speculations about the pros and cons of joining the EU appeared to receive an immediate cause for reflection at the beginning of May with an increase in the prices of a number of specific sensitive goods like sugar, bananas and petrol. Eurosceptics celebrated their first pyrrhic victory loudly. The symbolic value of the price levels of sugar, bananas and petrol is difficult to underestimate. Sugar has been an important component in producing home preserves for most Estonians with average or below average living standards. Bananas were hardly available for ordinary citizens during the Soviet era. Apart from freedom of speech and the rule of law, for the most of people access to the exotic foods like bananas due to cheap prices, symbolized the highly valued consumer freedom. The Soviet system was characterized by a deficit of the most highly valued goods producing a kind of 'fetishism of objects'. Car ownership was considered to be one of the main elements of status and position in a (post)communist society. Petrol turned out to be a very necessary component for the car-culture and hence a very sensitive issue to the public in terms of its price dynamics.

This starting point on the May 1, just six weeks ahead of the elections to the European Parliament gave a clear advantage to those attempting to tap into the Eurosceptical mood. On those grounds, it is probably not surprising that even most of parliamentary parties, who earlier, during the EU referendum were campaigning on the positive pro-EU stances, suddenly started to flirt with Euroscepticism. The crucial target of membership having been achieved, all the hidden fears

related to the joining a new Union surfaced. Defending national interests, concerns related to pooled sovereignty, preserving the national language and culture and all the main national symbols<sup>8</sup> meant clear opposition to the further deepening and federalization of the Union by most of political actors. On these grounds the Fatherland Union was strongly fighting for national interests with its main campaign slogan being 'For Estonia'. The People's Union promised to look after the Estonian currency by 'Protecting (the) Estonian Kroon.' Res Publica was ambitious (and desperately naive) about Estonia's special role in the EU with the slogan 'Breaking Through'. The Reform Party was concerned about defending its dominant neo-liberal discourse with its 'Keep Estonian Success' slogan. The Centre Party was intelligent enough to continue with its vague positions, promising something for everyone by combining 'Our Relic is Freedom' with 'We Believe in Estonia in Europe'.

Only the Social-Democrats with their slogan 'Common Sense Pays Off' were obviously diverging from the mainstream, openly supporting further deepening of the EU and delivering a bigger role to the main institutions of the EU, in particular to the European Commission. The Social-Democrats argued that current institutional framework allowed Russia to negotiate with bigger EU member states above the heads of the small Baltic states to introduce supposedly discriminatory statements covering Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia. With a strong head quarters in Brussels, they argued, this would never happen as the European Commission would remain strongly on the side of all its integral members without leaving some of them with sensitive disadvantages. In combination with a strong emphasize on improving and adapting the problematic Estonian social dimension to the average level of the EU and an impressive performance by its leading candidate, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who left all other top contestants from other parties far behind during the public debates in the main media outlets, this provided a strong basis for the electoral success of the Social-Democrats.

Average voters were deeply confused and amazed by such a fast and impressive shift of rhetoric by most of the mainstream political actors. Just a few months ago all those politicians were campaigning on the Yes side, using a broad variety of arguments in support of the EU project, and now they were openly competing with each other in attempting to find out all kinds of negative aspects related to the EU, promising to defend national interests whatever the costs and to protect the nation against all those apparent evils coming from the EU.

Most of peripheral parties, and hence traditional Eurosceptics, did not even run in the elections at all. From the five unsuccessful parties at last national elections, only two of the back runners, the Social Democratic Labour Party and Russian Party in Estonia, decided to participate. In addition, two minor parties, the Democratic Party and the Pensioners' Party, who even missed out on the last national elections, decided to use the European election to gain some publicity this time. Estonia has been missing a precedent of strong independent candidates running and winning in national elections. This time, the elections to the European Parliament attracted some publicly well known persons to participate as independent candidates. The mayor of the Maardu city council, Georgi Bõstrov, was backed by the United People's Party of Estonia which asked its overwhelmingly Russian-speaking electorate to support only this particular candidate. Marek Strandberg gained publicity for his appearances related to environmental and green issues in the

---

<sup>8</sup> In particular, the importance of the national currency, the Kroon, and priority for the foundations emphasised in the Estonian constitution were heavily supported.

media. Martin Helme was one of the leaders of the Eurosceptic camp who emerged during the EU accession referendum debates. Surprisingly enough, two other well recognized Eurosceptics, Igor Gräzin and Uno Silberg, decided to run under the party labels of previously pro-EU parties, the Reform Party and People's Union, respectively.

Due to the lack of an electoral tradition in EU elections and general tradition in holding elections during the summer time, the real campaign only really started two weeks before the election day, leaving far too limited a time span for the development of comprehensive discussion and advanced arguments. The main discussion was still centred on abstract and hypothetical issues related to the further unionisation and/or federalisation of the European Union.<sup>9</sup> As election day neared, opinion polls were showing the increasing popularity of the Social-Democrats and its leader Ilves. Despite the smear campaign waged by other parties, in particular the government coalition, to discredit the Social-Democrats and their leader,<sup>10</sup> the clear trend of increasing support for this party continued.

Officially reported campaign spending amounted to about 1.5 million Euros, with a huge watershed between the parliamentary parties and the rest. The front runners, Res Publica and Reform Party, spent respectively 433 000 and 287 000 Euros, and for minor parties the maximum was about 10 000 Euros (the Russian Party in Estonia). On this basis, while the parliamentary parties had the capacity to run their massive campaigns in all main media outlets, small parties and individual candidates largely lacked access to the media. Even Estonian National TV continued with its discriminatory tradition distributing freely granted public time to different parties and individual candidates unequally. Estonian national TV held three general debates, each lasting 90 minutes, where the six parliamentary parties received 180 minutes of total time (30 minutes per party), but all other parties and individual candidates were covered in one 90 minutes program (11.25 minutes per party/individual candidate).

## Results

Estonia is represented in European Parliament by three MEPs (out of six) in Socialist Group, two representatives in the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, and only one in the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats.

The results of these elections were a surprise to the Estonian political establishment in various ways. Turnout has always been considered as one of the important elements legitimating the whole political process. A clear discrepancy appeared here between high 50%-60% expectations of politicians and the more realistic, below the crucial 50% level, estimates made by the main

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, in its pre-election day edition, the main national newspaper *Postimees* asked leaders of the six main parties about the nature of the developments of the European Union towards a union of states or a united states of Europe. See: 'Kas riikide liit või liikumine liitriigi suunas', *Postimees*, 12.05.2004.

<sup>10</sup> The leading governmental party Res Publica went so far as to contrast on the black-white scale their positions with the 'socialists' as 'Progress versus stagnation' (<http://www.respublica.ee/index.php?id=5672>). Leader of the Res Publica, Urmas Reinsalu, in his advertisement in daily *Postimees* a day before elections spent a significant amount of the space just on attacking of 'socialists': 'By choosing socialists, you will choose a course, which goal is Dictate of European central authority; Decreasing decision-making power of the nation states; Weak borders and big immigration; Uncontrollable bureaucracy; High taxes for all citizens; Indiscriminate redistribution from hard-working to lazy.' See: Urmas Reinsalu, *Postimees*, 12.05.2004.

polling organisations and leading social scientists. But the lowest turnout of 26.8% after regaining independence turned out to be still far below of even the most sceptical estimations<sup>11</sup> (see Table 1) and provided a stark contrast with the previous 2003 national elections (58.2%) and the EU accession referendum (64.1%).

**Table 1. Turnout in the June 2004 elections to the European Parliament in Estonia**

	Total	% of registered voters	% of valid votes
<b>Registered voters</b>	873,809	100	-
<b>Votes cast</b>	234,485	26,83	-
<b>Valid votes</b>	232, 230	26,58	100

Source: Estonian National Electoral Committee 2004

The main factors accounting for this extremely low participation rate were the low salience, interest in and comprehension of EU affairs in general. An important role was certainly played by the confusion relating to the drastic shifts in rhetoric of the mainstream political actors from blatant Euro-optimism to certain elements of Euroscepticism. First, the negative experience related to the increase in prices for some sensitive/symbolic goods, and new attempts by Russia to question Estonian minority and citizenship policies, this time already through the EU framework, which was perceived to provide greater safety against Russian claims on specific matters, certainly did not encourage potential voters to participate in the elections. The lack of a tradition of summer voting in combination with the changed priorities relating to the beginning of the short lasting summer season tended to decrease the participatory intentions of the voters.

Disappointment in the government, its policies and controversial stands on the EU, provided strong grounds for a protest vote. Table 2 provides information relating to the election outcome.

**Table 2. Results of the elections to the European Parliament June 2004 in Estonia\***

	EU party group affiliation	Votes (%)	Seats	
			(%)	Share
Social-Democratic Party	PES	36.8 (7.0)	50.0 (5.9)	3
Centre Party	ALDE	17.5 (25.4)	16.7 (27.7)	1
<b>Reform Party</b>	ALDE	12.2 (17.7)	16.7 (18.8)	1
Fatherland Union	EPP-ED	10.5 (7.3)	16.7 (6.9)	1
<b>People's Union</b>	(UEN)	8.0 (13.0)	0 (12.9)	0
<b>Res Publica</b>	(EPP-ED)	6.7 (24.6)	0 (27.7)	0
Democratic Party	(IND/DEM)	1.2 (-)	0 (0)	0
Pensioner's Party	-	0.6 (-)	0 (0)	0
Social-Democratic Party	Labour (GUE/NGL)	0.5 (0.4)	0 (0)	0

<sup>11</sup> Except data provided by Saar Poll which already on October 2003 estimated for Estonia the lowest participation of 14% among all the candidate countries. See: [http://www.saarpoll.ee/europarlamendi\\_proгноos2004.rtf](http://www.saarpoll.ee/europarlamendi_proгноos2004.rtf); and European Commission. *Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2003.4*, Brussels: European Commission, 2003, Figure 7.7a, p. 197.

Russian Party in Estonia	(Greens/EFA)	0.3 (0.2)	0 (0)	<b>0</b>
Independent candidates (4)	-	5.7 (0.4)	0 (0)	<b>0</b>

Note: \* Results of the last National 2003 Elections are presented in parenthesis. Current governmental parties are presented by bold font.

Source: Estonian National Electoral Committee 2004

As a result, the government parties failed desperately, gaining only 26.9% of the votes and 16.7% of the seats (in contrast to the 55.4% and 59.4% respectively in the 2003 national elections). Actually, only one of the three governmental parties, the Reform Party, secured representation in the European Parliament. The collapse of the vote for the rurally-based People's Union was largely unexpected, as the party was running on an apparently strong platform of defending national interests which was perceived to be an important issue for those people living in the countryside. The main reason for its negative outcome was probably related to the increasingly positive attitudes towards the EU and a relatively low turnout in the countryside. Following its impressive emergence and rapid success in the last national elections the Res Publica party was eager to repeat its earlier success story. Surprisingly enough for the most entrepreneurial party in electoral affairs in Estonia, those methods and tricks which were believed to be crucial by party's spin doctors to bringing success to the party last time did not work at all in 2004.<sup>12</sup> Its massive and bold Soviet-style 'Breaking Through', campaign did not convince voters this time. Moreover, a confusing shift from being the most pro-European party during the EU accession referendum to a conservative pro-nationalist force with strong Eurosceptical elements,<sup>13</sup> nullified even all those advantages related to the Res Publica's incumbency.<sup>14</sup> As a result, in contrast to the ambitious plans of gaining 50% of the seats, Res Publica received only 6.7% of vote and secured no EP representation and, in doing, so actually helped the Social-democrats to become the leading party and to achieve an astonishing 36.8% of the vote and 50% of the seats. A party which was, just few months ago, desperately concerned with its further marginalisation in Estonian politics, suddenly presented the strongest left-wing winning case among the all post-Soviet EU member states. In addition to the dominant protest vote and failure of the government to convince the public, the candidate-centred logic of the elections presented a strong additional advantage to the Social-democrats. The majority of voters, confused by the controversial campaign and uncertain about the EU project, were desperately looking for the qualified professionals in international relations, capable of properly representing tiny Estonia in Europe. The leader of the Social-democrats, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, managed to impress the general Estonian public, not only with his credentials related to his previous international experience and skills, but also with a more convincing performance and secure handling of specific issues compared to his leading competitors from other parties. This was even despite the fact that general pro-EU 'deepening' and centralizing positions presented by Ilves were running in obvious opposition to the majority's preferences related to the preservation of national interests and sovereignty. This discrepancy is probably still explainable by the complexity of the issues related to the EU and Estonian

<sup>12</sup> Proving that factors other than the pure nature of the campaign framed voters' choices during the last national elections in 2003. See: *Europe and the Estonian Parliamentary Elections of 2 March 2003*.

<sup>13</sup> As much as general left-right terms are applicable to Estonian post-Soviet realities. Res Publica showed an impressive move from centre-left to the centre-right (or even distinctly right-wing) positions just during the period from campaigning for the national elections until campaigning for the elections to the European Parliament.

<sup>14</sup> Most post-communist elections appear to be characterised by a high level of the protest vote and punishment of incumbents. However, in a case of being in government for barely a year, incumbency should and could be still used as an advantage.



involvement in the EU affairs, leaving the majority of public without a deeper understanding of the all the nuances of the standpoints presented by Ilves.

Estonian voters have been ‘trained’ to support relevant parties. In combination with the specific electoral system, which favours larger vote gainers, it means a low level of wasted votes and no chances for independent candidates. The European Parliament elections diverge here significantly from the previous pattern. The wasted vote amounted to 23% in comparison to only 5.3% for the 2003 national elections. Independent candidates collected a noticeable 5.7% of support (in contrast to the miserable 0.4% on the last national elections), while two of them, Georgi Bõstrov and Marek Strandberg achieved remarkable seventh and ninth positions among the top vote gainers across the country.<sup>15</sup> That might point to an increase in voters’ interests in alternative candidates in the next national elections. Continuous low levels of support for the peripheral parties, only 2.6% in comparison to the 4.9% for the last national elections, is explicable probably due to the absence from the contest of some recognised Eurosceptical parties, such as: the Christian People’s Party, Independence Party and the Republican Party.

Due to the specific nature of the electoral campaign, the dividing lines between Euro-optimists and Eurosceptics were much more blurred this time. However, considering the previous longer tracks of the ‘permanent Eurosceptics’, who have showed their anti-EU stands consistently, this group failed to succeed in these elections. Many earlier Eurosceptics decided not to run at all. The only individual candidate with strong Eurosceptic positions, Martin Helme, received only 0.6% of votes. Two other well recognized Eurosceptics, Igor Gräzin and Uno Silberg, running under the Reform Party and People’s Party labels, received respectively 2.1% and 0.2% of votes.

Russian ethnic parties, failing once again to co-operate and to present a clear alternative to the mainstream Estonian parties, fared miserably, receiving only 3% of the popular vote.<sup>16</sup> Most of the recognized leaders of the two main Russian ethnic parties did not bother to run in the elections at all. Surprisingly enough, the only Russian party having parliamentary experience, the United People’s Party of Estonia, decided not to present its party list, instead to support an individual candidate, Georgi Bõstrov. The general organisational and ideological crisis of the Russian ethnic political parties in combination with confusion and discrepancy in relation to the nature and means of the integration into the European Union in the Russian-speaking community produced total disarray among Russian ethnic political forces.<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion and Future Prospects**

The founding elections to the European Parliament underlined the already established patterns of electoral change in Estonia. The trend of decreasing electoral turnout produced a new record low of only 26.8% of popular participation. The fragile foundations of party identification were further undermined by the repeated shifts in parties’ positions on crucial issues and overwhelmingly candidate-centred logic of the electoral process. A continuation of the pattern of dissatisfied voters punishing parties in power provided for a strong protest vote against the right-

---

<sup>15</sup> 2.7% (6182) and 2.3% (5354) of the votes.

<sup>16</sup> As an independent candidate Georgi Bõstrov received 2.7%, and the Russian Party in Estonia only 0.3%, of the vote.

<sup>17</sup> See: ‘The Estonian EU Accession Referendum, 14 September 2003’ and ‘Clinching the ‘Return to Europe’.

wing government leaving the three coalition partners with only 26.9% of the votes and 16.7% of the seats. Does this swing in voters' preferences mean the real emergence of a left in Estonia? The Estonian party system has been long characterized by the absence of relevant left-wing parties. Only the elections to the European Parliament presented the first signs of shifting voters' minds when the refurbished Social-democratic party received 36.8% of votes and half of the seats. Terms like 'left' and 'social-democratic' have been part of a *taboo* vocabulary in Estonian politics since it regained independence. This breakthrough by the Social-democratic party might increase the chances of left-wing parties to provide relevant alternatives to the mainstream right and, hence, to provide the first signs for the applicability of the left-right party scale in Estonia.

Elections to the European Parliament and its outcome also illuminated once again the problems related to Russian-speaking minority and its representation. Hopefully, the Estonian parties elected to the European Parliament have the capacity and will to represent the whole Estonian population in its uniformity and diversity.

*This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member- and candidate-states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications, visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>*