

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 41 THE 2009 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN ESTONIA\*

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### Key points:

- The second European Parliament (EP) election in Estonia were marked by a shift from elections on Europe – that was the case back in 2004 – to second order elections clearly focussed on domestic rather than EU issues.
- The governing parties were punished by the electorate – partly because of turbulent economic times, partly because of meddling with electoral rules.
- Popular dissatisfaction with change from open to closed electoral lists in EP elections was the decisive factor behind the success of Indrek Tarand, an independent candidate.
- His success was in turn related to increased voter turnout and possibly to the moderate yet increasing levels of internet voting – used for the third time in nationwide elections.
- The results of the election show that there is a persistent potential for electoral change and new parties in Estonia. However, it must be taken into account that the circumstances behind the success of Tarand were highly contextual.

The 2007 *parliamentary election* saw the huge success of the market liberal – yet increasingly nationalist – Reform Party. The party's leader, Andrus Ansip, remained the prime minister but changed coalition partners. The centre-left Centre Party and the rural People's Union were replaced by the national conservative Pro Patria and Res Publica Union and the moderately left-liberal Social Democrats.<sup>1</sup> The newly-founded Estonian Greens were the sixth party to enter the

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<sup>1</sup> The tension between the Reform Party and its erstwhile cabinet partners had been apparent since the bitter and tightly-fought (indirect) presidential elections in summer 2006. While the Centre Party and People's Union supported the incumbent Arnold Rüütel, the Reform Party sided with the opposition in backing Toomas Hendrik Ilves – a Social Democrat MEP.

parliament and were initially courted by the Reform Party over possible inclusion in the government.

The *global economic crisis* of 2008/09 has hit Estonia very hard. The economy contracted by 3.6% in 2008, is expected to contract at least by a further 10.3% in 2009 and not yet to grow in 2010 at the time of writing. Unemployment reached 15.6% in May 2009, up from 4.6% in June 2008. These developments led to critical problems in public finances, particularly given the objective in curbing the budget deficit in order to conform to the Maastricht criteria for joining the Eurozone. The Estonian parliament passed two negative state budgets cutting expenditures by almost 10% before the summer recess of 2009.

In spring 2009, cracks in the coalition started to appear over the budget cuts. The main conflict loomed between the conservatives (Reform, Pro Patria and Res Publica) and the Social Democrats. The former two favoured more dramatic spending cuts distributed proportionally over the population while the latter mulled over increased and more progressive income tax, and more generous assistance to the unemployed. Shortly before European elections the tensions led to a government crisis – three Social Democrat ministers were dismissed by the prime minister on 21 May that left the country with a minority coalition.<sup>2</sup> Among those to leave was Ivari Padar, the popular finance minister and the top candidate of the Social Democrats in the European elections. Reform, the main governing party, accused Padar of linking his work as a minister and the election campaign.

According to public opinion polls the Centre Party benefited from the economic crisis – its popularity hovered around 25% in 2007-08 yet increased to above 30% in 2009. The popularity of the prime minister's Reform Party took a plunge by decreasing from an average of 35% in 2007-08 to 25% in June 2009. The support for the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union remained at about 14% (18% in the 2007 national elections). The Social Democrats gained strength (from 10% to 14%) due to the popularity of their finance minister and their assertive line in budget cuts discussions. The Greens remained slightly below 10% since 2007 while the rural People's Union fell from 7% in 2007 to a meagre 2-3% in 2009.

The six Estonian MEPs were elected from party lists using the d'Hondt method in a single nationwide constituency. The strictly open party lists – based on full re-ordering of lists according to preference votes – used in 2004 were replaced by closed lists in 2009 EP elections. The issue of *closed versus open lists* has been the subject to heated political debate ever since Estonia joined the EU. The first version of European Election Act passed by the parliament in 2002 opted for closed lists. However, the act was amended to introduce open lists just three months before the 2004 elections. In 2006, closed lists were introduced again. While the Constitutional Committee of the parliament supported a reversal to open lists in September 2008, they were fiercely opposed by the Reform Party and the proposal never passed by the parliament. Hence, the 2009 EP election marked the first occasion in Estonian history when closed party lists were used – open lists have been the standard in all elections since early 1990s. The issue stirred considerable public emotions at the time when the popularity of (governing) parties was waning. The electoral system effectively became one of the key topics in the election campaign and went a long way in explaining the remarkable success of an independent candidate – the main surprise of the election.

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<sup>2</sup> Coalition talks with the People's Union were unsuccessful; the second negative budget was passed in June 2009 with parliamentary backing of the Greens.

All six parliamentary parties fielded twelve *candidates* – the maximum number allowed by the EP Election Act. Five extra-parliamentary parties ran shorter lists and there were six individual candidates. Four erstwhile MEPs sought re-election: Tunne Kelam (Pro Patria and Res Publica), Siiri Oviir (Centre), Marianne Mikko and Katrin Saks (both Social Democrats). Toomas Savi (Reform) and Andres Tarand (Social Democrats) did not run for another term. Savi was partly motivated by protest against closed lists but he had been keeping a low profile in national media for some time. Tarand had been somewhat more visible due to his criticism of the proposed Russo-German NordStream gas pipeline yet he expressed intention to return to environmental science after more than twenty years in politics.

Two party leaders stood as candidates – Edgar Savisaar (Centre) and Marek Strandberg (Greens). The list of the Reform Party included three cabinet ministers – Urmas Paet, Laine Jänes and Rein Lang. The only two of the above-mentioned with very good list positions (Savisaar and Paet) made it clear that they had no intention to take up seats in the EP if elected. Standing down immediately after elections has been fairly common in Estonian politics: both Edgar Savisaar and Andrus Ansip have previously declined a seat in the parliament and remained mayors of Tallinn and Tartu respectively. The leader of the Social Democrats, Ivari Padar, gave up a seat following 2004 European elections. In 2007, three MEPs who had been successful in national elections immediately vacated their seats in the parliament. (As expected, Edgar Savisaar gave up his seat in the EP on 7 July to remain the mayor of Tallinn.)

The candidate lists of the main parties were dominated by well-known political figures. The two top positions of the *Reform Party*'s list were occupied by Kristiina Ojuland – the vice-speaker of the parliament and a former foreign minister – and foreign minister Urmas Paet. They were followed by Igor Gräzin, a well-known maverick Eurosceptic, the only MP to vote against the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, who stood a reasonable chance of getting elected – as Paet did not intend to take up his seat. However, very little, if anything, of his rhetoric reached his party's campaign. The top candidates of the *Centre Party* included its charismatic leader Edgar Savisaar, the party's only incumbent MEP Siiri Oviir, Vilja Savisaar, the wife of Edgar Savisaar and the leader of the Centre Party's parliamentary group, and Jüri Ratas, the vice speaker of the parliament and a former mayor of Tallinn. The conservative *Pro Patria and Res Publica Union* took pride in the fact that their list had a highest share of female candidates – seven out of twelve (58%). However, the two top candidates with reasonable chances were both men – Tunne Kelam, MEP and Marko Mihkelson, the chair of Estonian parliament's European Union Affairs Committee – followed by Karoli Hindriks, the former head of MTV Estonia and a political novice. The top candidate of the *Social Democrats* was Ivari Padar – the recently sacked minister of finance and the leader of the party until March 2009. He was followed by two incumbent MEP's (Saks, Mikko) and Sven Mikser, the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament. The top candidates of the *Green Party* included two MPs – the leader of the party Marek Strandberg and the head of its parliamentary group Valdur Lahtvee – together with Peep Mardiste, former advisor to Social Democrat MEP Andres Tarand. The little known Anto Liivat was the top candidate of the *People's Union* followed by the leader of the party, Karel Rüütli. Due to the small number of Estonian MEP's and fractionalised party system, only the Centre Party and the Reform Party could even hope to have more than two candidates elected; the rest would have more realistically been happy with a single MEP.

By far the best known of the independent candidates was Indrek Tarand, the son of an incumbent MEP, Andres Tarand. He had been a prominent and sometimes controversial figure in Estonia. Between 1994-2002, Tarand served as the Secretary General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He left the ministry after he was caught drunk driving. That was aided by his long-standing conflict with Kristiina Ojuland, the minister of foreign affairs at the time, whom

he had sacked from the ministry back in 1994. Since then, Tarand had been a TV and radio host and active in various organizations (the Reserve Officers' Association, the Hunters' Society etc). He had also been the director of a military museum under the Ministry of Defence. Tarand caused considerable controversy following a football match between radio and television celebrities in 2005 shortly before local elections. He was among those flaunting a T-shirt printed by an affrontive newspaper that vilified politicians who had previously been members of the Communist Party in a particularly tasteless manner – calling for them to be burned. The minister of defence was so disturbed by this that he quit the cabinet while Tarand remained at the museum. However, he was mostly known for his constant (non-controversial) presence in the media – as the host of the Estonian version of “Have I Got News for You”, a popular television quiz show, and as a presenter of a radio talk show.

First and foremost, Tarand rallied against closed party lists and against supposedly increasing 'partocracy' in general. For example, he wanted to abolish state funding of political parties and protested strongly against the format of election debates in public broadcasting that gave more airtime to parliamentary parties and left Tarand debating with fringe candidates. His manifesto was rather thin on Europe – he most prominently promised to 'make Estonia visible and respected in the European Parliament!', often in English, perhaps in order to demonstrate his language skills. If asked, Tarand took a rather Europhile position – during the television debate he even mildly clashed with fringe Eurosceptics.

Five minor parties and six independent candidates contested the election. Three of them were Eurosceptic formations of different hues – the conservative and strongly anti-communist Peasant's Assembly, the anti-socialist Christian Democrats, and the relatively moderate Estonian wing of Libertas.eu. The Eurosceptic field was further fragmented by the candidacy of the strongly conservative nationalist Martin Helme who had been a candidate already in 2004. Similarly, the ethnic Russians were divided between two moderate parties (the United Left Party and the Russian Party in Estonia) and two more radical individual candidates (Dimitri Klenski, Juri Žuravl'ov), both linked to the Bronze Soldier demonstrations in April 2007. The two remaining individual candidates were a tongue-in-cheek representative of the un-registered Moustache Wearers' Party and an obscure member of the Centre Party – both negligible political quantities.

## The Campaign

In contrast to the second-order elections model prevailing in the EU member states, the 2004 EP election in Estonia was remarkable as it did not revolve around national political issues. The campaign essentially focussed on European issues rather than domestic politics – even if it was often primitive.<sup>3</sup> 2009 saw a turnaround as the campaigns of most parties were clearly concentrated on domestic issues or, at best, the European competence of their candidates. That was despite the fact that most parties had compiled fairly sophisticated manifestoes outlining their positions on EU-related policy areas.

The Centre Party ran perhaps the most manifestly domestic campaign based on a slogan “Eesti vajab vahetust!” (“Estonia needs change!”). Its main television ads were mostly concerned with

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<sup>3</sup> See: Allan Sikk, 'From »Sexy Men« to »Socialists Gone Nuts«' in Paul G. Lewis and Zdenka Mansfeldova (eds) *The European Union and Party Politics in Central Eastern Europe*, Basingstoke: Palgrave (2006), pp. 40-63. See also: Evald Mikkel, 'The European Parliament Election Estonia, June 12 2004', *European Parties Elections and Referredums Network European Parliament Election Briefing Paper No 21* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-ep2004-estonia.pdf>.

attacking the sitting government. Similarly, the Reform Party tried to benefit from the popularity of its trademark policies – low taxes and generous parental benefits. It even made an intangible pledge to introduce an EU-wide parental benefit scheme based on the Estonian blueprint and financed from the EU budget. It focussed more than other parties on the personal qualities of its candidates (“Euroopa tasemel tegijad”/“Movers and shakers of European calibre”) – in particular Kristiina Ojuland, former foreign minister, and foreign minister Urmas Paet. The Reform Party campaign saw a return of Siim Kallas, the vice president of the European Commission and former prime minister, to national political campaigns. Remarkably, Kallas was the most visible face in the campaign in spite of not being a candidate himself. Likewise, Mart Laar, the leader of the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union featured side by side with Tunne Kelam, an incumbent MEP, in the main television ad of the party that focussed exclusively on the issue of job creation in Estonia. The campaigns of the other parties were much less visible – mostly due to more limited spending (see below). The Social Democrats focussed on advancing Estonian agriculture and Ivari Padar, their top candidate; the Greens discussed various environmental and energy issues; the People’s Union focussed in on their dynamic but little known top candidate stressing the party’s experience in (rural) municipal governments. The campaigns of the minor parties and independent candidates were barely visible. However, it was reported that Tarand managed to make good use of YouTube and his blog in mobilising younger voters.

Reported expenditures on party election campaigns varied considerably. The parliamentary parties ran traditionally lavish campaigns, spending a total of more than 1.5 million Euros (equalling the figure for 2004 EP elections) or 3.8 Euros per vote cast. In stark contrast, Indrek Tarand (independent), the grand winner of the election, reported spending just 40,000 Estonian kroons (2,600 Euros, 2.5 cents per vote) on his campaign. Even though the media has been accused of being openly pro-Tarand in the run up to the election by other parties, his campaign was vastly overshadowed by those of the two largest parliamentary parties. The Centre Party reported spending 9.7 million kroons (620,000 Euros), the Reform Party 5.1 million kroons (330,000 Euros), and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union 4.8 million kroons (307,000 Euros). Other parliamentary parties spent around 2 million kroons (130,000 Euros)<sup>4</sup>.

## The Results

The election was marked by a strong increase in electoral turnout. In 2004, just 27% of eligible voters had cast their votes – only Poland and Slovakia had had a lower turnout figure. In contrast, 44% participated in 2009 EP election – slightly above the EU average and second highest in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> However, voters remained considerably less active than in national elections – the turnout in 2007 parliamentary elections was 61% (up from 58% in 2003).

As **Table 1** shows, the 2004 EP election was marked by the triumph of Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the top candidate of Social Democrats, who was subsequently elected the President of the country. In 2009, an independent, Indrek Tarand managed to win more than a quarter of votes nearly measuring up to the most popular party. While public opinion polls in the run up to the election predicted that he might have a chance of winning a seat, the extent of his success came as a surprise to most observers. A survey conducted just weeks before the election put his

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<sup>4</sup> See: 'Keskerakonnal on europarlamenti valimistest võlgu üle kuue miljoni krooni,' *Eesti Päevaleht*, 13 July 2009, <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/473354>.

<sup>5</sup> Only Latvia, where local elections were held at the same time, demonstrated higher turnout (53%).

support at 14% but it was nearly doubled on the polling day. The increase was probably aided by higher than predicted turnout (44% versus 36%).

Compared to the 2007 national parliament elections, all the governing parties suffered losses in support. The vote share of the Reform Party – the main party of the government and the winner of 2007 parliamentary elections – declined from 28% to 15%. The support for the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union fell from 18% to 12%. Hence, the combined support of the two governing parties decreased 18% from 46% to 28%. The Social Democrats, who were dismissed by prime minister from the government just weeks before the elections, suffered smaller decrease in their popularity (10.6% in 2007, 8.7% in 2009 EP elections).

**Table 1 European Parliament election results, 2009**

Party/candidate	EP political group	Votes % (change 04-09)	Seats (change)	Elected MEPs
Centre Party	ALDE	26.1 (+8.6)	2 (+1)	Edgar Savisaar*, Siiri Oviir
Indrek Tarand (ind)	Greens-EFA**	25.8 (new)	1 (+1)	Indrek Tarand
Reform Party	ALDE	15.3 (+3.1)	1 (0)	Kristiina Ojuland
Pro Patria & Res Publica	EPP	12.2 (-5.0***)	1 (0)	Tunne Kelam
Social Democrats	PES	8.7 (-28.1)	1 (-2)	Ivari Padar
The Greens		2.7 (new)		
Martin Helme (ind)		2.5 (+1.9)		
People's Union		2.2 (-5.8)		
Dimitri Klenski		1.8 (new)		
United Left Party		0.9 (new)		
Libertas		0.6 (new)		
Christian Democrats		0.4 (new)		
Russian Party		0.3 (+0.0)		
Peasant's Assembly		0.2 (new)		
Other independents		0.3 (n.a.)		
Total		100.0	6	

Source: Estonian National Electoral Commission, <http://www.vvk.ee/> (accessed 7 July 2009)

\* – did not take up the seat, passed on to Vilja Savisaar

\*\* – announced after the election.

\*\*\* – based on the combined vote share of the merged parties in 2004

The results were very close – on the night of the election it was initially announced that the Centre Party had won three mandates leaving the Social Democrats with none. A couple of hours later it appeared that based on more complete results the last seat to be declared would go to the Social Democrats instead. The Centre Party appeared a frustrated winner and demanded several recounts of ballots. Even though the results ultimately remained unchanged, the Centre Party's objections to technical irregularities in a small rural municipality reached the Constitutional Court. The party also demanded the replacement of the head of National Electoral Committee. The result was paper-thin indeed – the Centre Party was eventually only 19 votes short of taking the seat from Social Democrats.

The Centre Party's increased vote share compared to 2004 European elections (equal to its 2007 parliamentary election share) can mostly be attributed to popular discontent with the governing parties during times of economic crisis. Tarand's success was less directly linked to the declining popularity of the main parties as it resulted primarily from the backlash against the use of closed party lists and generally increasing 'partocracy' – a term he often used. Social Democrats lost more than three quarters of their vote share in 2004. That did not come as a particularly bad surprise even to the party itself – after its enormously popular top candidate back then had moved on to become the president of the country. Yet, it is likely that - together

with the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union and the Greens - the Social Democrats suffered most because of the success of Tarand. He pulled in many of the parties' voters as he criticised the two largest parliamentary parties (Centre and Reform) ruthlessly to the point of alienating even their former supporters.

Despite running as an independent, Tarand always intended to join an EP party grouping if elected. On 10 July 2009, it was announced that he would join the the Greens–European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA) group in the EP an independent member. Before opting for the Greens-EFA, he had discussions with four other EP groupings – the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, the Party of European Socialists, the new European Conservatives and Reformists group, and with the group of the non-attached.

In the 2009 European elections, advance internet voting was used for the third time in Estonian elections. While the number of internet voters was not particularly high (see **Table 2**) the share of internet votes almost doubled compared to the 2007 national elections and internet votes constituted nearly half of all advance votes. Among the parliamentary parties, the Centre Party and the People's Union did worse internet voters compared to their total vote share (see **Table 3**). The two parties had been most sceptical about the provision of internet voting. In 2009, the Centre Party raised some controversy when it introduced computers for internet voting in their campaign tents. It is unclear whether the party hoped to increase its (internet) vote shares or to discredit the internet voting system. It looks likely that controversies related to internet voting are bound to increase in the future as the share of electronic votes will probably increase further.

**Table 2 Internet voting in Estonian elections, 2005-2009**

	Local 2005	National 2007	European 2009
Total votes	1 059 292	897 243	909 326
Internet votes	9 317	30 275	58 669
Internet votes ...			
... as % of all votes	0.9%	3.4%	6.5%
... as % of advance votes	7.2%	17.6%	45.4%

Source: Estonian National Electoral Commission, <http://www.vvk.ee/index.php?id=10610> (accessed 7 July 2009)

**Table 3 Internet voting by parties**

Party/candidate	Total votes %	Internet votes %
Centre Party	26.1	10.9
Indrek Tarand (ind)	25.8	32.3
Reform Party	15.3	20.1
Pro Patria & Res Publica	12.2	17.3
Social Democrats	8.7	10.4
The Greens	2.7	3.3
Martin Helme (ind)	2.5	1.9
People's Union	2.2	1.3
Others	4.5	2.5
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Estonian National Electoral Commission, <http://www.vvk.ee/index.php?id=10610> (accessed 15 July 2009)

*Euroceptic parties and candidates* appeared very weak in this election. Martin Helme, an arch-conservative Euroceptic supported by 2.5% of the voters was a partial exception – he apparently benefited from some name recognition after contesting the first EP elections in 2004. Even though the absolute number of Euroceptic votes more than tripled compared to 2004, their overall support remained low. Altogether, only about 5% of the votes were cast for identifiably Euroceptic candidates and parties. Furthermore, while most mainstream parties flirted with mild Eurocepticism in 2004, such sentiments were effectively missing in the

campaign in 2009. The limited support for Eurosceptic parties and candidates is not surprising as popular attitudes towards the EU and Estonian membership had changed from pre-accession suspicions to general endorsement. According to a Eurobarometer survey from late 2008, 78% of Estonians believed that the country had benefited from membership (the second most positive opinion after Ireland) and 61% believed that the EU membership is generally a good thing.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

The 2009 EP election in Estonia was marked by increased turnout and continuing change in the party system. Governing parties were punished as the result of the hit the country took in the global economic crisis and, perhaps more interestingly, for manipulation of the electoral rules. It was speculated that closed electoral lists were attractive to most parties as a means to avoid any party being hugely rewarded because of the popularity of their top candidate as the Social Democrats were in 2004. However, the plan turned out to be counter-productive as the change to closed lists became a rallying cry for a tremendously successful independent candidate. At the time of writing, it seems highly likely that Estonia will revert back to open lists in European elections. The success of Indrek Tarand has led the Reform Party – once strongly in favour of closed electoral lists – to re-consider its position.

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<sup>6</sup> See: *Eurobarometer 70, Public opinion in the European Union: First Results* (2005), published by the European Commission, pp. 32, 36, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70\\_first\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_first_en.pdf).