

STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN ESTONIA – 2023: SOME OBSERVATIONS AND PROBLEMS

Regular elections of the members of the XV Riigikogu were held in the Republic of Estonia on 5 March 2023. The election week started on Monday, 27 February, and ended on Sunday, the election day, 5 March 2023. Elections are held every fourth year, so the previous elections were in 2019. The elections held this year were based on the Riigikogu Election Act adopted on 12.06.2002 which has had 27 amendments in the period from 12.02.2003 to 25.10.2017.

Other previous elections in Estonia were held:

- in 2019 – elections of the European Parliament (held every five years);
- in 2021 – elections of the President of the Republic (held every five years);
- in 2021 – elections of local government councils (held every four years).

There were 12 electoral districts during these elections in Estonia. Three of them were in Tallinn which has eight city districts and they were divided into electoral districts as follows:

- Electoral District No. 1: Haabersti (71), North Tallinn (11), Kristiine (7);
- Electoral District No. 2: Kesklinn (9), Lasnamäe (20), Pirita (6);
- Electoral District No. 3: Mustamäe (10), Nõmme (10).

There were 405 polling places in Estonia, including 81 polling places in Tallinn. In addition, voting was made possible (electronically, at the location of foreign missions or by post) also for about 84,000 voters living in foreign countries. Although there are many voters living abroad, they have low voting activity (only about 8% participated in the previous elections).²

In this brief article the author gives an overview of these elections in Tallinn, in Electoral District No. 2 because he lives at Pirita which belongs to that electoral district.

Electoral District No. 2 – Tallinn City Centre, Lasnamäe ja Pirita city districts where nine political parties and a group of independent candidates were represented. The following candidates had been registered:³

1. The Right-Wingers Party – 15 candidates (no acquaintances or people I have met, know, have seen or heard before⁴);

¹ The number of polling places in the respective city district, total number in Tallinn: 80. Voting on the election day: [<https://www.tallinn.ee/et/valimised/valimispaeval-haaletamine>] 07/03/ 2023; MR: The correct number is 81 polling places after all.

² 63.7 of the voters voted at the Riigikogu elections. [<https://www.err.ee/1608904970/riigikogu-valimistel-haaletas-63-7-protsenti-valijatest>] 06/03 /2023

³ Ministry of the Interior. Election Information Sheet – Riigikogu elections of 2023. Elections in Estonia. [<https://www.valimised.ee>] 22/02/2023

⁴ By **people known** (people I have met, know, have seen or heard) we mean people, candidates whom the undersigned has met or talked to personally (e.g. former students, colleagues, people working in the same field, etc.), who have been heard or seen on the radio, TV or theatre or who

2. *Estonian Green Party* – 5 candidates (one person known);
3. *Isamaa Party* – 15 candidates (8 people known);
4. *Social Democratic Party* – 15 candidates (2 people known);
5. *Estonian Conservative People's Party* (EKRE) – 15 candidates (3 people known);
6. *Estonia 200 Party* – 15 candidates (3 people known);
7. *Estonian Reform Party* – 15 candidates (8 people known);
8. *Estonian Centre Party* – 15 candidates (6 people known);
9. *Estonian United Left Party* – 6 candidates (not known (Slavic names), never heard);
10. *Independent candidates* – only one candidate (not known (Slavic names), never heard).

The total number of candidates in Estonia was: 968 persons. There were in total 117 candidates in Electoral District 2 (including 31 known people, i.e. 26.5% of the candidates of the district), of whom:

- only six candidates (19.4%) could have been trusted (if they had presented their positions) but they were in a wrong, i.e. not so trustworthy party anyway;
- 13 candidates (41.9%) were completely unacceptable, i.e. from whom only trouble, foggy talk and actions which are bad for the people could have been expected; also their earlier activities had not been positive or acceptable;
- the number of candidates whom I had briefly heard or read about earlier and who should have thoroughly introduced themselves before the elections, was 12 (38.7%);
- apart from 31 candidates from 117, the remaining 86 candidates were quite unfamiliar, nothing was known about them, they were complete strangers, so very few people remained among those for whom it was possible to vote;
- also several other candidates (six people) could not be regarded as trustworthy candidates as they were known to have connections with non-trustworthy candidates (or former politicians) who were probably candidates in other electoral districts in Tallinn and elsewhere in Estonia;
- no political party was completely trustworthy as they included candidates who were completely unacceptable or whose future activities in the Riigikogu would have been incomprehensible.

If we had to evaluate the introduction of candidates, it was bland or mostly in-existent. Only the following parties had sent their introduction/advertisement to the mailbox at home (even that mostly inadequate, at places even misleading and poor). The “ranking” was as follows:

1. Isamaa Party – it contained information about three candidates of the 15 listed (no names will be mentioned here):

have led programmes, etc., who have written in the media or about whom someone has written or who have been interviewed, etc. By people not known the author means people, candidates of whom he has heard nothing and whom he has never seen to be able to decide or think anything about their thoughts, positions, attitudes, communication, abilities or readiness to participate actively in the society, responsibility, etc.

- one candidate with earlier experience had presented his/her positions positively on a satisfactory level and had divided them into three general groups;
- one candidate (probably without particular prior experience) had written relatively many single thoughts and praised him-/herself a lot but the proposals were very far from real life and the practical situation (concerning setting the minimum wages and old age pension), comparing the situation in the Republic of Estonia with the economy of the Federal Republic of Germany;
- one candidate considered it enough to write the text of the anthem of the Republic of Estonia (?), to wish happy anniversary of the Republic and to present him-/herself on the background of a waving blue-black-white flag.

2. Social Democratic Party – here only one candidate of the 15 had bothered to write something: three values had been briefly written from which they planned to proceed (education, environment and more equal society). In addition, each of the six political objectives had been characterised in one sentence (minimum wages; cutting or forests and renewable energy; raising the salaries of teachers and increased financing of higher education; team learning at school during transition to studies in the Estonian language; increasing child support for the first and the second child, and health insurance to everybody with the increased financing of health care). Also EKRE had been deprecated. Besides, the booklet had been illustrated with some nice photos with references to family diversity and protection of freedom!

3. Estonia 200 Party – they were different from others in that sense that they presented the portrait photos of all 15 candidates with the statement – It is possible with us! Besides, the objectives of their programme (smartness, wealth, happiness) and using a lot of disapproved one- or two-word phrases (better internet connection, bureaucracy, several changes in economic sectors up to snow removal). And the goal – not to be among the top five but to be the best in the world. Not bad!?

Other parties (Right-Wingers, Greens, EKRE, Reform, Centre Party, Left Party and the independent candidate) did not offer anything! They saved good paper and printing ink.

What to think – the picture is poor but “fine”. And besides that the agitation of many people before 5 March 2023: be sure to go and vote, choose at least someone slightly better than the bad ones.

According to the preliminary information, 63.5% of voters participated in the elections of the Riigikogu.⁵ The participation rate at the Riigikogu elections was the highest in the Rapla County (77.6%) and the lowest in the Ida-Viru County (53.1%). 47.1% of voters made their decision during advance voting. 10.7% of voters permanently living abroad gave their vote.

But the election party of the Centre Party became silent when electronic results were made public. The party cake was cut in the corner of the hall without shouting hurrah.

⁵ At 13:00 on 6 March the information was corrected – 63.7% of voters participated in the election. Source: Elections in Estonia. [<https://www.valimised.ee>] 06/03/2023

According to the law, recounting of votes started at 10 o'clock on Monday, 6 March by the electoral committees of cities and rural municipalities. Also e-votes were recounted.⁶

Results: 613,801 of the 966,129 people with voting rights participated in the Riigikogu elections in 2023. After checking for double votes, 312,181 e-votes were counted. 301,620 voters gave their vote with a ballot paper at a polling place. Thus the final participation rate was 63.7. There were 610,299 valid and 3,502 invalid ballot papers. In addition, an invalid e-vote had been given.⁷

The Reform Party who had received 37 mandates at the elections started on Wednesday, 8 March coalition talks with Estonia 200 and Social Democrats who had received 14 and 9 mandates in the Riigikogu, respectively.

According to the final election results:⁸

- the Reform party won the elections, having got 31.2% of votes and thus 37 mandates in the Riigikogu;
- the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE) remained the second with 16.1% of votes, which means 17 mandates in the Riigikogu;
- the Centre Party was the third with 15.3% of votes which gave 16 mandates;
- Estonia 200 received 13.3% of votes, i.e. 14 mandates;
- the Social Democratic Party received 9.3% of votes, which gave nine mandates;
- Isamaa received 8.2% of votes i.e. eight mandates.

The following remained below the threshold (5%):

- Right-Wingers with 2.4% votes;
- Estonian United Left Party with 2.3% of votes;
- independent candidates with 1% and
- the Greens with 1%.

The next elections will take place in Estonia:
in 2024 – elections of the European Parliament;
in 2025 – elections of local government councils;
in 2026 – election of the President of the Republic.

Thus some kind of elections have taken (see also the beginning of this article) and will take place almost every year.

⁶ VALIMISBLOGI | Riigikogu valimised võitis Reformierakond. Karis: kutsun erakondi alustama kiireid koalitsioonikõnelusi. Ohtuleht.ee. 06 March 2023

⁷ According to final statistics, 63.7 per cent of voters participated in the Riigikogu election. [https://www.postimees.ee/7727489/tapsustatud-andmetel-osalet-riigikogu-valimistel-63-7-protsenti-valijatest] 08/03/2023

⁸ Täna algavad koalitsiooniläbirääkimised Reformierakonna, Eesti 200 ja sotside vahel. Ohtuleht.ee 8.03.2023

On the background of all this the criticism of people's deputies by voters is justified by the fact that even 31 people's deputies of the previous, XIV Riigikogu were not elected again (10 did not stand as candidates).⁹ If we conclude from this that the XV Riigikogu now consists of a lot of new people, we can perhaps hope for more effective work of the people's deputies. We also hope to have increasingly more experts in the Riigikogu who would work on issues related to their competency in their legislative activities. Otherwise random people who are well-known (or famous) have to work with issues in the Riigikogu which are not very clear to them. The Riigikogu is not a place of studying one's speciality, for that the earlier education and professional knowledge should have been acquired already. I apologise but many former people's deputies and also recent candidates have extremely low and vague knowledge of the economy. I believe that many best students of the faculties of economy of Estonian universities understand the economic situation of Estonia better.

World-view. It is often emphasised that political parties differ from each other according to the world-view. However, if we observe (which the undersigned has also generally done) the political speeches and positions on economic policy of the members of the parties represented in the Riigikogu and other representatives of the parties, it is difficult to clearly discern them from each other according to their world-view. They often gravitate from their own world-view also to the world-view of another party, sometimes unfortunately also to demagogy. It seems that members of political parties will have to work and acquire experience for a long time to gain actual clarity and understanding of their world-view and also behave respectfully.

Having been in contact and talked to many people about the activities of the Riigikogu in the course of many years, people often think that the personal higher salary (and in the future also higher pension) and a number of benefits are the world-view of the people's deputies. When observing their activities (also information sessions, etc.), it is becoming clear that some members of the Riigikogu are like underground (they have not been seen or heard, the names can be found in the list of Riigikogu members but not noticed from their active activities).

February – July 2023
At Pirita-Kose in Tallinn

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⁹ ERR, Terevisioon, Uudised. 8.03.2023, kell 9.00; ERR, Vikerraadio, Uudised. 13.03.2023, at 12.00