

Provocations against Russia dominate Estonian parliamentary elections

By Markus Salzmann
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The Estonian governing coalition of the Reform Party (RE) and Social Democrats (SDE) will continue to rule despite losing its absolute majority in the March 1 parliamentary elections.

RE, the party of Prime Minister Taavi Roivas, lost three seats, winning 30 of the 101 seats in parliament, followed closely by the pro-Russian Centre Party, which now holds 27 seats after gaining one seat.

The new government will likely be composed of the Reform Party, the Social Democrats and the right-wing Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL). Roivas categorically ruled out a coalition with the pro-Russian Centre Party.

The fact that not a single party that even remotely represents the interests of broad sections of the population contested the elections expressed itself in a massive abstention. Turnout was 63.7 percent, but in several regions of the country was little more than 50 percent. Moreover, two new right-wing parties will enter parliament. In total, there will be six parties in the new parliament.

The crisis in Ukraine and tensions with Russia dominated the election. Foreign and security policies were the only issues discussed by the parties. The government parties conducted a repulsive anti-Russian campaign in country were approximately one quarter of the 1.3 million inhabitants are ethnic Russians.

A few days before the election, the government organized a massive provocation jointly with the US and European imperialist powers just a few hundred metres from the Russian border. On Estonian Independence Day, combat vehicles bearing American flags drove through the city of Narva, which is principally inhabited by ethnic Russians. In addition to the Second US Cavalry Regiment, British, Dutch, Spanish and Latvian soldiers also participated in the

parade.

The eastern border town is separated from Russia by the Narva River. Seeking to encourage an atmosphere of panic, both Estonian and US officials have claimed that Russia could try to penetrate in the NATO area at this point.

Over the next five years, Estonia plans to invest €40 million in the development of infrastructure to facilitate a stronger NATO presence. The government confirmed a Defence Ministry plan for the construction of barracks, training facilities and associated roads. NATO has already significantly increased its military presence in the Baltic States, citing Russian support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Painting Russia as the antagonist, Prime Minister Roivas stated, “The situation, however, is that our eastern neighbour has been behaving as the aggressor towards other free countries for quite a few years. Georgia in 2008, at the moment, Ukraine ... This gives us no way to deal with them as if nothing has happened.”

Estonia, as well as Latvia and Lithuania, were all part of the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991. After the restoration of capitalism the Baltic States joined both the EU and NATO in 2004. Estonia has also been a member of the European Monetary Union since 2011.

As in Latvia and Lithuania, the Russian minority in Estonia is subjected to discrimination. At least 100,000 Russian-speaking inhabitants of the country have so-called “grey passports”. They are considered stateless and have no right to vote. In recent years, ultra-right-wing groups have been able to openly agitate against the Russian minority without the state intervening to stop them.

The election campaign’s anti-Russia character and the demands for more NATO troops to be stationed in

the country were undisputed by all the parties. After some initial hesitation, the Centre Party, whose leader enjoys close relations with Moscow, adopted a clear course of criticism of Putin's policy regarding Ukraine. This is in contrast to the attitude of many Estonians, who regard the escalation of the conflict with Russia by the government, the US and the EU as a legitimate threat.

The right-wing government in Tallinn is escalating the conflict with Russia without regard to the possible dangers. According to media reports, the government is preparing for an "irregular invasion". Prime Minister Roivas told reporters that Estonia has taken precautions and "carefully planned its defence."

Defence Minister Sven Mikser agreed to the largest arms supply contract in the history of the country. In December, Estonia announced a deal that included the purchase of 44 C90 tanks from the Netherlands for \$113 million. Neighboring Latvia acquired 123 warships for €48 million in August last year, and in November bought 800 anti-tank systems and 100 trucks.

The recent strengthening of the military Voluntary Association *Kaitseliit* (Defence League) is also significant. Established in 1917 in the wake of the Russian Revolution, it was composed of the most reactionary forces that rallied to fight against the workers' government in Russia. With the integration of the country into the Soviet Union in 1940, it was officially disbanded.

Re-established after independence in 1991, *Kaitseliit* is now managed by the Estonian Ministry of Defence and has 15,000 members. Last year alone, it recruited 900 new members, mostly former military or members of fascist organizations.

In the final analysis, the stoking up of the conflict with Russia serves to divert attention from the extreme social crisis in the country, which every party failed to address in the election.

Estonia faces mass emigration by young, professionally qualified people who see no future there. Prior to the adoption of the euro in 2011, it had been hit hard by the international economic and financial crisis. Economic performance fell by 14 percent in 2009 while the official unemployment rate peaked at more than 18 percent in 2010.

While total state debt was quite low compared other

EU states, the government in Tallinn initiated a rigid austerity policy to meet the requirements of Brussels. The resulting cuts were equal to 8 percent of GDP. Wages of state employees were cut by about 30 percent and social benefits massively reduced. In this way, the budget deficit was reduced to just about 1.5 percent of GDP at the expense of the general population.

Real wages have not risen for eight years and unemployment has almost doubled. Estonia is the poorest country in the euro zone. Currently, more than 100,000 people live below the poverty line, unemployment is officially almost 8 percent. While thousands of citizens have already emigrated in search of work recent surveys indicate that nearly 80,000 more will follow them this spring.

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