

Municipal council elections in Estonia 2017

Success of decoy ducks and ruling parties

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- Although general municipal elections are considered second-order in comparison with parliamentary and presidential elections, the importance of the latest municipal council elections in Estonia should not be underestimated. For one, these municipal elections were the first general elections since autumn 2016, when drastic changes took place in the Estonian political landscape. Second, in the latest elections the minimum voting age was 16 instead of the former 18.
- The overall turnout for the latest municipal elections (53,4%) was the lowest of municipal elections held during the last decade, despite growing popularity of electronic voting. The number of voters was also lower in absolute terms in 2017 compared to 2013 even though the total number of voters was higher in 2017, partially due to the lowering of the voting age. About 31% of participating voters cast their votes online, which is Estonia's new e-voting record (in 2005, it was just 1.8%).
- The leading coalition party (the Centre Party) and the leading opposition party (the Reform Party) were the election winners in 2017 in absolute terms. The far-right Conservative Peoples' Party of Estonia (EKRE) managed to increase its support more than fivefold compared to the 2013 elections. This rapid increase in support clearly suggests that this political party could be a serious competitor in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in 2019.
- The Social Democrats lost voters both in absolute and relative terms compared to 2013 and won only 10.7% of the votes. Along with their relatively poor outcome in 2017 compared to 2013, the Social Democrats also showed relatively unstable performance. Support for the Social Democrats varied remarkably across the counties. It was highest (about 25% of total votes) in Saare County and Hiiu County. Support was weakest (about 3% of total votes) in Pärnu County and Rapla County.
- Those political parties that chose to use "decoy candidates" to gain more votes were the winners of the elections, even if both the candidates themselves and the general public knew that these decoys would never be participating in the local municipal councils.

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Summary

The outcome of the municipal council elections in 2017 in Tallinn and Tartu also indirectly suggests that, at present, none of the political parties represented in the parliament should be interested in calling for extraordinary elections. Thus, earlier speculation in the policy community that the current government could collapse after the municipal council elections in 2017 appear unfounded. This definitely contributes to the overall political stability in Estonia after the turbulence in 2016.

The results of the elections in big cities correlated both with expectations leading into the elections and with the current division of power in the national parliament. This should definitely build the confidence of the Centre Party (KE). Although Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL) is considered one of the losers of the latest elections because of their drastic loss of voters compared to the elections four years ago, at the same time they still showed a result in 2017 that was better than overall expectations. Thus, to some extent they should feel relatively confident as well.

Those political parties that chose to use “decoy candidates” (members of national parliament of European Parliament) to gain more votes were the winners of the elections, even if both the candidates themselves and the general public knew, that these decoys would never be participating in the local municipal councils. This could be most clearly seen with the Reform Party, which included to lists of candidates two current members from European Parliament, as well as President of the Riigikogu and voters expressed their support for these “decoy candidates”. This development suggests that a candidate’s “famous face” is more important than his or her active participation in political debates during the pre-election period. For example, some of the candidates with the highest number of votes, such as Yana Toom and Kaja Kallas, mostly did not bother themselves with active debates during the latest elections.

Election coalitions worked very well in small communities. This is most likely related to personal connections – people know each other better in

small communities and vote for those they trust and not for decoy ducks. At the same time, in Tallinn and Tartu voters preferred big political parties which conducted extensive professional advertising campaigns. To some extent, this could also reflect the tendency of voters in big cities to be less willing to take risks; when voting for big political parties voters already know in advance what they will get, whereas the possible actions of election coalitions are more unclear.

The latest elections were a lesson for both the Social Democrats and the Conservative Peoples’ Party. We have seen that due to the polarisation of society today, voters will punish every opinion that derogates from the neutral. In this light, the Social Democrats in particular should think about the reason why they have failed so many times in realizing their potential in elections. This brings us to the question of whether in the future the Social Democrats should continue their abstract ideological fights simultaneously with the Reform Party and the Conservative Peoples’ Party, or whether they should choose a more discrete approach to bring their ideas and values closer to the voter. It might be the case that in the latest elections the Social Democrats also put too much hope on the potential vacant left wing voters of the Russian-speaking community, particularly in Tallinn, after the former Russian-minded party leader of the Centre Party, Edgar Savisaar, was replaced by Jüri Ratas. However, this advantage has not materialised because other members of the Centre Party with Russian backgrounds, such as Mihhail Kõlvart and Yana Toom, have broadly compensated for it.

As far as the Conservative People’s Party (EKRE) is concerned, the latest elections have shown that they need to recruit more (at least 20) well-known and highly reputable people to realize their abstract support and to get real mandates both at the local and national level. The latest public opinion polls have shown that public support for EKRE is greater than for IRL. Despite this, in the latest municipal elections IRL managed to beat EKRE. This clearly highlights the tendency of IRL to have more familiar faces that tip the balance in their favour when elections come even if ideological support might be greater for EKRE.

Introduction

Although general municipal elections are considered second-order elections in comparison with parliamentary and presidential elections, the importance of the latest municipal council elections in Estonia should not be underestimated in two respects. First, these municipal elections were the first general elections since autumn 2016, when drastic changes took place in the Estonian political landscape. In November 2016, the Reform Party (RE), which has participated in all government coalitions (and mostly led them) since 1999, was left in opposition. Consequently, the Estonian Centre Party (KE), which was for almost 20 years politically excluded from governance at the state level, has formed a new coalition with the Social Democrats (SDE) and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL).

In view of this, the latest municipal council elections constituted the first litmus test for the success or failure of the new coalition, and in particular the leading Centre Party. Moreover, the Centre Party itself has recently undergone drastic changes – the former party leader Edgar Savisaar was replaced by Jüri Ratas – and the impact of this step on voter behaviour was unclear. Second, in 2015 the Estonian national parliament, the Riigikogu, gave 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in municipal council elections. It was reasoned that the Estonian society faces an ageing population and that to increase the interest of young people in politics the voting age needed to be lowered. Thus, in the latest elections the minimum voting age was 16 instead of the former 18.

Last but not least, the municipal council elections in Estonia in 2017 have definitely shown what kind of influence media and communication can have on interpreting the outcome of processes. After the elections, local media loudly stated that the former party leader of the Centre Party, Edgar Savisaar, completely failed in the elections because of his modest number of votes. In 2017, he received 3,611 votes, which is definitely less than he gained in the municipal council elections in 2013 when more than 39,000 voters (mostly from the local

Russian-speaking community) supported him. However, the number of votes he got in the 2017 elections was still more than for the leaders of the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (Hanno Pevkur got 3,590 votes) and the Social Democrats (Jevgeni Ossinovski got 1,375 votes). Even the best result for the Social Democrats (Rainer Vakra with 3,296 votes) was below the number of votes for Edgar Savisaar.

Basic principles and rules for Estonian municipal council elections

Estonian citizens have the right to vote in all elections and referendums. Citizens of other EU member states have the right to vote in local government council elections and European Parliament elections. A citizen of a non-EU member state or a stateless person residing in Estonia may vote in the local government council elections if he or she resides in Estonia on the basis of a long-term residency permit or the right to permanent residence. He or she cannot stand as a candidate to the council, however.

The organisation of municipal council elections in Estonia

- The nomination of candidates started on 16 August 2017 and ended on 5 September 2017. Only registered political parties and election coalitions have the right to submit lists of candidates.
- Advance voting and internet voting took place from 5–11 October 2017.
- Election day was 15 October 2017.

Source: <https://www.valimised.ee/en/right-vote>.

Municipal council elections took place in 79 local government units in Estonia, and in total 1,729 municipal council members were elected. The number of nominated candidates registered by the Estonian national electoral committee was 11,804.

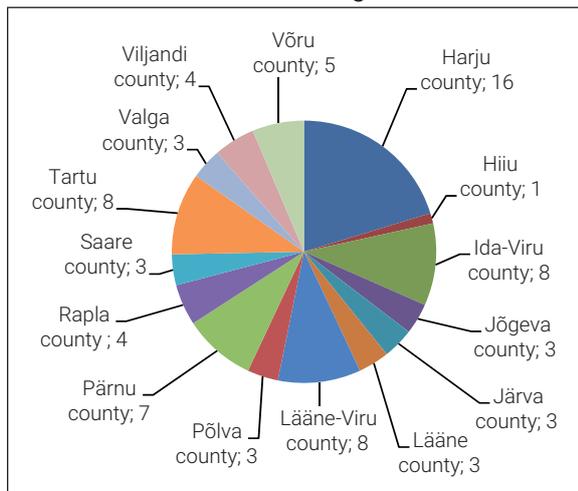
The electoral districts were divided into 15 counties, and the results of the elections also followed these distinctions (see also Figure A and subsection “The election outcome by two most influential electoral districts”): Harju County, Hiiumaa County, Ida-Viru County, Järva County, Lääne County, Lääne-Viru County, Pärnu County, Rapla County, Saare County, Tallinn, Tartu County, Valga County, Viljandi County, Võru County, and Zhetysay County.

County, Ida-Viru County, Jõgeva County, Järva County, Lääne County, Lääne-Viru County, Põlva County, Pärnu County, Rapla County, Saare County, Tartu County, Valga County, Viljandi County, Võru County.

The exact number of members varies for each municipal council based on the population living in a particular area. The municipal council in Tallinn has the most members (79) and the council in Ruhnu municipality has the least (7). Based on regional influence, the most important counties are Harju County, Tartu County and Pärnu County. Moreover, the outcome of the elections in Tallinn (where the municipal council consists of 79 members), Tartu (49 members), Pärnu (39 members) and Narva (31 members) were particularly closely monitored by experts.

Figure A.

Division and number of local government units



To highlight one remarkable detail in this regard, the number of elected council members in Estonia decreased a few months ago as a result of ongoing administrative reform. The initial number of elected local council members was 2,026, but decreased after reform to 1,729 members. This decision met resistance by politicians of the smaller parties in Estonia such as EKRE and the Free Party, which have argued that reducing the number of elected council members would make it more difficult for less well-known politicians to reach public office.

A glimpse at the results of internet voting

This time, internet voting (or online voting or e-voting) quite unexpectedly received a lot of attention in Estonia. Voting via the internet is something Estonia has practiced for more than a decade. From 2009 on, the number of voters preferring to participate in elections via the internet has increased steadily (see Table 1), and internet voting has become more or less an organic part of elections in Estonia. Usually, about 15–20% of voters prefer internet voting. In the most recent parliamentary elections in 2015, about 30% of voters voted via the internet.

Table 1.

Statistics on internet voting in Estonia

	Local Elections 2005	Local Elections 2009	Local Elections 2013
Eligible voters	1,059,292	1,094,317	1,086,935
Participating voters	502,504	662,813	630,050
Internet voters	9,317	104,413	133,808
Internet votes counted	9,287	104,313	133,662

Source: <https://www.valimised.ee/en/archive/statistics-about-internet-voting-estonia>.

This time, however, in September 2017, the Estonian authorities were informed about a possible vulnerability in the card chips that could potentially affect use of the Estonian ID cards, including for e-voting. This initiated a discussion in Estonia about whether it was safe to vote via the internet and whether the local elections should be postponed. After some investigation, the State Electoral Office decided to allow the use of ID cards to vote online. In practice, this incident has not affected people’s confidence in online voting, and in the municipal council elections in October 2017, 186,034 voters (about 31% of participating voters) cast their votes online, which is Estonia’s new e-voting record.

In the municipal council elections in 2017, people who decided to use e-voting mostly preferred

candidates of the Reform Party. Among them, former Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas was the most popular.

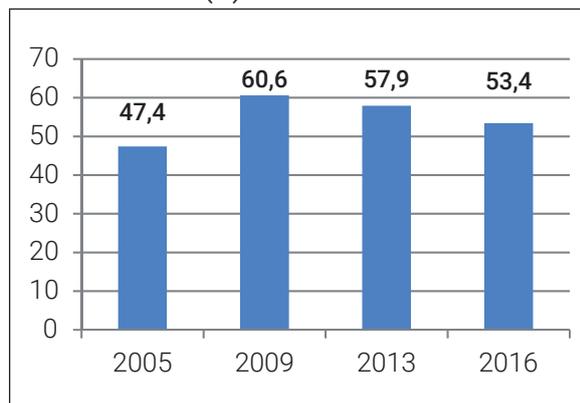
The outcome of the 2017 municipal council elections in Estonia

Overall turnout

The overall turnout for the latest municipal elections (in percentage points) was the lowest of municipal elections held during the last decade (see Figure 1), despite growing popularity of electronic voting.

Figure 1.

Election turnout (%)



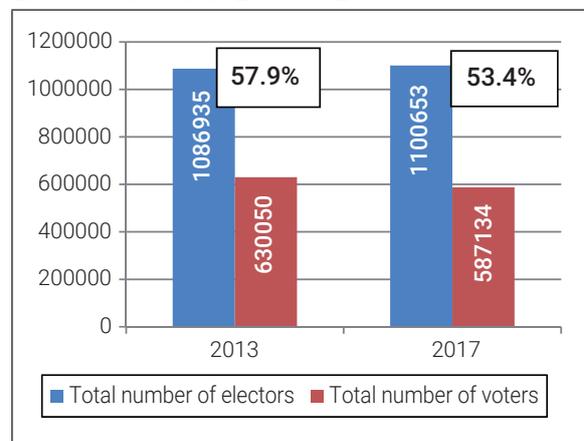
This suggests the tendency of a growing proportion of voters to decide to “exit” instead of to “voice” (Albert O Hirschmann: Exit, voice and loyalty, 1994). Detailed information on election turnout according to population groups is not yet available. Assuming that the choice between “exit” and “voice” depends on earlier experience, it could be argued that the decreasing turnout gives an indication of peoples’ disappointment with leading political parties or the lack of appropriate candidates. from their point of view.

The number of voters decreased in absolute terms in 2017 compared to 2013 even though the total number of voters was higher in 2017, partially thanks to the lowering of the minimum voting age (see Figure 2).

It was assumed in the local policy community that even if about 60% of 16- and 17-year-olds participated in the elections, there should be approximately 14,000 to 15,000 more voters. Although detailed information on turnout according to population groups is not yet available, the final number of voters in 2017 clearly shows that this expectation was not fulfilled. Some policy analysts have argued that the election turnout for young people was still low even though an extensive campaign was organised to call young people to vote.

Figure 2.

Election turnout in 2013 vs 2017



Election outcome by political party

Focusing on political parties, the leading coalition party (the Centre Party) and the leading opposition party (the Reform Party) were the election winners in 2017 in absolute terms (see Figure 3). The Centre party won 159,118 votes (27.3% of the total) and the Reform Party won 113,672 votes (19.5% of the total).

In general, this is in accordance with the public opinion polls conducted before the elections. For example, the leading local web-based platform for policy analysis, Poliitikaguru, predicted that the Centre Party would win 28% of the votes and that the Reform Party would follow with 22%.

During the pre-election period, the Reform Party searched for direct confrontation with the Centre Party, criticising its positions. Some of the Reform

Party's arguments were interpreted by the public as being too aggressive and forcing a nationality-based conflict between Estonians and the Russian-speaking community in Estonia. In this sense, the recent election campaign of the Reform Party was not the most ethical.

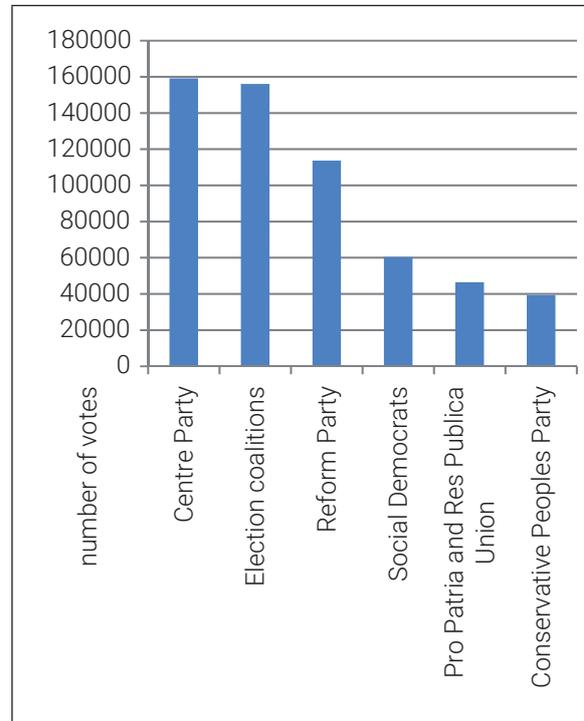
Another confrontation during the pre-election period was created by the Social Democrats, who wanted to benefit from their fundamental differences with the far-right Conservative Peoples' Party of Estonia. However, the Social Democratic party leader, Jevgeni Ossinovski, largely did this in a way that mobilised EKRE voters and convinced the more neutral members of Estonian society not to vote for the SDE. Instead of focusing on their own strengths, the Social Democrats chose the tactic of insulting the opponent, which led to a situation where the SDE won only 10.7% of the votes (60,309 votes). Thus, their actual result was even lower than predicted (e.g. the local portal Poliitikaguru predicted that the SDE would win 15% of the votes).

The last coalition party – the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union – won a higher share of the votes than was predicted initially in public opinion polls. Before the elections, the policy analysts of Poliitikaguru predicted that the party would win 5% of the votes or even fewer. The actual result was 8%. This development could be mainly related to the fact that another political party, the Free Party, which shares quite similar views with the IRL, decided not to participate in the elections with a party-specific list of candidates but rather nominated some of their members to the election coalitions. However, various election coalitions combining members of different political parties and independent individuals also achieved very good results (156,048 votes and 26.8% of total votes).

Having in mind the dynamics of voters' preferences in the long run and comparing the results of the current elections with the outcome of the municipal council elections in 2013, two opposition parties – the Reform Party and the far right Conservative Peoples' Party – stand out. These two political forces managed to increase their number

Figure 3.

Election results in 2017



of voters (see Figure 4). In absolute terms, the increase in the number of voters was highest in the case of the EKRE, which gained 30,988 voters compared to 2013.

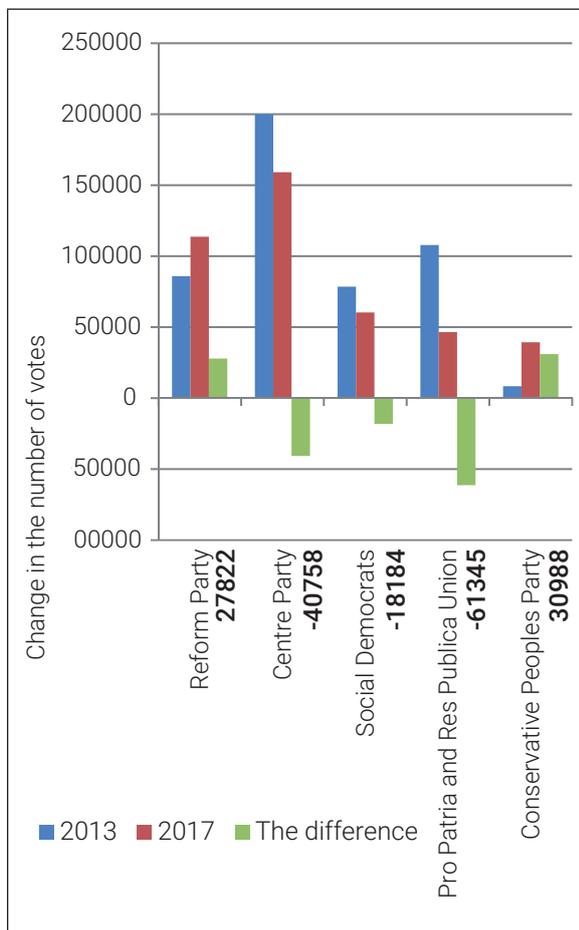
At the same time, all the current coalition parties – the Centre Party, the Social Democrats and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union – have lost voters both in absolute and relative terms compared to 2013 (see Figure 4). The decline in the number of votes was particularly drastic for the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, making them a loser in the elections due to the extensive loss of voters.

Despite placing fourth in the elections, the Social Democrats could also be considered the losers of the elections due to loss of voters.

The Conservative Peoples' Party of Estonia increased its support more than fivefold compared to the outcome of the 2013 elections. This is even more remarkable given that the party's list of candidates was relatively weak, including only a limited number of people well-known in

Figure 4.

Comparison of final results of the municipal council elections in 2013 and 2017



Estonia. The rapid increase in the support for EKRE (8,337 votes in 2013 versus 39,325 votes in 2017) clearly indicates that this political party could be a serious competitor in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in 2019, even if some of the current governmental parties don't want to admit this.

Election outcomes in the two most influential electoral districts

As predicted by public opinion polls, in Tallinn the Centre Party won the elections with 44.4% of the votes, receiving 40 mandates and the absolute majority in the Tallinn city council. Although this is fewer than four years ago, when the KE received 46 mandates, this result is still remark-

Figure 5.

Election results in Tallinn 2017 (%)

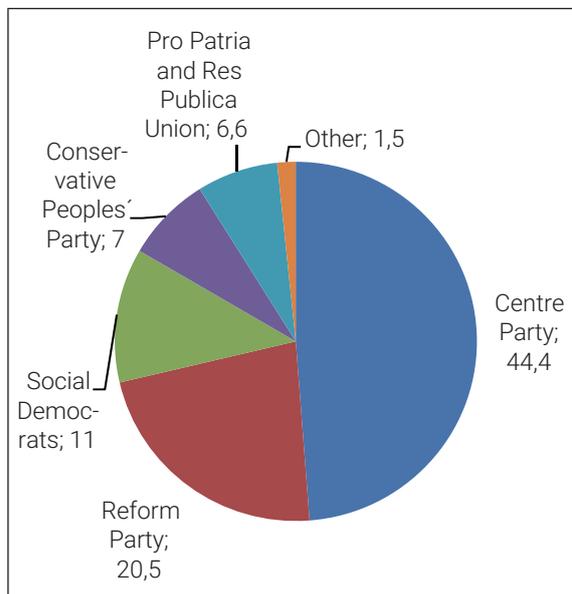
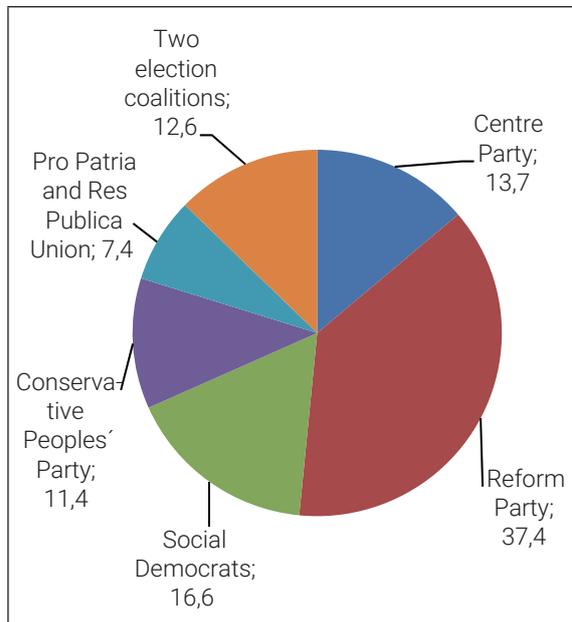


Figure 6.

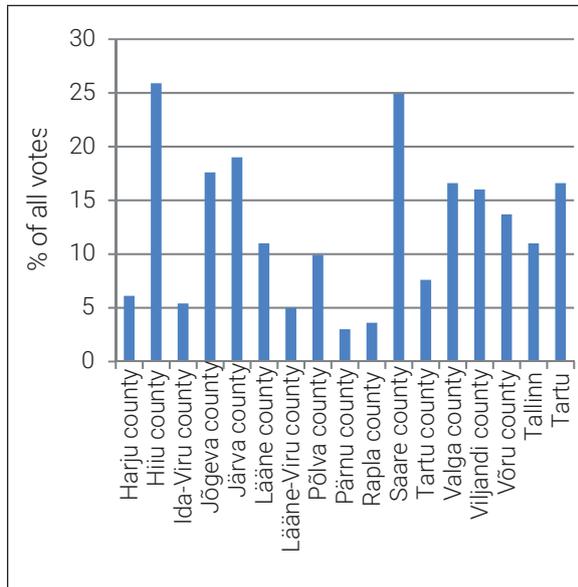
Election results in Tartu 2017 (%)



able considering that the former party leader and the voters' magnet, Edgar Savisaar, was this time represented by his personal candidates' list. There was a lot of speculation and turbulence in the local political landscape before the elections, with questions as to whether voters with Russian backgrounds would vote for the KE or for the new

Figure 7.

Election results for SDE in 2017 by county



election coalition established by Edgar Savisaar and some local businessmen. The results of the latest election clearly show that voters with Russian backgrounds are not so much focused on voting for certain individuals. Furthermore, the Centre Party itself has also successfully managed to replace the former leader Edgar Savisaar with other candidates with Russian backgrounds, such as Mihhail Kõlvart, Yana Toom and Mihhail Korb, who showed decent results in the latest elections.

In Tartu, the Reform Party won the elections with 37.4% of the votes, receiving 20 mandates out of 49 (i.e. not the absolute majority in the Tartu city council). Such a development could also have been expected since the party has had a strong electorate in Tartu for decades.

Along with a relatively poor outcome in 2017 compared to 2013, the Social Democrats also demonstrated relatively unstable performance. Support for the Social Democrats varied remarkably across the counties. It was highest (about 25% of the total votes) in Saare County and Hiiu County, where the party also has a very strong representation at the – now already former – municipal council. The support was weakest (about 3% of total votes) in Pärnu County and Rapla County.

Conclusions

The overall turnout for the latest municipal elections (53,4%) was lower than in previous municipal elections in last decade. It could be argued that the de-creasing share in turnout gives an indication of people's disappointment with leading political parties or the lack of appropriate candidates. The number of voters decreased in absolute terms in 2017 compared to 2013, even though the total number of voters was higher in 2017, partially due to the lowering of the minimum voting age. Although detailed information on turnout according to population groups is not yet available, policy analysts have estimated that the turnout of young people at the elections was relatively low.

The outcome of the elections only partially overlapped with the results of the opinion polls conducted before the elections.

Focusing on political parties, the leading coalition party (the Centre Party) and the leading opposition party (the Reform Party) were the election winners in 2017 in absolute terms. After them, various election coalitions across Estonia combining members of different political parties and independent individuals also achieved very good results.

However, having in mind the dynamics of voters' preferences and comparing the results of the current elections with the outcome of the municipal council elections in 2013, two opposition parties – the Reform Party and the far-right Conservative Peoples' Party of Estonia – stand out. These two political forces managed to increase their number of voters compared to previous elections (see Figure 4). In absolute terms, the increase in the number of voters was highest in the case of the EKRE, which gained 30,988 voters compared with their result in 2013.

The Conservative Peoples' Party increased its support more than fivefold compared to the outcome of the 2013 elections. This rapid increase in support clearly indicates that this political party could be a serious competitor in the forth-

coming parliamentary elections in 2019, even if some of the governmental parties don't want to admit this.

At the same time, all the current coalition parties – the Centre Party, the Social Democrats and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union – have lost voters both in absolute and relative terms compared to 2013 (see Figure 4). The decline in the number of voters was particularly drastic for the IRL. Despite placing fourth in the elections, the SDE should also be considered a loser in the elections due to its loss of voters. Instead of focusing on its own strengths, the SDE chose the tactic of insulting the opponent, as a result of which they gained only 10.7% of the votes.

However, some of the tendencies of the latest local elections such as the aggressive confrontation of some political parties during the election debates and relatively broad public support for so-called “decoy ducks” should definitely give both politicians and voters cause for careful consideration during the next elections in 2019, when the new members of the national parliament, the Riigikogu, will be elected.

Additional sources and statistics

Official information on the procedural details of the 2017 municipal council elections:
<https://www.valimised.ee/et/kohaliku-omavalitsuse-volikogu-valimised-2017>

Information on the voting results in 2017 across counties in Estonia:
<https://kov2017.valimised.ee/valimistulemus.html>

The main outcome of the current elections in the special section of the local leading news portal, Postimees:
<https://poliitika.postimees.ee/section/3381>

The overview of the main results of the elections in 2017 on the local leading news portal, Postimees:
<https://poliitika.postimees.ee/4277729/kiirulevaade-kes-olid-valimiste-suurimad-voitjad-ja-kaotajad>

The main outcome of the current elections in another local news portal, Delfi:
<http://www.delfi.ee/news/kov2017/tulemused>

Official population statistics:
<https://www.siseministerium.ee/et/eesmark-tegevused/rahvastikutoimingud/rahvastikustatistika>

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- strengthening democracy and active civil society
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