

The 2019 European Parliament elections in the Baltic states

DR DAUNIS AUERS, UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA

May 2019

- The three Baltic states showed a mixed profile in the European Parliament elections. While Estonia and Lithuania were largely occupied with domestic events, Latvia experienced a long, high-profile campaign. At the same time all three countries showed that the European and the national level are closely interlinked and do interplay with each other.
- Due to a preferential voting logic in a proportional representation system all established political parties put forward lists containing candidates with either extensive political experience, current MEPs or high-profile personalities. In this way they benefited from a pronounced experience/competence versus fresh-faces/innovation divide.
- The political cleavages present in many older Western European democracies were largely absent. The campaigning focused on economy, immigration and security issues as well as relations with Russia. With this the mainstream parties were the biggest winners in the region, with the centrist European Peoples Party (EPP), the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) winning 17 of the 25 seats in the region. The Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA) and the European Conservatives and reformists (ECR) each won three seats.
- Like in prior EP-elections rightwing populist and Eurosceptic parties did not manage to achieve a decisive electoral turnout but the issue may potentially grow with more vigour in the years to come.

Content

Introduction	3
1. Parties and candidates	4
2. Issues and Policies	9
3. Euroscepticism and National Populism	10
4. Results and impact	12

Introduction

The 25-26 May 2019 European Parliament elections were the fourth in the Baltic states since accession to the European Union fifteen years ago. As was the case in the European Union (EU) as a whole, turnout increased in all three states, although only Lithuania saw a turnout above the EU average and this was largely down to the European poll coinciding with the second round of voting on the next Lithuanian president.

European Parliament elections are broadly understood as “second order elections” in national electoral cycles. Voters use the election as a forum to express their opinions on national parties, politicians and policy issues rather than to vote on European-level issues or policy alternatives.

This was certainly the case with the May 2019 European Parliament elections in the Baltic states, which followed Estonia’s March 2019 parliamentary vote as well as Lithuania’s municipal elections in March and the first and second round of presidential voting in May (with the second round taking place on the same day as the European Parliament election). While having the presidential vote coincided with the European Parliament elections allowed Lithuania to avoid the ignominy of having a catastrophically low turnout – as was the case in 2009 when just 21% of the electorate voted which was second lowest in the EU – it did mean that journalists,

politicians and the public were more concerned with debating who would follow President Dalia Grybauskaitė, who had held the office for a decade, than debating Lithuania’s place in the European Parliament. Estonia was similarly still dealing with the political fallout from an unexpected and controversial new three-party coalition government that saw the national populist Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE) enter government office for the first time. Only in Latvia did the European Parliament election receive a similar depth of coverage and public interest to previous years.

The elections were framed by a generally positive economic outlook. In Spring 2019 unemployment in the Baltic states was low (7.6% in Latvia, 5.8% in Lithuania and just 4.2% in Estonia¹) and annual GDP was forecast to grow briskly at rates of 2.8% in Estonia, 3.1% in Latvia and 2.7% in Lithuania following even higher rates of growth in 2018.² This economic optimism was also reflected in generally positive attitudes to the EU. Eurostat data revealed that Lithuania and Estonia were the second and fourth most positive states in seeing EU membership as a “good thing” while all three states were above the EU27 average in believing

1. Eurostat. 2019. Unemployment rates, seasonally adjusted, March 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics

2. GDP in 2018 grew by 3.9% in Estonia, 4.8% in Latvia and 3.4% in Lithuania. European Commission. May 2019. European Economic Forecast Spring 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ip102_en.pdf

Table 1.
European Parliament electoral rules in the Baltic States

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Minimum age of candidates	21	21	21
Electoral threshold (%)	None	5%	5%
Election day	Sunday 26 May	Saturday 25 May	Sunday 26 May
Number of MEPs (after Brexit)	6 (7)	8 (8)	11 (11)
Voting system	Preferential PR	Preferential PR	Preferential PR
Formula for seat allocation	D’Hondt	Sainte-Laguë	Hare quota

Source: Central Election Committees in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

Table 2.

Attitudes to the European Union. Baltic states and EU27 average

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	EU27
Generally speaking, do you think that (our country's) membership of the EU is a good thing? (% agree)	74%	54%	71%	61%
Taking everything into account, would you say that (our country) has on balance benefitted from being a member of the EU (% agree)	88%	72%	90%	68%
Would you personally like to see the European Parliament play a more important or less important role? (% more important)	34%	56%	66%	54%
My voice counts in the EU. (% agree)	22%	27%	32%	51%
Our country's voice counts in the EU (% agree)	58%	50%	57%	63%

Source: Eurobarometer 91.1 of the European Parliament (2019)

that their countries had benefitted from EU membership (see Table 2). Indeed, more than half of all Latvians and Lithuanians favoured giving the European parliament a greater role. While all three states are below the EU27 average in terms of agreeing that their personal or national voices count in the EU, this may well reflect the reality of being small states rather than being a sign of Euroscepticism. Indeed, only one out of the twenty-five European Parliament seats contested in the Baltic states in 2019 was won by an openly Eurosceptic party.

1. Parties and candidates

A total of 41 parties, alliances, electoral committees and individual candidates were registered to compete in the election (see Table 3). Political parties have the right to submit candidate lists in all three Baltic states. Additionally, in Latvia and Lithuania parties can also form electoral alliances and present joint lists of candidates. Estonian electoral law allows individual candidates to stand for election. Indeed, in both 2009 and 2014 Indrek Tarand, a radio and television personality, was elected to the European Parliament with a personal mandate. In the 2019 election Tarand stood on the Estonian Social Democratic Party's (SDE) list. Five individual candidates were regis-

tered in Estonia for the 2019 election, including Raimond Kaljulaid, President Kersti Kaljulaid's brother. He had left the Estonian Centre Party (EK) just weeks after being elected to parliament in protest at the new government coalition formed with the national populist Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE). In 2015 Lithuania created a form of public election committee that allows groups of citizens to run for office without having to join or create new political parties. They do, however, need to collect the signatures of 10,000 citizens in order to run. Five such public election committees ran for the European Parliament, including one led by the impeached ex-president and serving MEP, Rolandas Paksas and another named the "Train of Aušra Maldeikienė", formed by an independent deputy in the Lithuanian parliament.

European elections in the region have tended to be quite personalised with the character of candidates being a key campaigning element. There are three major reasons for this. First, all three Baltic states utilise preferential voting proportional representation systems in single national constituencies in European Parliament elections. This open-list system gives voters the opportunity to rank candidates according to their own personal preference and tends to encourage active individual campaigning. Second, a MEP's remuneration

Table 3.

Political parties, alliances, election committee and individual candidates standing for election to the European Parliament in the Baltic states in 2019

Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Estonian Reform Party (ERP)	New Unity (JV)	Homeland Union – Lithuanian Social Democrats (TS-LKD)
Estonian Centre Party (EK)	National Alliance (NA)	Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (LSDP)
Isamaa	Social Democratic party Harmony (SDPS)	Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania (LRLS)
Estonian Social Democratic Party (SDE)	Green/Farmers Union (ZZS)	Order and Justice (TT)
Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE)	Latvia's Russian Union (LKS)	Labour party (DP)
Estonian Green Party (EER)	Development/For (AP)	Lithuanian Peasant and Green Union (LVŽS)
Estonia 200	New Conservative Party (JKP)	Lithuanian Green Party (LŽP)
Biodiversity Party (EE)	KPV LV	"Valdemaro Tomaševski Block" - Coalition of the Christian Families Union and the Russian Alliance
United Left Party (EÜVP)	Progressives (PRO)	Lithuanian Centre Party (LCP)
Erik Orgu (individual candidate)	Latvia's Regional Union (LRA)	Public Election Committee "Strong Lithuania in a united Europe"
Harry Raudvere (individual candidate)	New Harmony (JS)	Lithuanian Social Democratic Labour Party (LSDDP)
Raimond Kaljulaid (individual candidate)	Action Party (RP)	Public Election Committee "Vytautas Radžvilas: Let's Get Back the State!"
Argo Mottus (individual candidate)	Awakening	Public Election Committee "Train of Aušra Maldeikienė"
Maria Kaljuste (individual candidate)	Centre Party (CP)	Lithuanian Freedom Union (Liberals) (LLS)
	Latvia's Social Democratic Workers' Party (LSDSP)	Public Election Committee "Decisive Jump"
	Latvian Nationalists (LN)	Public Election Committee "Rolandas Paksas Movement"

Source: Central Election Committees in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

is considerably higher than parliamentary (or political executive) salaries in the Baltic states. As a result, European Parliament elections in the Baltic states typically attract high profile candidates and 2019 was no exception. Third, because the three Baltic states together elect just 25 of the European Parliament's 751 MEPs the actual and potential *influence* and *efficacy* of MEPs are among those issues most discussed during the campaigning. As a result, those parties that already have MEPs often campaign on the influence that their MEPs already possess while opposition parties are forced to field candidates with high national profiles that can realistically claim to accumulate this sort of influence in the future.

As with every European Parliament election in the region, there were both realistic contenders and others that lacked the finances, experience, personalities and name recognition to seriously compete for one of the available 25 European Parliament seats. A key indicator of party institutional strength (and Europeanisation) is membership of a European party and, if present in the European Parliament, a group in the European Parliament. Membership of these European-level organizations gives parties access to international contacts, financing, training as well as external legitimacy.

Not all major Baltic parties are members of European parties. This is often because existing parties in the political groups have vetoed or delayed national rivals from joining. In the case of Latvia, for example, both the Green-Farmers Union (ZZS) and the New Conservative Party (JKP) have expressed their intention of joining the European People's Party (EPP) group if elected to the European Parliament. Earlier attempts to join were frustrated by New Unity (JV). Nevertheless, European links are a good initial guide to the most influential parties in the election.

The three Baltic members of the EPP are Estonia's Isamaa, Latvia's New Unity (JV) and Lithuania's Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD). All three ran similar campaigns, based around their high-profile personalities, expertise and political experience and influence in

the European Parliament. Isamaa's electoral list was led by General Riho Terras, a former Commander of Estonia's Defence Forces, and Juri Luik The Minister of Defence. The party repeatedly emphasized its membership of the EPP as an instrument for expanding Estonia's influence in the European Parliament. Similarly, JV's list was led by Valdis Dombrovskis (who served as Latvia's prime minister from 2009-2014 and a Vice-President of the European Commission from 2014-2019) and Sandra Kalniete (a former foreign minister and European Commissioner who has been an MEP since 2009). JV's slogan for the election was "Personalities. Experience. Influence" while its programme stated that "JV's European team is energetic, competent and experienced." TS-LKD's list was led by Liudas Mažylis, a well-known professor and politician, and Andrius Kubilius, a two-time former prime minister, and its campaign also emphasized that "With us – Your voice will be strong in Europe."

Estonia's Reform Party (ERP, a member of the ALDE group) similarly adopted an "experience" and "influence" strategy. The top three candidates on the ERP list were Andrus Ansip (who served as Estonia's prime minister from 2005 to 2014 and a Vice-President of the European Commission from 2014-2019), Taavi Roivas (Ansip's successor as prime minister from 2014-2016) and Urmas Paet (who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2005-2014 and then as an MEP from 2014-2019). ERP's programme emphasized that:

We have to send to Europe those who know European and NATO leaders and who know that Europe and NATO stands for Estonia. Those who have served Estonia for a long time and have contacts and access to all European leaders. We need to send people to Europe who listen and listened to.

The governing Estonian Centre Party (EK) is also a member of the ALDE group. However, it was mostly focused on managing its controversial new government coalition and ran a relatively lacklustre campaign. However, it did benefit from having MEP Yana Toom, the second most

Table 4.
Membership of European Parties and European Parliament Groups

European Parliament Group & European Party	Country	Party
European People's Party (EPP) <i>European People's Party (EPP)</i>	Estonia	Isamaa
	Latvia	New Unity (JV)
	Lithuania	Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD)
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) <i>Party of European Socialists (PES)</i>	Estonia	Estonian Social Democratic Party (SDE)
	Latvia	Social Democratic Party "Saskaņa" (SDPS)
	Lithuania	Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP)
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) <i>Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), European Democratic Party (EDP)</i>	Estonia	Estonian Centre Party (EK) Estonian Reform Party (RP)
	Latvia	Development / For (A/P) ³
	Lithuania	Lithuanian Liberal Movement (LRLS) Labour Party (DP)
European Conservatives and reformists (ECR) <i>Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE)</i>	Estonia	–
	Latvia	National Alliance (NA)
	Lithuania	Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (LLRA)
European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) <i>Party of the European Left (PEL), European Anti-Capitalist Left (EACL), Nordic Green Left Alliance (NGLA)</i>	Estonia	Estonian Left Party (EUVP)
	Latvia	–
	Lithuania	–
The Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA) <i>European Green Party (EGP), European Free Alliance (EFA)</i>	Estonia	Estonian Greens (EER)
	Latvia	Latvian Russian Union (LKS)
	Lithuania	Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS)
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) <i>Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe (ADDE)</i>	Estonia	–
	Latvia	–
	Lithuania	Order and Justice (TT)
Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) <i>Movement for a Europe of Nation and Freedom (MENF)</i>	Estonia	Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE)
	Latvia	
	Lithuania	

Source: web-sites of the European Parties and European Parliament Groups

3. Development/For is an alliance of two parties. Latvia's Development (*Latvijas Attīstībai*) is a member of ALDE. For (*Par!*) is not a member of any European party.

popular European parliament candidate in Estonia according to a poll, top its candidate list.⁴ It also emphasized experience – indeed, in a public debate Yana Toom stressed that she should be elected because “only in the second term are you efficient.”⁵ In Latvia, Development/For (AP) was the first party to launch its campaign, hoping that the media attention from an early start would give its well-known but politically inexperienced candidates a boost. AP’s party list was led by Ivars Ijabs, an associate professor of political science at the University of Latvia. Businesswoman Baiba Rubesa, who was the CEO of the Rail Baltic project, and Ieva Ilvesa, an expert in cyber security policies at the Ministry of Defence, but who is much better known as the third wife of the former Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves.⁶ AP emphasized its inventiveness (it ran with the slogan “if you have Ijabs you have ideas!”) and argued that it would bring a breath of fresh air to Brussels. Both the Lithuanian Liberal Movement (LRLS) and the Labour Party (DP) sit in the ALDE group in Brussels and Strasbourg. Similarly to ERP, LRLS focused on the experience and perceived influence of its lead candidate Petras Auštrevičius, an MEP since 2014. LRLS also has one of the more colourful MEPs in its ranks – millionaire professional poker player Antanas Guoga, who is also known as “Tony G”. DP focused its campaign on party founder and leader, Victor Uspaskich, who has remained popular with his core electorate despite avoiding serving a four year prison sentence for tax fraud since 2013 due to his parliamentary immunity in the Lithuanian parliament and, since 2014, the European Parliament.

Political rivals claim that the leaders of Latvia’s Social Democratic Party “Saskaņa” (SDPS) hope to enjoy the same immunity after the European Parliament election. SDPS initially announced that its list of candidates would be led by Vjačeslavs Dom-

brovskis, an academic economist who had been the party’s prime minister candidate in Latvia’s October 2018 parliamentary election. However, just one month later, Dombrovskis stepped aside as party leader and Mayor of Riga (until he was suspended from the post in April) Nils Ušakovs and former deputy mayor Andris Ameriks (who had resigned the post in December 2018) were announced as the two lead candidates. Both are connected to a fast-spreading municipal corruption scandal. SDPS’ European election campaign sharply contrasted with its national campaign half a year earlier. While Mayor Ušakovs heavily featured in that campaign, despite not running for parliament himself, the European Parliament campaign featured pictures of PES’s Spitzenkandidat Frans Timmermans rather than SDPS’ own candidates. Ušakovs also avoided participating in the many televised debates in the run-up to the poll. In contrast, Estonia’s SDE list was headed up by the most popular candidate in the country, former Foreign Minister and candidate for president Marina Kaljurand, as well as former Foreign Minister Sven Mikser and Indrek Tarand, who was twice previously elected to the European Parliament as an independent candidate. The Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP) similarly emphasized the experience and influence of its leading candidates. Lead candidate Vilija Blinkevičiute pleaded regularly the fact that mepranking.eu ranked her as the most active MEP in Lithuania.⁷

Indeed, the experience versus fresh-face divide was a feature of the election campaign across all three Baltic states, not least because MEP rankings such as votewatch.eu and mepranking.eu had revealed that MEPs from the Baltic states could punch above their weight and have influence in Brussels. The National Alliance (NA) campaign in Latvia made much of MEP Robert Zīle’s ranking on the mepranking.eu website as the most active Baltic MEP. Parties with little domestic and no European experience, such as the New Conservative party (JKP), the Progressives (PRO) and Estonia 200 followed AP’s strategy of stressing their creativity and newness. JKP’s list was headed

4. ERR. 20 May 2019. “Ratings: Marina Kaljurand may earn SDE two mandates in European elections.” <https://www.err.ee/940697/marina-kaljurand-voib-eurovalimistel-tuua-sotsidele-kaks-mandaati>

5. Estonian World. 2019. Estonian EU parliament candidates explain what they stand for. Yana Toom. <https://estonianworld.com/life/estonian-ep-candidates-explain-what-they-stand-for>

6. Ilves’s second wife, Evelin, also ran for the European parliament in Estonia, from the Greens list

7. Mepranking.eu. 2019. <http://www.mepranking.eu/mep.php?id=96681>

by a well-known scholar, Andis Kudors (an expert on Russian disinformation) while Estonia 200 emphasized in its programme that it would continue the Estonian “push for innovative changes in both government and economy” in Europe. PRO emphasized its innovative approach by putting Gunta Anča, a disability rights campaigner, at the top of its candidate list.

The Latvian Green/Farmers Union (ZZS), which held the prime minister’s post from 2016-2019 but is currently in opposition, had no MEPs and no European party affiliation, although it aims to join the EPP if one of its experienced lead candidates – a former Finance Minister (Dana Reizniece-Ozola) and Defence Minister (Raimonds Bergmanis, who is also known as a long-running former contestant on the World’s Strongest man competitions) – is elected. In contrast, Lithuania’s governing Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS), which recruited one of Lithuania’s favourite sons, the millionaire former NBA basketball star Šarūnas Marčiulionis to stand on its list, plans to sit in the The Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA) party group where

it would join the Estonian Greens, a mainstream European green party, and the rather more curious pro-Kremlin Latvian Russian Union (LKS), which campaigns for a federal Europe (and closer ties with Russia), and whose three leading candidates all have European Parliament experience. It is led by Tatjana Ždanoka, who served as an MEP from 2004–2018, only leaving the European Parliament in order to campaign full time for a seat in the European Parliament, Andrejs Mamikins a former journalist elected to the European Parliament in 2014 on the SDPS list, who later defected to LKS, and Miroslavs Mitrofanovs who took up Ždanoka’s vacated seat in 2018.

2. Issues and Policies

A Eurobarometer survey (see table 5) identified the key concerns of European citizens in advance of the election. The top issue in all three states was the “economy and growth” while Latvians and Lithuanians were also concerned with social protection and youth unemployment. In contrast,

Table 5.

Eurobarometer survey. “Which of the following themes should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections.”

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	EU27
Economy and growth	53%	68%	67%	50%
Immigration	51%	33%	39%	44%
Social protection of EU citizens	30%	42%	55%	35%
Consumer protection and food safety	17%	32%	28%	30%
Combating climate change and protecting the environment	28%	26%	27%	43%
Promoting human rights and democracy	31%	28%	32%	36%
Fight against terrorism	39%	25%	26%	41%
The way the EU should be working in the future	30%	22%	29%	30%
Combating youth unemployment	29%	46%	56%	49%
Security and defence policy	48%	31%	33%	30%
Protection of external borders	30%	24%	17%	24%
Protection of personal data	22%	20%	22%	19%

Source: Eurobarometer 91.1 of the European Parliament (2019)

immigration and security were the second and third most pressing issues for Estonians. These did indeed prove to be the key themes in the campaign – economic development, migration (and demography) as well as international security.

Economic and social issues certainly figured in all three campaigns, particularly in Latvia and Lithuania. This was primarily framed by the ongoing negotiations on the EU's multiannual financial framework (long-term budget) for 2021–2027. However, there were no dividing lines here, with all parties demanding higher direct payments to Baltic farmers and seeking to maintain current levels of cohesion funding. AP even called for raising the EU's budget by 50%, to an annual 1.5% of EU GDP. There were also many debates about setting EU-wide minimum salaries and pensions, while left-wing parties argued in favour of common tax rates (something dismissed by the right parties as having a destructive impact on Baltic competitiveness). Latvia and Lithuania saw MEP candidates' debate cohesion fund spending for 2021–2027 with a division emerging between those, typically on the right and in the centre, arguing that the funds should be used to raise competitiveness (by focusing on high-value added sectors, education, research and innovation) and those on the left and representing rural interests who argued that the funds should be directed to the less development regions to prevent them from falling too far behind. Unsurprisingly, Estonia saw much discussion about the EU's digital agenda with all parties agreeing that it should be central to any future EU development strategy.

Migration was a second key concern. This had two dimensions. First, Latvia and Lithuania have seen hundreds of thousands of young people migrate to the UK, Ireland and other EU states in search of higher incomes. Small, radical parties argued that the EU should compensate the Baltic states for this trend. Mainstream parties argued that the opportunities of EU membership should be utilised to increase competitiveness and grow the economy which would then stem the outflow of labour, although states should also develop re-emigration strategies. The second dimension concerned Europe's external borders and migrant

flows from third countries, particularly Islamic migration, with most parties agreeing that Europe's borders should be tightened, more funds spent on a common border guard, and that migrant flows be limited to fit the needs of the labour market.

International security, which in the Baltic states essentially means relations with Russia, was also hotly debated. EL, SDPS and LKS draw their support from the large resident Russian-speaking communities in Estonia and Latvia and argued for a softening of sanctions and more "pragmatic" relations with Russia. In Lithuania, the prime minister's LVŽS also argued for more dialogue and increased cooperation with Russia (much to the scorn of President Grybauskaitė) while the populist MEP Rolandas Paksas also advocated closer relations with Russia and Belarus.

Nevertheless, all three of these "European" issues were debated in parallel with domestic concerns. Estonia's controversial new government coalition featured heavily in every debate and the testy relationship between EK and EKRE was often laid bare. Indeed, after one fiery exchange with an EKRE candidate, Yana Toom (EK) declared that "we are in a coalition with idiots".⁸ LVŽS's dithering over whether it should resign from the government after disappointing municipal and presidential election results (Prime Minister Skvernelis had won just 19.66% of votes in the presidential race) as well as the presidential race dominated Lithuania's political discourse, leaving little oxygen for European issues. Only in Latvia did European issues take centre stage.

3. Euroscepticism and National Populism

The Baltic states have typically had only small, fringe Eurosceptic parties and these have struggled to attract meaningful support. For example, Eurosceptic parties have regularly competed in European Parliament elections in Latvia but have

8. ERR. 1 May 2019. "English language European election panel discussion". <https://news.err.ee/935180/watch-again-english-language-european-election-panel-discussion>

fared very poorly. Normunds Grostiņš is probably Latvia's best known Eurosceptic, and has campaigned in previous elections with the Action Party (RP, formerly known as the Eurosceptic Action Party) although in 2019 he campaigned with the misleadingly named Centre Party (CP) which also has a German member of the Bundestag, Waldemar Herdt (from the Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany, AfD, party), as the number two on its list. However, CP has little support in Latvia and picked up just a 0.49% share of the vote in 2019. NA is a moderate national populist party that is culturally conservative and wary of immigration. Its more radical and youthful wing (All for Latvia, VL) is tempered by the more mainstream nationalism of the older and more experienced For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Independence Movement (TB/LNNK) wing which is represented by Roberts Zīle who sits in the soft-Eurosceptic ECR group in the European Parliament. NA supports the European Union but opposes deeper integration, describing itself as "euro-realist". The Electoral Action of Lithuanian Poles is also a member of the ECR, and has close relations with Poland's governing Law and Justice party. However, it campaigned as the "Valdemaro Tomaševski Block" - Coalition of the Christian Families Union and the Russian Alliance in 2019.

Until very recently the most prominent Eurosceptic force in the region was Lithuania's Order and Justice (TT) which sits together with the UK's Nigel Farage in the hard Eurosceptic Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFD) group in the European Parliament. However, the party's founder, the impeached ex-president Rolandas Paksas, left the party in November 2018 to found a movement which is taking part in the election as a Public Election Committee known as the "Rolandas Paksas Movement". This proved disastrous for both, with neither Paksas or TT winning a seat in 2019, with these Eurosceptic votes being taken by the Lithuanian Centre Party (LCP).

However, the 2019 European election saw Estonia's EKRE and its national populist Eurosceptic platform rise to greater prominence. The party

had competed in the 2014 European election but won just 4% of votes and no seats. However, its outspoken criticism of the EU's response to the migration criticism, particularly its unsparing criticism of the refugee relocation programme, as well as criticism of multiculturalism and liberal LGBT policies in western Europe resonated with the public. It finished third in the March parliamentary election, winning 19 of 101 seats and entered a government coalition with the liberal and pro-Russian EK and the centre right Isamaa. This has undoubtedly energised EKRE's base while disappointing and de-motivating both EK and Isamaa voters. Indeed, EKRE leveraged its domestic success and new found international attention to place Euroscepticism on the debating platform.⁹ EKRE removed EU flags from the plenary hall of the Estonian parliament after its member Henn Pölluas was elected president of the parliament and promised to "fight for an independent Estonia in Europe". Sovereignty became a key issue in the Estonian campaign when, in an interview with the Financial Times, Martin Helme, EKRE's deputy chairman and the Minister of Finance in the new government, reversed previous Estonian governments' policy of remaining at the core of the EU and argued that he would oppose any deepening of monetary union or the adoption of a common European immigration policy.¹⁰ Uncompromising identity and migration issues also became more prominent in Estonia. The second point in EKRE's European election programme states that:

The European Union must protect and value Christian culture and other traditional European values! The rapidly growing number of Muslims in Europe has put European identity and values at risk. To stop this, immigration must be halted and illegal immigrants returned to their countries of origin.

9. For example, Anti Poolamets, EKRE's representative in a debate held by ERR, was the only participant to compare the Soviet Union and the European union and lament Estonia's loss of sovereignty after membership. All other participants virulently disagreed with this perspective. <https://news.err.ee/935180/watch-again-english-language-european-election-panel-discussion>

10. Mehreen Khan. 16 May 2019. "Estonia Finance Minister vows to oppose further EU integration". Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/4ba5f5fa-77f2-11e9-be7d-6d846537acab>

Most candidate debates were drawn into long discussions of these issues precisely because EKRE's uncompromising stance was so controversial to the other parties. Marine le Pen's visit to Estonia in mid-May poured more oil onto the fire as le Pen was pictured giving the white supremacist "OK" symbol together with an Estonian MP (although she later apologised and claimed that she believed she was just giving the OK symbol). This had echoes of the day the new government was sworn into parliament a few weeks earlier when several new ministers were pictured giving the same symbol. A week later EKRE's Jaak Madison joined nine other national populist parties (including Finland's The Finns party, Germany's AfD, Italy's Lega and France's National Rally) from the European Parliament's Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group in committing to working together in the European Parliament.

The consolidation of EKRE as a major political force in Estonia, and its ability to dominate any debate with its own key issues, saw Eurosceptic issues given an unprecedented airing in Estonia. While Euroscepticism has not been mainstreamed

in the same way in Latvia and Lithuania it seems inevitable that more nationalist parties in these countries will be tempted to replicate the success of EKRE in the next few years.

4. Results and impact

The European Parliament's mainstream parties were the biggest winners in the region, with the centrist European Peoples Party (EPP), the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) winning 17 of the 25 seats. The three big social democratic parties performed well, winning two seats in each Baltic state, while ALDE took half of Estonia's six seats. The EPP won the elections in both Latvia (JV) and Lithuania (TS-LKD) but Isamaa failed to win a seat in Estonia. Nevertheless, the campaigns that focused on experience and influence in Brussels appear to have resonated with the public.

The three parties that make up the new governing coalition in Estonia won just two seats and 37.4% of votes while the opposition RP and SDE won

Table 6.
2019 European Parliament Results

Group	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
European People's Party (EPP) 5 MEPs	–	JV (26.2%) 2	TS-LKD (18.6%) 3
Socialists and Democrats (S&D) 6 MEPs	SDE (23.3%) 2	SDPS (17.4%) 2	LSDP (15.1%) 2
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) 6 MEPs	RP (26.2%) 2 EK (14.4%) 1	AP (12.4%) 1	DP (8.5%) 1 LRLS (6.2%) 1
Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) 3 MEPs	–	LKS (6.2%) 1	LVŽS (11.9%) 2
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) 3 MEPs	–	NA (16.4%) 2	"Valdemaro Tomaševski Block" (5.2%) 1
Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) 1 MEP	EKRE (12.7%) 1	–	
Unaffiliated			Public Election Committee "Train of Aušra Maldeikienė" (6.1%) 1

Source: National Election Commissions and European Parliament, 2019. <https://www.election-results.eu>

almost half (49.5%) of the votes. EK and Isamaa voters appear to be sceptical of the government coalition, with neither party matching its performance in the March 2019 parliamentary election, when the parties won, respectively, 24.8% and 13.7% of the vote. Even EKRE was unable to sustain its share of the vote from 17.8% in March and dropped to 12.7% in May. This display of dissent by EK and Isamaa voters will inevitably see the leaders of both parties reconsider their coalition agreement with EKRE. Lithuania's governing LVŽS' poor performance in a third consecutive election in just a few months (following municipal and presidential elections this year) will put pressure on the prime minister Saulius Skvernelis, who has already flirted with stepping down from the post. In contrast, Latvia's Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš will be delighted that his JV party more than tripled its share of the vote from the October 2018 parliamentary election. However, two of Latvia's governing coalition parties – JKP and KPV LV – failed to pass the 5% threshold, with KPV LV, which finished second in the parliamentary election, seeing its share of the vote

slip below 1% following internal party strife over the last few months. This election confirmed that KPV LV is the weak link in the Latvia's government.

The Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA) and the European Conservatives and reformists (ECR) also each won three seats while the fledgling new Eurosceptic group formed by national populists Marine le Pen and Matteo Salvini won only one seat (the Estonian Conservative People's Party, EKRE). The new liberal Estonia 200 and Latvian PRO parties had hoped to win seats in the European Parliament after failing to pass the 5% threshold in the recent national parliamentary elections. However, their repeated failure to win seats and access to the European Parliament financing that would have helped to subsidise their national operations, will see questions asked about the parties' leadership and strategy as well as the parties' future viability. Overall, the 2019 European Parliament election was a victory for the Baltic states' established pro-European parties and confirmed deep public support for the European Union.

About the author

Daunis Auers is Associate Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Latvia. He defended his PhD at University College London and has been a Fulbright Scholar at the University of California Berkeley and a Baltic-American Freedom Foundation Scholar at Wayne State University in Detroit, where he completed his book on the Comparative Politics of the Baltic States (published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2015). His research focuses on parties, referendums, elections and legislatures in the Baltic states as well as more policy-focused research on Latvia's regional competitiveness.

Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Riga Office
37-64 Dzirnava iela | Riga, LV-1010

Responsible:
Peer Krumrey | Director of the FES in the Baltic States
Tel.: +371 6783 05 39
<https://www.fes-baltic.org>
<https://www.facebook.com/FES.BalticStates>
<https://twitter.com/FESBalticstates>

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

About the FES

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany with a rich tradition in social democracy dating back to its foundation in 1925. The foundation owes its formation and its mission to the political legacy of its namesake Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected German President. The work of the FES focuses on the core ideas and values of social democracy – freedom, justice and solidarity. This connects the FES to social democracy and free trade unions. As a non-profit institution, the FES organizes its work autonomously and independently.

The FES promotes:

- a free society, based on the values of solidarity, which offers all its citizens the same opportunities to participate on political, economic, social and cultural levels, regardless of their origin, sex or religion
- a lively and strong democracy; sustainable economic growth with decent work for all
- a welfare state that provides more education and improved healthcare, but at the same time combats poverty and provides protection against the challenges that life throws at citizens
- a country that is responsible for peace and social progress in Europe and in the world.

FES in the Baltic States

Shortly after the restoration of independence, in 1992, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation started its activities in the three Baltic States and opened offices in Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius.

The core concern was to support the democratic transition processes, to accompany the Baltic States on their way to the European Union and to promote the dialogue between the Baltic States and Germany, and among the countries of this region.

The current focus of the work of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is:

- strengthening democracy and active civil society
- supporting the European integration process
- contributing to the development of a common European foreign and security policy
- promoting a fair and sustainable development of economic and social policies in the Baltic States and in the EU

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the author works.

ISBN 978-9934-8853-0-3