

2006

# Republic of Estonia

Jeffrey K. Hass

*University of Richmond*, [jhass@richmond.edu](mailto:jhass@richmond.edu)Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/socanth-faculty-publications>Part of the [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Hass, Jeffrey K. "Republic of Estonia." In *World Encyclopedia of Political Systems and Parties*, edited by Neil Schlager, Jayne Weisblatt, and Orlando J. Pérez, 420-24. 4th ed. Vol. 1. New York: Facts On File, 2006.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology and Anthropology at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology and Anthropology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

# REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA

(Eesti Vabariik)

By Jeffrey K. Hass, Ph.D.



Estonia is the northernmost of the three former Baltic republics of the Soviet Union, with a 2005 population of 1.32 million people. It is not a homogeneous country: While ethnic Estonians make up 67.5 percent of the overall population, Russians come in a strong second with 25.6 percent. Estonian is the official language, but Russian, Latvian, and Lithuanian are significant as well. Despite some ethnic issues, Estonia has enjoyed a relatively stable transition to democracy and a market economy. While political parties have yet to tap deep roots into society and some scandals have marred political life, Estonia is further on the way to a Western-style political and economic system than most of the former Soviet republics.

Economically, Estonia has been the *wunderkind* of the former Soviet republics since its economy reached bottom in 1993. Experts suggest this is due to economic discipline and strong adherence to orthodox economic reform. While unemployment has been rising (9.6 percent in 2004) and wages in many sectors have not risen with inflation, privatization of small and medium-sized firms is complete, and large-scale privatization is proceeding apace. Further, Estonia has oriented its economy to trade with the West, solidifying this link by obtaining membership both in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) in 2004.

## The System of Government

Estonia is a parliamentary republic with a unicameral legislature. Its constitution was adopted in 1992.

## EXECUTIVE

The executive branch is made up of the president, the prime minister, and the deputy ministers who head the state bureaucracy.

Estonia's president is a weak one, essentially a figurehead who represents Estonia in international forums. Another of his major duties is appointing and recalling diplomatic personnel. The president does enjoy some formal powers over internal policy and legislation. While the president is expected to proclaim as law those bills that pass the parliament, he can exercise a weak veto, which involves sending back to the parliament legislation he considers faulty. If the parliament passes the bill a second time (by simple majority vote), the president can bring the law to the attention of the National Court, the highest court of the land, to rule on its constitutionality. Further, in moments when the parliament cannot convene, the president may issue decrees that have the force of law; these decrees must be confirmed when the parliament is able to convene if they are to remain in force. Finally, the president presents candidates for high governmental positions (e.g., prime minister), who must then be confirmed by the parliament.

Lennart Meri, the first president of the Estonian republic, tried to make the presidency a more forceful office, partially through use of the position as a bully pulpit and partially through his own initiatives in the international arena. For example, without prior approval of the parliament and at his own initiative, Meri negotiated and signed an agreement with Russia

over removal of the latter's troops from Estonian soil. However, such acts are the exception rather than the rule, due to constitutional restrictions.

The prime minister and his deputy ministers are the heads of the government bureaucracy. The prime minister and the Council of Ministers are thus as important as, if not more important than, the president within the executive branch. In fact, by the constitution, the prime minister is the chief executive. The biggest responsibilities of the prime minister and the Council of Ministers are the day-to-day operations of government and implementation of policy. The prime minister and the Council of Ministers answer for their actions to the parliament rather than to the president; when called upon they have to appear before parliament to answer questions and provide requested information.

While Estonia's post-Socialist democracy has been fairly stable, its top leadership has not; nearly all prime ministers have served for two years or less. The first prime minister, Mart Laar, held office from October 1992 (after the presidential and parliamentary elections) to October 1994, when two scandals (involving a transfer of a large sum of money to Chechnya and arms sales to Israel) forced him out of office. Laar's government enacted tax cuts and fiscal discipline that made Estonia the economic miracle of the former Soviet republics. An economics minister resigned after it became apparent he could not handle his responsibilities, the defense minister in 1993 allowed Russian troops to enter the country during negotiations with Russia over troop withdrawals, and a law on non-citizens provoked severe criticism from Russians in Estonia and from Western countries (the law would have required noncitizens, such as ethnic Russians, to

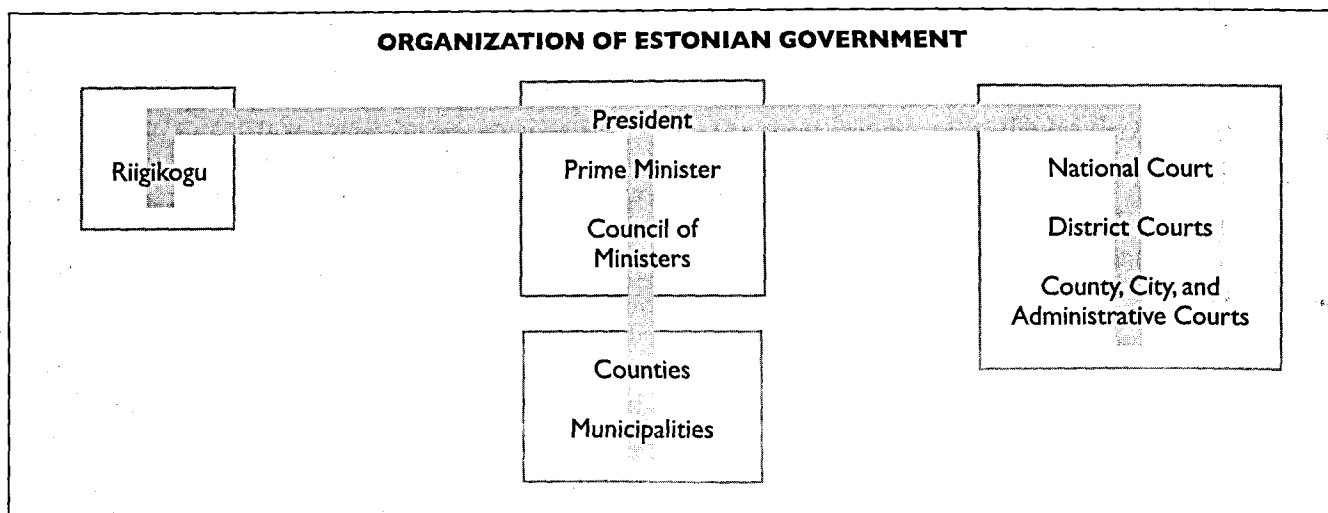
reapply every two years for residency permits without guarantee of reacceptance).

In 1994 Laar was replaced by Andres Tarand, who held the office until the March 1995 parliamentary elections. At that point Meri proposed Tiit Vahi as prime minister. Vahi's tenure was marked by problems with parliament: lack of confidence in the economics minister, Liina Tonisson, and a scandal involving bugged telephone conversations between prominent politicians. Vahi resigned but was soon reappointed by Meri and remained in office until 1997. Märt Siimann took over as prime minister but in 1999 was replaced by Laar at the head of a center-right coalition in the parliament. In 2002 Laar resigned, and Siim Kallas of the Reform Party took over for one year, after which Juhan Parts became prime minister at the head of the major electoral victory of the new Res Publica party. In April 2005 Parts resigned following a no-confidence vote in parliament. Andrus Ansip, who had been economics minister in the Parts government, became prime minister.

## LEGISLATURE

In Estonia the parliament (Riigikogu) is the supreme political power. A unicameral body composed of 101 delegates, parliament wields the power of legislation. Policymaking is delegated to the prime minister and government, but the government is beholden to parliament and must account for its actions and results before the legislative branch. Passing legislation requires a majority of 51 votes; legislation may be introduced by the president or through the parliament. The parliament also controls the purse strings, as the state budget requires majority support within

### ORGANIZATION OF ESTONIAN GOVERNMENT



the Riigikogu before it is official. Members are directly elected and serve four-year terms.

The Riigikogu exercises control over the prime minister through votes of no confidence. However, if the parliament is too strongly taken to infighting and cannot pass a state budget or cannot approve a prime minister after "prolonged delay," the president can dissolve the parliament and call for new elections. Further, the president can also dissolve the parliament after a vote of no confidence in the prime minister and cabinet. However, because the parliament elects the president, the president must take care that the incoming parliament will not be inclined to seek revenge in the next presidential "election."

## JUDICIARY

As for all former Soviet republics, the Estonian judicial system is undergoing change, which is not surprising considering the judiciary was subordinate to the Communist Party and requires the laws and procedures of an independent court in a democracy. The court system currently follows a continental, rather than an Anglo-American, model: Courts are arbitrators between parties rather than interpreters. Legal interpretations are not set by courts, and precedent does not play an important role in Estonian jurisprudence. This means every case has to be argued from the basis of the law and context of conflict, rather than on the basis of past decisions.

Estonia has three levels of courts. The first level is local, for cities and rural regions. The next level, the district courts, is for appeals from the local level. Both levels decide on criminal cases and on legal conflicts between parties. Appeals may be made up the hierarchy. At the top of the pyramid is the National Court, which decides on constitutional issues and has the final say on appeals that have worked their way up from the local and district levels.

## REGIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

With its capital in Tallinn, Estonia is comprised of 15 counties (*maakonnad*), each of which is run by county councils elected for three-year terms.

## The Electoral System

According to the constitution, the president is chosen by the parliament. To win, a presidential candidate

must receive two-thirds of the votes cast by parliamentary deputies (that is, 68 votes). Parliament has three rounds to select a president; if no candidate receives the necessary two-thirds support, then an electoral college decides. This electoral college is composed of the 101 parliamentary delegates plus 273 representatives of local governments.

The exception to this procedure was in 1992, when the first post-Soviet Estonian president was to be selected by popular vote. In this case a candidate had to receive more than 50 percent of votes cast on the first ballot; otherwise the top two vote getters would face a runoff in the parliament. In 1992 none of the four candidates received a majority; Arnold Ruutel (a former Communist and head of the party Secure Home, the successors to the Communist Party) and Lennart Meri (a former writer) received 42.7 percent and 28.8 percent of votes cast. Hence, both candidates went to the parliament, which proceeded to select Meri (the second-place candidate) as president; Meri received 59 votes in parliament to Ruutel's 31. (Apparently, several parliamentary groups had agreed ahead of time to select any candidate except the Communist candidate, Ruutel.)

In August 1996 Ruutel and Meri squared off again for the presidency, with the vote this time within the parliament. After three rounds, neither candidate could reach the required 68-vote threshold, and the electoral college convened and eventually chose Meri. In the 2001 presidential race Arnold Ruutel returned and won. A former Communist elite as president did not disturb the public much, however, as Estonia's leftist parties had, like those in Eastern Europe, moved from Communism toward social democracy.

## The Party System

Political parties in Estonia, as in the other Baltic states, have had a more difficult time in forming than in other post-Soviet states. Parties have been forming and reforming, creating and breaking coalitions and parliamentary factions, making solidification of a small number of parties difficult. Few parties have any history and thus any legacies, nostalgia, or party apparatus to organize and maintain both image and discipline. Even the parties that had some history, such as the Pro Patria and the Estonian National Independence (ENIP) parties, which were active in anti-Soviet mobilization in the late 1980s, suffered in local elections in 1993 and parliamentary elections in 1995. This reduced any impetus to solidification

or hegemony these parties may have had. The Communist Party did not try to be a direct descendant, as in other post-Communist nations; further, former Communist functionaries are spread throughout other parties as well.

Another reason parties have not solidified in Estonia is that voters in Estonia do not readily identify with parties; they instead identify more closely with candidates who have a “clean” past, meaning untainted by Soviet history. Voting is for individual candidates rather than for parties; while the electoral system does favor party formation through elections by rewarding parties whose candidates do well, the individual basis of voting does not appear to impress party identification on voters’ minds. Finally, as in the United States, Estonian parties do not appear to differ strongly in their political platforms, so that promarket reforms, independence, and integration into Europe (through NATO and the EU) have been common goals among most platforms.

## Major Political Parties

Estonia’s parties, like post-Socialist parties generally, have been developing. Grassroots structures are weak, and parties continually merge or emerge from splits, so the landscape is not entirely stable. However, the vast majority of parties are not radical: even ethnic or nationalist sentiments are more muted than in radical nationalist parties elsewhere. The more important parties have Estonian members and orientation; a few minor Russian-oriented parties exist, supported by segments of the Russian-Estonian population, but their representation is insignificant.

### REFORM PARTY

(Eesti Reformierakond)

The Reform Party is a pro-reform liberal party supported by entrepreneurs. In 2003 it joined with the Union for the Republic Party and the Estonian People’s Party to form the ruling coalition. Following the resignation of Prime Minister Juhan Parts in 2005, Andrus Ansip of the Reform Party formed a new coalition government with the Estonian People’s Party and the Center Party.

### UNION FOR THE REPUBLIC PARTY

(Res Publica)

The 2003 parliamentary elections saw the rise of a new party, Union for the Republic (Res Publica). Res

Publica has conservative and populist leanings. In 2003 the party received 24.6 percent of the vote and 28 seats (equal to Center Party) in parliament. It joined with two other parties of different views, the Reform Party and the Estonian People’s Party, to form the ruling coalition. It had dropped out of the ruling coalition by 2005, however.

### ESTONIAN PEOPLE’S PARTY

(Eestimaa Rahvaliid)

The Estonian People’s Party is a moderately leftist party supported by directors of state farms. In 2003 it joined with the Union for the Republic and the Reform Party to form the ruling coalition. It remained part of the ruling coalition following the formation of a new coalition government by Andrus Ansip in 2005.

### CENTER PARTY

(Eesti Keskerakond)

Another centrist party is the populist Center Party, created by a merger of social and liberal democrats trying to legitimize their left-leaning ideology by appearing moderate. Center Party ran into troubles in the middle 1990s when Edgar Savisaar became party chairman after personal scandals, a move that caused many party elites to abandon the party. Nonetheless, the Center Party has returned to prominence. It has more than 2,000 members and received the most votes in the 2003 parliamentary elections (25.4 percent). Their moderate image is as much from their mix of left-wing and right-wing ideas as from moderation in economic change. In 2005 the party joined the ruling coalition along with the Reform Party and the Estonian People’s Party.

### PRO PATRIA

(Isamaaliit)

The most important group within Mart Laar’s right-wing ruling coalition in the early 1990s formed Pro Patria (Isamaaliit, “Fatherland Union”) in 1995, with participation from the Estonian National Independence Party. While Pro Patria maintained the semi-nationalist rhetoric of its roots, it was hurt by the severe economic reform policies its members had enacted in the early 1990s. They have had better success recently in local-level elections. At present the party has less than 1,400 members. It won 7.3 percent of the vote and seven seats in parliament in the 2003 elections.

## MODERATES PARTY

(Mõõdukad)

In 1992 the Social Democrats and Rural Center Party merged to form the Moderates Party (Mõõdukad). Their platform generally calls for moderate economic reform with some support for agriculture. Their electoral and popular support has dropped in recent years. The party won 7 percent of the vote and six seats in parliament in the 2003 elections.

## Minor Political Parties

The strength of Estonian nationalist opposition to Soviet occupation fairly well guaranteed that a formal Communist party would not exist in Estonia, and Communist, Socialist, and labor parties are weak to nonexistent. However, Communist politicians toned down their rhetoric and adapted social democratic rhetoric. Leftist parties had some electoral success in the 1990s, but recently they have received no representation in parliament. Among the smaller leftist parties are the agricultural party Rural Union (Eesti maalit) and the Estonian Democratic Justice Union (Eesti Demokraatlik Õigluslitt).

Smaller parties on the right include the Estonian National Independence Party (Eesti Rahvusliku Sõltumatus Partei, ENIP). This party was formed in 1988 as a popular movement against Soviet occupation and domination. Factionalism plagued ENIP, and its electoral success flagged in the 1990s.

## Other Political Forces

In the coming years, Estonia's nascent membership in the European Union will likely come to play an important role in the country's political system and culture. However, it is too soon yet to know how the EU's influence will impact the country.

The military does not interfere in the country's political system.

## National Prospects

Estonia's economy is strong, and most political parties appear to hover around a middle ground, sharing the conviction that Estonia needs economic reform and should be part of Europe; differences involve the means to these ends, political conflict being more a function of political ambition and normal politics than of ideological differences. A major triumph for Estonian politics and diplomacy was acceptance into NATO and the EU in 2004. While this has annoyed Russia, no major diplomatic tensions between the two countries have emerged as a result. The opening of new markets to Estonia will further enhance trade and help its economic development. While citizenship and ethnic problems, particularly concerning Russians living in Estonia, remain a sore spot, the government does not purposely antagonize the Russian population; while there have been moments of intolerance or prejudice, these have been minor and rare. With practices of democracy institutionalizing and with market recovery under way, Estonia may serve as the textbook case of how to build democracy and a market.

## Further Reading

- Arter, David. *Parties and Democracy in the Post-Soviet Republics: The Case of Estonia*. Aldershot, England: Dartmouth, 1996.
- Iwaskiw, Walter R., ed. *Country Studies: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1995.
- Lauristin, M. and M. Heidmets, eds. *The Challenge of the Russian Minority: Emerging Multicultural Democracy in Estonia*. Tartu, Estonia: Tartu University Press, 2002.
- Smith, D. J. *Estonia: Independence and European Integration*. London, U.K.: Routledge, 2001.