

ESTONIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION, MARCH 2ND, 2003



Young Charlie Chaplin plays with the globe. From a painting in an exhibition to mark Estonia's EU entry held in a school also used as a polling station in Tartu

INTRODUCTION

The small Baltic republic of Estonia has been hailed as a bastion of democracy and one of the economic success stories of post-communism. In the present year, 2003, the Heritage Foundation concluded that it has the sixth freest economy in the world, thus putting it ahead of France and Germany! Such fulsome approval has, no doubt, contributed to the fact that the country is now poised to enter both NATO and the EU. In November 2002, Estonia became one of seven new ex-Communist countries to be invited to join the alliance, along with Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria. Estonia is also among the top contenders for membership in the European Union. Referendums to endorse membership of both organizations will be held later in 2003.

However, as with the other Baltic states, there is another, darker side to the story. For example, like its neighbour Latvia, Estonia has a large population of ethnic Russians who are both economically disadvantaged and effectively disenfranchised, although unlike Latvia, Estonia does, at least, permit its Russian minority to participate in local elections. Otherwise, Russians can only vote in parliamentary elections if they have Estonian citizenship something only available to those born in the republic between 1920 and 1940 (during Estonia's interwar independence) and their descendents or, alternatively, if they pass various exams, including a language test. From the Finno-Ugric family, Estonian is a notoriously recondite and difficult language with precious little relationship to any other tongue in the world. International organizations like the OSCE and Council of Europe have been remarkably relaxed about what appears to be a serious breach of human rights and democracy in the Baltics' treatment of its Russian minorities compared, say, with the pressure they exert on Turkey which is constantly admonished for discriminating against its minority Kurdish population – in particular, the failure to afford the Kurds greater linguistic rights.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that Estonia's troubles were solely connected with its Russian minority. All three Baltic States have other problems too including declining populations, unemployment, teenage crime and drug addiction. The truth is, that organizations like the Heritage Foundation, cocooned from reality in their Washington duplexes, have no idea what life on the ground is like in any of the former Communist countries when they (preposterously) accord marks out of ten for progress towards a free market.

BHHRG has visited Estonia twice in recent months. Unlike other accession countries, it is reported to have a strong Eurosceptic constituency so, in October 2002, prior to the Copenhagen EU meeting when

a formal invitation for the country to join the union was issued, the Group's representatives travelled to Tallinn, Tartu and Narva to gauge opinion on the EU. This visit was followed up in Spring 2003 when BHHRG sent observers to Estonia's parliamentary election held on 2nd March, 2003. Voters chose from a nationwide total of 963 candidates to fill the 101-seat national parliament, the Riigikogu, with 11 political parties registered and a handful of independents competing. Since the last parliamentary election in 1999, Estonia had adopted a new electoral system in accordance with the Riigikogu Election Act, passed on 12th June, 2002, and implemented on 18th July, 2002.

Social Decline

Like other post-communist countries in both Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union with a strong rural base, agriculture has all but collapsed in Estonia. Vast tracts of formerly cultivated land now lie destitute surrounded by the decaying infrastructure of the former collective farms – cattle sheds, barns and management facilities. The situation is at its bleakest in the Russian-populated regions in the east of the country. There, one can see numerous small, wooden houses boarded up and abandoned by their owners long gone in search of a better life either in towns like Narva or to Russia itself.

The collapse of the collectives has brought with it the disintegration of social networks. Many rural people in Estonia now live in small, isolated communities often comprising a few homesteads eking out a living by subsistence farming. The disintegration of their previous social arrangements means that people have difficulty forming the kind of groups and associations needed to breathe life into the workings of a modern democracy. Inevitably, this means that politics is conducted by small cliques many of which drift from one indistinguishable party to another. Civil society lies still-born in much of Estonia.

Despite a public commitment to and fierce pride in its independence, combined with a frequently stated fear of occupation by larger neighbours, Estonia has managed to sell more or less everything of value to foreign buyers – its banks, daily newspapers top phone companies and stock market. While it has attracted some investment in high-tech industry - Finland's Nokia mobile phone company has built a factory in the country, there is much industrial blight; the problem is that this kind of investment ultimately creates few jobs. BHHRG also found that Estonia's reputation as a thriving internet center was totally undeserved as it proved impossible to get on line in hotels across the country, even those catering to foreign visitors.

BHHRG's representatives concluded that significant social and economic problems plagued the republic. In July last year, the Estonian news agency ETA reported that statistics compared during an AIDS conference in Barcelona revealed that Estonia had "bypassed the other Baltic states as well as Russia in the number of HIV-positive people per 100,000 citizens and is comparable to the African countries." Addicted intravenous drug users (there are reportedly between 12,000 to 15,000 drug users in the country) made up 85% of newly diagnosed HIV-positive cases, and Estonia was second in the world after Russia in the percentage of intravenous drug users.

The population of Estonia has continued to decline, dropping two percent since the previous parliamentary elections in 1999 to roughly 1.35 million. State incentives for child-bearing have dried up, and the state-provided child allowance now stands at \$11 per month, the same level as in 1997. Clearly the exodus of inhabitants abroad in search of income opportunities, a trend already long visible in other ex-Communist countries, applies particularly to Estonia. BHHRG's representatives visited the towns of Paldiski in the west and Narva in the east and encountered significant depopulation. In Paldiski, BHHRG was told that there were c. 4,000 inhabitants in the town, down from around 10,000 since the mid-1990s when thousands of Russians left with their families. Roughly 1,600 out of the 4,000 were Estonians, the rest Russian. Paldiski was once home to the largest and most prestigious submariners' academy in the USSR. When this closed, a large number of Paldiski's residents lost their livelihoods and left. Many of Paldiski's buildings, including the submariners' institute, stand abandoned and empty, stripped of everything including the glass in the windows. On polling day, the election commission chairman in Paldiski told BHHRG that unemployment was a chronic problem causing a lot of people to leave, but a lot of single mothers had moved to Paldiski to occupy vacated apartments because they could obtain them

for free. She said roughly 60-65 out of 100 marriages now ended in divorce in Estonia, a sharp increase since the Soviet times.

In Narva, on the border with the Russian Federation, BHHRG's representatives spoke with its ethnic Russian inhabitants. The central complaint of younger people was their difficulty in finding work – even short-term summer jobs. They also said that their parents were often forced to do menial jobs as there was no work for people with professional qualifications. They complained that there was “nothing for the youth to do,” and hence there were a lot of young drug addicts and a “huge problem with narcotics” in the area, and that *kompot* (a cheap, synthetic form of heroin) was a “big favourite” among drug users. In October 2002, BHHRG almost tripped over used syringes near Narva castle, yards away from the border crossing with Russia. Others confirmed that drugs came in from Russia on a regular basis. Narva's municipal authorities had promised the city's residents cinemas, discos, etc. – but none had materialized. People also told BHHRG of the numerous advertisements in the newspapers inviting young women to become prostitutes.

Prostitution, Child Abuse and Trafficking

In April 2003 a 56-year-old Swedish woman went on trial for procuring and trafficking more than two dozen Estonian women as part of a prostitution ring operating from Stockholm. The proximity of the Scandinavian countries has exacerbated the sex trade in all the Baltic States – the short ferry journey from Finland is the means whereby much of the business is conducted. There are also growing numbers of young men from Western Europe going to cities like Tallinn for stag parties which amounts to a weekend of cheap booze and commercial sex.

There are also fears that the procurement of children for sex is widespread in the Baltics. In many poverty-stricken post-Communist countries (Ukraine is another example) people of working age have gone abroad to seek jobs, leaving their children behind to roam the streets. The same problem seems to have arisen in the Baltics. There are numerous ‘modeling agencies’ in the Baltic States with connections in Scandinavia. Some may be perfectly respectable organizations offering young women modeling opportunities, but when the ‘models’ turn out to be children whose ages are not revealed but who look as young as eight or nine years old, suspicions mount. There are also fears about bogus adoption claims for children in orphanages in the Baltic states.

In Tartu, Estonia's second largest city, BHHRG's representatives met with the directors of the [Tartu Child Support Center for Abused Children](#). The organization has been operating with assistance from the Estonian branch of George Soros' Open Society Institute since November 1995, and has implemented a programme called “Big Brother, Big Sister” to pair “risk-group” children in “one-on-one friendships” with adults, both recent university graduates and older people.

Head Paediatrician Dr. Ruth Soonets told BHHRG that the problem of child abuse in Estonia, including child trafficking, is much worse than in Soviet times. “Seventy-five percent of children in Estonia now live in poverty,” said Dr. Soonets. Poverty, stress, joblessness, alcoholism, narcotics, and neglect resulting from families going in search of money for food are the post-Soviet social dysfunctions that have led to endemic child abuse, sexual and otherwise. The Center tried to encourage abused children to come forward, and said that minors are often brought to them by mothers and other relatives (usually not fathers), social workers, teachers and police officers.

Dr. Soonets, a former employee of the Tartu Hospital Child Outpatient Department for twelve years, told BHHRG that her organization was busy composing a letter to the local government requesting further assistance in confronting the child abuse problem. She complained about the reluctance of the political parties to help by acting on existing legislation. Dr. Soonets asserted that the primary need was financial, but strangely seemed to place great importance on the fact that she had attended so many conferences abroad in the past several years.

It seems unlikely that the child abuse and trafficking in the Baltics could be eliminated by programmes such as “Big Brother, Big Sister,” however well-intentioned such projects may be. They are not a substitute for the firm hand of the state enforcing the law and prosecuting offenders. However, the problem with crimes such as paedophilia is that they often involve politicians and people at the highest levels of society. Belgium is a case in point and similar allegations made against leading figures in the government structures in Latvia, although unproven, have refused to go away. Also, it is BHHRG’s experience that when any ex-Communist government attempts to rigidly enforce the law it can expect to come under fire from the West (including from organizations like Soros’s Open Society Institute) for authoritarianism or dictatorship.

Background to the Election

Estonia gained independence from the USSR on 6th Sept., 1991, a couple of weeks after the abortive coup attempt in Moscow against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. From this point onward, the Estonian Popular Front, founded in 1988, took the lead in political life. Led by Edgar Savisaar (now Mayor of Tallinn and leader of the Centre Party) and Marju Lauristin (now a leader of the Moderate Party), the Popular Front expanded to include various nationalist parties such as the staunchly anti-Communist “Pro Patria Union” led by one-time prime minister [Mart Laar](#). Eventually the Popular Front disintegrated into the plethora of parties visible in Estonia today, and the republic began its post-independence political life of endlessly shifting coalitions.

There was not much to distinguish the leading parties competing in the 2nd March election from each other. The Moderates, Centre Party, Reform Party, Res Publica and Pro Patria all agreed on issues such as NATO and EU entry, privatization and continuation of the present discriminatory policies towards the Russian minority. The People’s Union finessed their position on the EU question somewhat by stating that it would not support entry into a ‘federal Europe’. A smaller entity, the Independence Party had a different profile being opposed to EU membership, but as it is regularly attacked for neo-fascism, it never surmounts the 5% threshold necessary to gain a seat in parliament.

Although the left-leaning Centre Party came first in both 1999 and this election it did not form the government on either occasion although it later joined the governing coalition in January, 2002. It is a common feature of proportional representational systems that a country’s most popular political party never gets to govern. In the case of the Centre Party this is even more bizarre. As pointed out, despite the propaganda Estonia is a poor country which, nevertheless, seems to always have extreme right-wing governments foisted upon it. Perhaps someone, somewhere senses the absurdity of this situation as names are changed and new parties emerge in order to deflect attention from the suspicion that power in Estonia is divided up between a political elite which somehow always manages to be in government. The emergence of the Res Publica party in 2001 is a case in point. The party includes among its members many names from the supposedly discredited Pro Patria party. It is also noteworthy that the respected Estonian exile, Rein Taagepera, a professor of social science at the University of California, was an intellectual father-figure to the party. This suggests that it has support (and clout) with the US administration. Taagepera emerged in the late eighties as one of the leading promoters of Estonia’s independence. In 1991 he wrote the official account of the small, plucky nation’s emergence from the Soviet embrace.

The 4 Russian parties in Estonia were combined into one entity called the Russian Party. However, it failed to cross the 5% threshold on 3rd March.

Estonia is divided into 15 counties (*maakonnad*) and 255 parishes (*vallad*). Six municipalities serve as independent territorial-administrative units of government, while the parishes are divided into villages (*külad*) and townships (*asulad*), each with their own soviets. For the election, however, the territory of Estonia was divided into 12 electoral districts, including the cities of Tallinn (the capital) and Tartu. Some districts encompassed two or three counties. The number of electoral mandates allocated to each district varied between 6 and 12, but because of the complicated electoral system the number of MPs sent to the

Riigikogu deviated from the official numbers when all the counting had finished (see chapter on Electoral System, below).

Electoral Issues: Official and Real



How far will the privatisation go?

Taxes

With problems such as widespread drug addiction, unemployment, population decrease and child abuse on ready display, foreign observers were apparently meant to believe the most pressing issue in the 2003 election was whether or not the country should have a progressive or flat rate income tax. The various major parties had constructed different approaches to this question. The [Centre Party](#), led by Tallinn Mayor Edgar Savisaar, had proposed introduction of a progressive tax: 33% for those earning 16,000 kroons (EEK) a month, 26% for those earning 6,000-16,000 EEK, and 15% for those earning up to 6,000 EEK (US\$1 = approx. 5 EEK). The [Reform Party](#) of Prime Minister Siim Kallas wanted to keep the flat rate but lower it from 26% to 20%, while the newcomer party "[Res Publica](#)" campaigned on the idea of raising the minimum tax-free income. Other parties also had a tax plank in their platforms. The [Moderate Party](#) supposedly wanted to keep the 26% flat rate but raise the rate to 33% for anyone earning over 25,000 EEK a month. The [Estonian People's Union](#) proposed increasing tax-free allowances to 2,000 EEK a month plus a further allowance of 2,000 EEK for each child. Most of these tax schemes were never more than academic, since even the most optimistic prediction for a single party's electoral performance was never more than 35-40 seats out of 101. In the event, no party even surpassed 28 seats, and so the tax plans of the respective parties were destined to be lost in the inter-party haggling of a coalition government.

Population

It is ironic that all the parties favoured by the West - Pro Patria, the Moderates, the Reform Party and Res Publica - advocated an increase in the birth rate in their election manifestos. This was eerily reminiscent of the policies of Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, the head of Hitler's Women's League as were the added

economic incentives on the Scholtz-Klink model. As pointed out by BHHRG, it is generally accepted that the Estonian population has shrunk since independence although, bizarrely, the electorate has grown from 766,626 in 1999 to 858,505 in 2003. Who is right? One thing is for sure, namely that many people officially on the register will not be living in the country any longer. The problem is not persuading people to have children but rather providing work for people already born. However, as Res Publica also promised to nearly double the prison population, the unemployment figures could soon go down with the party in government.

NATO and the European Union

Estonia's entry into NATO and the EU should have been significant issues, but BHHRG's impression was that NATO entry was not at the forefront of average voters' minds – perhaps people fail to appreciate the costs of NATO entry which demands that 2% of a country's GDP be spent annually on defence. All six parties that were predicted to make it into parliament favoured membership in both organizations, although, official opinion polls showed popular support for EU below that for NATO. In fact, Estonia has gained something of a reputation among Eurosceptics as the least enthusiastic of the candidate members. A group of British Eurosceptics recently set up a fund to help the Estonian 'No' campaign with its public relations, needless to say, all state funding, as well as assistance from Brussels goes to those in favour of accession to the union. Estonia's referendum is planned for September, months after most of the other 10 countries have voted a sign, perhaps, that any lingering doubts will be put to rest when it is seen that everyone else has voted 'Yes'.

The only party of the six to explicitly place conditions on Estonia's EU membership was the Estonian People's Union, which opposed entry if the EU was to become a federal entity. The Centre Party, meanwhile, left the issue of EU membership off its party manifesto. On January 22nd, the Estonian newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* reported that "[of] Estonians, 48 percent said they would vote in favour of accession at a referendum, 35 percent were against accession and 17 per cent were unable to give an opinion. Compared with April 2002, support for the European Union has grown as much as by 13 percentage points..." The only party to unequivocally oppose membership in the EU is the Independence Party, described in a BBC pre-election guide to Estonia as having "a small voice in the country and a small membership of just over 1,000." The United Russian People's Party opposed joining NATO and advocated using state resources required of NATO membership to resolve social problems.

BHHRG spoke with Allar Tankler, media relations chief at the Res Publica campaign, who said his party had no intention of reopening negotiations on EU accession, describing as "very populist" the decision of the Centre Party not to take a concrete stand on the issue. However, Mr. Tankler also expressed the view that although a referendum (scheduled for September) on EU accession would be "basically binding," the EU referendum should be repeated as often as possible even if the result is "no." Referring to the government's expressed intention that if the referendum produces a negative outcome, then "like in Ireland" there will be another one, Tankler said: "It would be best for everyone if, you know, we just sort of got it over with."

Mart Viisitam, executive secretary of the Centre Party, told BHHRG that it would be "difficult to imagine Lithuania and Latvia joining [the EU] without us." He said that the BBC had recently asked his party why it was not more enthusiastic about the EU, and that the party responded that it was quite satisfied so far with the way the process was going. The problem, he said, was "what the EU will look like in the future," and added that, "the question of Estonian independence is still open."

The ethnic Russians interviewed by BHHRG displayed cynicism in their views of both NATO and the EU. Their main ambition was to get out, to go to Germany or Finland, and for this reason some thought NATO membership might actually be a good thing. A couple of female Russian students actually seemed to think that Estonia's inclusion in NATO would make it easier for them to travel back and forth across the Russian border (!). However, the Russians generally reacted negatively toward the prospect of EU membership, commenting that it would "just make prices higher." There was "instability everywhere," they said, and EU membership would make it easier for Estonians to go to the West but "harder for us." The

inhabitants of Estonia had “no interest in NATO,” they said, and believed membership in the alliance was “a completely governmental issue.”

As BHHRG has noted in other places, the problem for ‘no’ campaigners is that many people will vote in favour of EU entry because they want to **leave** the candidate country in question not because they approve of the EU *per se*. The sad fact is that the economic preliminaries of joining the EU have already taken their toll across the region and it is almost irrelevant now whether or not Estonia, or anywhere else for that matter, formally joins up or stays out.

Estonia and the War on Iraq

As publicized in the first week of February, Estonia was one of ten countries to have signed the “Letter to Washington” in support of a US-led war on Iraq. The Letter to Washington became a source of brief domestic controversy when it emerged that neither the parliament nor the president had known about it beforehand. The same thing happened in the Czech Republic when former President Havel took it upon himself to unilaterally sign the letter without consulting the Czech parliament. On 10th February 2003, the radio reported that the Estonian People’s Union, one of six parties in parliament, sent an open letter to Prime Minister [Siim Kallas](#) voicing shock over the way in which Estonia came to sign the letter and reminding the prime minister that two-thirds of Estonia’s inhabitants did not support the war. Estonian President [Arnold Ruutel](#), commander in chief of the country’s armed forces, had publicly stated his opposition to war a few days earlier, declaring: “Let us keep peace in the world... We were able to restore our state in 1991 following this principle... We consider the same thing important today: we have to try to save every single human life.”

Prime Minister Kallas responded to the criticism from fellow politicians over his clandestine signing of the letter by claiming that Estonia was “forced to choose” between America and ultra-nationalist Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Kallas, a former official of the Soviet Estonian finance ministry who in 1994 was accused of assisting in the theft of \$10 million from the republic’s central bank, said that naturally Estonia chose to side with the US. The question of why Estonia could not remain neutral on an issue as grave as war received no coverage in media reports. People’s Union candidate Dr. Uno Silberg told BHHRG that, very soon after the parliamentary mini-crisis broke over the Letter to Washington, all the MPs came to an understanding, something he described as a manifestation of the “business plan” in Estonia.

As the controversy over the Letter to Washington at the beginning of February revealed, the democratic will in Estonia is not necessarily fairly reflected in the republic’s electoral politics. An opinion poll conducted at the end of March revealed that 80% of Estonians opposed the war in Iraq. Even support for NATO membership was reported on March 8th in the newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* to have decreased by 15% as a result of the Iraq crisis.

The complacency of Baltic politicians was slightly dented on 30th March when an antiwar demonstration which took place in front of the US Embassy in Tallinn turned into a riot as protesters began throwing bottles and other objects at the embassy building. 83 people were arrested. In fact, in yet another example of the democratic dysfunctionality that has accompanied this war the world over, all opinion polls conducted in the Baltic States show their populations overwhelmingly opposed to the attack on Iraq.

Privatization

Another issue that formed a backdrop to the election was the question of privatization of Estonia’s largest energy concern, Eesti Energia. In January 2002, Prime Minister Mart Laar purportedly resigned over the failure of a privatization deal that would have resulted in the state enterprise’s acquisition by the American company NRG Energy. The Soviet-era Eesti Energia is supposedly the world’s largest oil shale-fired plant. Before the deal failed, NRG President Dave Peterson twice warned the Estonian government that backing down on the deal would jeopardize the country’s NATO and EU bids, and Prime Minister Laar repeated the warnings for public consumption. The warnings were apparently to no avail, as politicians

from then-President [Lennart Meri](#) down joined in condemning the privatization as disastrous for the country.

Allar Tankler expressed the Res Publica party's position on the privatization to BHHRG: "We have a position on Eesti Energia that the state is not necessarily a bad business option. There are some companies, especially in the energy sector, where the government should retain an interest. But it is reasonable to maybe go and publish some of the shares on the stock exchange to lessen 'political management.' A lot of enterprises are being run by politicians for political motives."

The Centre Party's Mart Viisitamm expressed the following view of the Eesti Energia buy-out scheme: "The deal was bad from the beginning. The conditions were terrible, and the contract left practically nothing for us." However, Viisitamm added that the failure of the NRG Energy-Eesti Energia deal was not the real reason for the resignation of [Mart Laar](#) as premier. "Laar resigned because the Reform Party in the Tallinn city government entered into coalition with the Centre Party, and the city and national governments are very connected. Laar could not remain the head of the national government when his party had lost control of the city council."

The EU is also targeting oil shale powered energy on environmental grounds. As this report is written, several Estonian politicians are demanding that the country cooperate with neighbouring Lithuania to build a new nuclear power plant after the facility at Ignalina closes due to EU safety concerns. BHHRG representatives visited Ignalina in December 2002 where residents seemed unconvinced that any new facility would be built in the future. The suspicion must be that all local power generation will cease and the Baltic states will be put onto the European grid. According to *The Baltic Times* [3-9 April 2003] "Eesti Energia also plans to take part in "Estlink", a 110 million euro power cable that will link Estonian and Latvian energy suppliers to the Scandinavia and Nordic power grid". If so, local consumers can look forward to paying a great deal more for their energy supplies.

As the mopping up operation is all that is left on the privatization front, efforts to attract the attention of weary voters now turned to corruption. Res Publica appealed to the electorate as the 'new brush' that would fight corruption. In the months leading up to the election several high-profile figures came under attack – they were mostly from the Centre Party, the one party that still has a significant following in the country. Again, according to *The Baltic Times* [13-19 March 2003] "centrist leaders were linked to shady business groups and Soviet era repression". Over and over again BHHRG has found that corruption is about all that remains on the post-communist election menu now that projects bearing the name 'reform' have fallen into disrepute with voters. Although envy and retribution remain human constants they offer little practical solutions to peoples' problems other than the opportunity to let off steam.

The Election: Polling Day and after

BHHRG observed the voting in Paldiski, Keila, Rakvere, Vaike-Maarja and Tartu. On the whole, the voting was conducted in an orderly and peaceful manner, but BHHRG's observers were struck by the absence of domestic observers in any of the polling stations - the only exception was at Paldiski No. 1, where one observer was present. This observer was actually a candidate from the Russian Party (which campaigned on a platform of overhauling the health system to allow inexpensive Russian medicines into the country). This should set alarm bells ringing for the forthcoming EU referendum if there is a similar dearth of domestic observers

In other polling stations, BHHRG encountered a few minor problems. In Keila No. 2, also in the 4th district, BHHRG found the polling station housed in a sports complex that did not qualify as a public building. The complex, which included an indoor swimming pool, was a business concern that belonged to a "sports union." This was odd, considering Keila was clearly a large enough municipality to have schools and other public buildings to serve as polling stations. BHHRG was bothered by the large poster of Reform Party leader and Prime Minister Siim Kallas displayed just beyond the parking lot, a little too close to the polling station entrance for comfort.

Out of 2,953 registered voters, 766 had voted by midday, including 312 early voters. At Rakvere No. 2, by 4 p.m. 1,298 people had voted out of 3,164, including 371 early votes. Here, the ballot box was made of clear plexi-glass, so that all ballots could be seen after they were dropped in and, as everywhere, a commission worker stood over the ballot box to stamp the ballot papers and watch voters as they dropped them in. But the ballots were not sealed, merely folded once, and many of the pieces of paper were in an open position inside the box so that the vote could be easily seen. This could hardly be described as fully respectful of the principle of secrecy of the ballot.

The chairman was not present during the entire time BHHRG's observers were in the polling station, so that all questions had to be answered by subordinates. Also, this was the only polling station where the national list of candidates was not up on the wall. Usually, the national list was openly displayed in the common area, while the list of candidates running in the particular district was inside the polling booth. Here, the national list was in a loose-leaf binder on a shelf, so that voters would have had to open it and flip through if they wanted to see the national list. Few voters entered the polling station while BHHRG was there, and none consulted the book.

In the village of Vaike-Maarja, at 6:15 p.m., BHHRG was told that roughly 50% of the 2,301 registered voters had cast their ballots, with 18% having voted early. The two voting booths were half-hidden, located in the alcoves of doorways leading to the outside. In polling station No. 16 in Tartu, 1,320 had voted by the time the polls closed out of a total of 2,401 – about 55%. The only troubling feature at this polling station was a large display of student artwork on the walls in the voting area on the theme of the European Union. Paintings incorporating the blue flag with yellow stars loomed over the voters as they went through the polling process, and this struck BHHRG as bordering on undue influence in an election coming only six months before a referendum was due to be held on EU membership.

The count was conducted quickly and without incident, an impressive feature in an election in which counting was so complicated and involved so many candidates. Commission workers demonstrated close attention to detail and conscientiousness about recounting when discrepancies were found. The system of counting in the election was so convoluted that it could conceivably have taken much longer (see Electoral System, below).

Results

Turn-out appeared on the low side; the official statistics for voter turn-out nationwide (58%) was higher than BHHRG's observation. However, 17% of the electorate had voted early. The final number of seats obtained by each party was as follows:

Centre Party:	25.4%	(28 seats)
Res Publica:	24.6%	(28 seats)
Reform Party:	17.7%	(19 seats)
People's Union:	13.0%	(13 seats)
Pro Patria Union:	7.7%	(7 seats)
The Moderates:	7.0%	(6 seats)

Res Publica's tie for first place came as a slight surprise, as it was forecast that the Centre Party would win an outright majority. Some Estonians commented to BHHRG's observers that the victory of Res Publica represented a mass protest vote, because people were fed up with the establishment parties and hence voted for the newcomer. But, as has been noted, Res Publica is not composed of political newcomers but largely from figures who broke away from the Pro Patria Union, whose popularity had declined drastically over the past several years, and whose core electoral support came from émigrés living in the West – émigrés with citizenship have the right to vote in Estonian parliamentary elections

Electoral System

Although the conduct of the Estonian election was basically correct with few serious violations observed in the voting process, there are worrying aspects to the system. For example, approximately 17% of

people voted in the pre-election period. In BHHRG's experience this number is relatively high and, of course, this type of voting tends to be unmonitored. Similarly, a large number of Estonians living abroad are registered to vote – again in an unsupervised manner.

But the most problematic aspect of this election from BHHRG's point of view was the absurd system for tabulating votes. Dr. Uno Silberg pointed out to BHHRG that the Estonian government changed the electoral procedure after every election, so that Estonia had become a "guinea pig" for newfangled voting experiments. Indeed, BHHRG was informed by Res Publica – a big beneficiary of the new election system – that one of its leading lights was a famous expert on international election systems, Rein Taagepera, who lived in California. Certainly, this was an example of proportional representation taken to ridiculous extremes.

According to the website of the Estonian National Electoral Committee, the procedure for counting votes was as follows:

There are three rounds of counting. In the first round, candidates who receive the same or more votes than the simple quota in their electoral districts are considered elected. The simple quota is calculated for each electoral district by dividing the number of votes in the electoral region by the number of mandates allocated to the district.

In the second round of counting, mandates are awarded to candidates on candidate lists of parties receiving more than 5% of the votes nationally, with the candidates ranked according to the number of direct votes they received. A party's list receives as many mandates as the number of times that the number of votes obtained in the electoral districts exceeds the simple quota. The candidates listed at the top of the list who received votes equal to at least 10% of the simple quota are elected.

In the third round of counting, all remaining mandates are distributed between the national candidate lists with at least 5% of the national vote. In this distribution, a modified d'Hondt method is used with a series of 2 to 0.9, 3 to 0.9, 4 to 0.9 and so on.

In the calculation of the comparative figures of each list, as many first elements of the series as there are mandates distributed on the basis of simple quotas to the same list in the electoral district shall be disregarded. Candidates whose names are at the top of the national candidate list and who had received the same or more votes than 5 per cent of the simple quota in their respective electoral districts receive the remaining mandates.

Although BHHRG appreciates that there are probably many mathematically inclined persons who could grasp the essence of such a vote-counting system upon first reading, there can be little doubt that it is gobbledygook to most people, particularly the average voter anywhere in the world. While it may give people such as Rein Taagepera and other electoral "experts" a certain thrill or sense of satisfaction to devise systems such as these, therefore, it would seem to have little to do with the ideal of promoting and strengthening popular representative government

It seems that this system resulted in an electoral travesty. In several cases, candidates who won only a few hundred votes gained seats in parliament, while others who secured many times more failed to get in. Evelyn Sepp of the Centre Party gained only 292 votes but won a seat. Likewise, the Centre Party's Kullo Arjakas (415), Toivo Tootsen (301), and Varner Lootsmann (295), Res Publica's Avo Uprus (372), and the People's Union's Mart Opmann (396). The Pro Patria Union's Lauri Vahtre and Mari-Ann Kelam won 1,691 and 1,391 votes respectively but failed to get into the legislature, while the same party's Mart Laar won only 1,055, yet managed somehow to get in.

In Electoral District 7, Erika Kruup of Res Publica won 1,047 votes but failed to win a seat, while Res Publica's Nelli Kalikova – running on the same local list of candidates – won only 755 votes but got into parliament. In District 10, neither the Centre Party's Tonu Kauba (1,226) nor the Moderates' Marju Lauristin (1,294) won seats, while the Reform Party's Margus Hanson (1,082) and Res Publica's Ene

Ergma (979) did. In District 11, the People's Union candidates Elmer-Johannes Truu, Arno Sild, and Margus Leivo won 1,196, 975 and 792 votes, respectively, but only Mr. Leivo made it into the Riigikogu. Also in District 11, the Reform Party's Mait Klaassen, Meelis Malberg and Meelis Atonen won 847, 806 and 604 votes, respectively, but only Mr. Atonen got into parliament. In District 12, the People's Union's Andres Varik won 2,112 votes but failed to enter parliament, while the Reform Party's Vaino Linde (1,309) and Res Publica's Ela Tomson (1,652) did win seats. The list of examples goes on and on.

Such seemingly nonsensical results can be explained basically as follows. A voter chooses a candidate from a local list by writing the number of the candidate on the ballot paper. But the vote essentially registers for the party, not the individual, so that when all the votes are counted nationwide, the candidate the voter has chosen is subordinated to other candidates from that party who rank higher on the party's national list. Someone voting for the Centre Party's Vladimir Panov (No. 83 on the national list), for example, gets Evelyn Sepp (No. 12) instead, even though Panov got 1,022 votes and Sepp only 292. A person voting for Res Publica's Erika Kruup (No. 58), who won 1,047 votes, instead gets Nelli Kalikova (No. 11), who won only 755. And so on and so forth. Only six out of the eleven registered parties competing fielded the maximum number of candidates allowed on their national lists, and these were the six that gained entry to parliament. But a close inspection of these lists reveals the bogus nature of these parties' "internal organization," since large chunks of these lists are obviously just names inserted in alphabetical order and not in order of some influence or importance within the "party." In fact, the only party in Estonia that appeared to BHHRG to conform to a traditional conception of a political party was the Centre Party.

Conclusion

According to BHHRG's representatives, Estonia is far from the success story it has generally been portrayed. While its convoluted electoral system may be a product of duly ratified legislation, and may indeed be just another "legal" example of proportional representation Europe-style, the result is that ordinary voters end up with representatives that they do not like or perhaps do not even know. Electoral inventiveness thus becomes a mechanism for the perpetuation of unpopular and corrupt elites. Under such circumstances, the leaders of a country like Estonia could obviously sweep the small republic into the EU and NATO under terms unfavorable to ordinary people but very lucrative for themselves. If this is the "New Europe," the future on democracy's new frontier looks less bright than may be commonly assumed.

In Tartu, BHHRG encountered two gleaming new four-star hotels that were almost completely empty, and was told by the people at the reception desk that they were built by a member of parliament from the Reform Party. The receptionist said that the Reform Party was "very popular" in that neighborhood of Tartu. Yet other Estonians were rather more cynical, saying the hotels were a manifestation of money laundering by oligarchs who had built hotels no one could afford to stay in as a way of investing in the future, waiting for the "right time" to sell. If this is how wealth generated by the "free market" is being spent in Estonia, it is little wonder social and economic conditions have declined since the Soviet days.

Organized crime may be an inevitable symptom of the transition to a "free market," and the attendant violence – such as bombs that occasionally go off in the city centers (two such explosions blew out the windows of a sports shop in downtown Tallinn a year ago) – may simply be viewed as a problem to be tolerated in the short term. But how "free" are countries like Estonia? At the beginning of 2002, 'free' Estonia issued its first internal passports, credit-card-sized plastic cards made by a Swiss company in the basement of Estonia's main bank, Hansapank. Former President Lennart Meri described the cards, which are embedded with microchips containing all personal information, as "a key to the future." Such developments in combination with Estonia's seemingly unconditional pro-US stance in the war on terror portends a future for the small Baltic republic as a sinister little "surveillance state" on a permanent war footing."

Res Publica presented itself as a newcomer, and gigantic posters of party leader [Juhan Parts](#) covered the walls of Tallinn. In fact, as BHHRG learned, Res Publica's key figures largely hailed from the widely discredited Pro Patria Union. Both Res Publica and Reform pointed the finger at each other before the

election in an attempt to establish guilt by association with the supposedly-hated establishment Centre Party. A favourite Res Publica campaign poster featured a photo of Mayor Savisaar standing next to Prime Minister Kallas of Reform and smiling, while a big heart hung over their heads. The caption: "LOVE? Spring is a time of love: one ideology, two parties." The idea was to present Res Publica as the principled alternative to the Reform Party, which had proven itself to be not below alliances with the Centre. Yet BHHRG learned that the Reform Party's banner on the Internet pointed the finger at Res Publica for the same crime: "How many districts have a coalition between Res Publica and the Centre Party? More than 12."

Not surprisingly, soon after the election, Res Publica agreed to enter into a "coalition" with the Reform Party and People's Union (60 seats), leaving out the [Pro Patria Union](#) and Moderates, both of which failed to win any seats in the local elections of October 2002. On 1st April, Centre Party leader Edgar Savisaar declined to form a government so, on 2nd April, Juhan Parts (leader of Res Publica) became prime minister. The main points in the coalition agreement are the reduction of tax rates, tough anti-monopoly measures, financial support for women on maternity leave, improvement of border checks. However, the most surreal plank of the new government's policy is to provide "**financial support for international relations studies at Estonian universities**", something which manages to make its Scholtz-Klink policy a model of common sense.

For now, with Juhan Parts as premier and the Reform Party in the coalition government, Estonia's political future looks like business as usual. Time will tell whether Mr. Parts proves as rock solid in his support of the West as his predecessor was. It is perhaps significant that the lame-duck government of Siim Kallas rushed through approval of the EU accession treaty at its final meeting, indicating that the powers-that-be may not have wanted to take any chances that Res Publica's campaign populism might turn out to have some substance once the new government took power. According to *Eesti Päevaleht* on April 7th, an opinion poll conducted from 14th -27th March by something called the "Turu-uuringute joint-stock company" concluded that 33% of Estonians would prefer Mr. Kallas to head the government, as opposed to only 18% of Mr. Parts (Mr. Savisaar came second with 19% in the poll). Perhaps the process of "doing down" Mr. Parts has already started.

Reform Party Chairman Siim Kallas, who won 10,008 votes in the election (second only to Edgar Savisaar, with 12,960, in the nationwide count), has not taken up his seat in the Riigikogu. As reported by Estonian radio on April 9th, the "replacement MP for Siim Kallas" in parliament is Adres Taimla, who won only 886 votes and ran in Dist. 8 (Jarva and Viljandi counties), while Mr. Kallas ran in Dist. 4 (Harju and Rapla). The situation regarding Harju and Rapla residents' representation in their national legislature appears no clearer than the workings of the Estonian electoral system as a whole, a fact no doubt advantageous for Mr. Kallas' future prospects, and for Washington's behind-the-scenes maneuvering – if need be – on behalf of its trusted friend Siim Kallas to ascend to the premiership again.