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Rise of Outsiders in Estonia and Latvia Municipal Elections in 2017: Radical Rightist and Reformist Populist *

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Estonia and Latvia held municipal elections in 2017 and each case saw the rise of political outsiders, so-called populist and/or radical-right parties. While the two republics have a high level of similarity in their socioeconomic backgrounds and political systems, a comparative analysis of the 2017 municipal elections in their two capital cities demonstrates interesting contrasts. In Estonia, the radical-right party won seats where such rightist parties had not been popular earlier, while in Latvia, the reformistic populist party won seats where the rightist party had long been popular. What these elections had in common, however, were that they demonstrated their ‘newness’ within existing political contexts. This implies a nuanced background for the reasons behind the change in European party politics, including how and when radical-rightist and populist parties emerge. The rise of these outsider parties is, to some degree, connected with already-existing contexts of party competitions.

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Two Baltic States and Their Local Elections

Comparison of these two local elections has methodological advantages, as we can control the effect of many parameters that could affect the electoral results. The Baltic republics of Estonia and Latvia share some common characteristics. Both are small nations; Estonia's population is approximately 1.3 million while Latvia's is 2.1 million (as of the 2000s). Historically, both nations were under the strong influences of the German nobility from the thirteenth century until they gained their independence in 1918 from the Russian Empire. Both were annexed into the Soviet Union in 1940 and restored their *de facto*⁽¹⁾ independence in 1991. Because of their complex histories, both countries currently have many Russian-speaking inhabitants as an ethnic minority. Due to animosity toward the old Communist regime, leftist political parties in both nations have been weak, at least on the national level.

Joining the European Union (EU) was, and is, the unwavering national strategy of both Estonia and Latvia after the restoration of independence, and has been almost a consensus position among major political forces in both countries. There has been no significant Euroscepticism or perception gap about the EU between two countries' political discourses; this has made pro-EU and centre-rightist parties in Estonia and Latvia strong.

The capitals of these countries, Tallinn in Estonia and Riga in Latvia, contain approximately one third of the national population; Tallinn has 0.4 million people and Riga has 0.7 million. Therefore, electoral results in Tallinn and Riga have a significant impact on even national-level politics. Both countries use

(1) The official stances of the Estonia and Latvia government are that Estonia and Latvia never lost their independence *de jure* from 1918 because they see the 'occupation' of the Soviet Union as illegal.

a parliamentary system based on proportional representation in both national and regional politics. When they cast their ballots, voters can express their preferences for individual candidates who appear on a party list. The candidate with the greatest number of votes among political parties is elected to the office at the seat allocation stage. In both countries, national and regional elections are held every four years, with the exception of snap elections (as happened in Latvia in 2011 at the national level). In a nutshell, these two Baltic capitals have similar political backgrounds and electoral systems.⁽²⁾

The Background of Party Politics

In both countries, the general background of party politics has both elements in common and distinct differences. In general, parties on the left have been weak while centre-right, pro-EU, and nationally conservative parties are strong. However, this trend could be seen only national level politics; in local elections, the politics of the two capital cities lead to parties of the centre-left and those favouring the Russian-speaking minority being relatively popular. Because Tallinn and Riga have a much higher proportion of Russian-speaking minorities, they have attracted migrants from the entire area occupied by the former Soviet Union.

Estonia has four major political parties: the centrist Centre Party (K), the centre-right Economic Liberal Reform Party (RE), the economically and culturally centrist Social Democratic Party (SDE), and the moderate

(2) Of course, there are also differences between electoral politics in Tallinn and Riga. These differences include the manner of expressing candidate preferences, the existence of Internet voting, and the design of electoral districts. These are rather minor differences, from a viewpoint of impact on the rise of new parties. One marginal but unneglectable difference lies in party registration and financing: studies show that regulations on these have a significant impact on the emergence and success of new parties (e.g. Hug 2001, Hino 2012).

conservative Fatherland and the Res Publica Union (IRL). It is well-known that the Centre Party attracts a great deal of support from Russian-speaking voters. Thus, it has served as the governing party in Tallinn's city government for many years. The long-reigning chairman (and founder) of Centre Party, Edgar Savisaar, served as Tallinn's mayor from 2001 to 2017⁽³⁾, with only three years' out of office (2001-2004).

Although Latvia's party system is much more volatile than Estonia's, it has also four major parties. These parties are the centre-left Russian minority party Harmony (S)⁽⁴⁾, the centre-right and economically liberal party Unity (V), the Latvian nationalist right-wing National Alliance (NA), and the rural-based and oligarchical the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS). Harmony, which was originally a collection of Russian-minority parties, has recently rebranded itself as more 'Social Democratic'. Although Harmony has been excluded from coalition talks at the national level, it has won government offices in Riga. Its

Table 1 *Results of Tallinn (Estonia) Municipal Elections*

	2017	2013	2009
Centre Party (K)	40	46	44
Reform Party (RE)	18	9	14
Social Democratic Party (SDE)	9	8	8
Estonian Conservative Peoples Party (EKRE)	6		
Fatherland and Res Publica Union (IRL)	5	16	13
Savisaar Election Coalition [splinter from K]	1*		
others	0	0	0
TOTAL	79	79	79
turnout	53.5	64.9	65.7

Source: Estonia's Electoral Committee

* The Savisaar Election Coalition received fewer votes than the required 5%; its leader, however, received enough votes to qualify for an individual quota. Thus, the Party received one seat.

(3) Strictly speaking, from September 2015 to November 2017, deputy mayor Taavi Aas (the current mayor of Tallinn) served as acting mayor due to Savisaar's illness.

(4) This party had been well known as the 'Harmony Centre (SC)' in the past.

Table 2 *Results of Riga (Latvia) Municipal Elections*

	2017	2013	2009
Harmony + Proud to serve Riga (S-GKR)	32	39	26
Regional Alliance + For Latvia's Development (LRA - LA)	9		
New Conservative Party (JKP)	9		
National Alliance (NA)	6	12	0
Unity (V)	4	9	22*
Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS)**	0	0	0
others	0	0	12
TOTAL	60	60	60
turnout	58.7	55.6	53.8

Source: Latvia's Central Electoral Committee

* Sum of seats won by two political parties creating Unity in 2010. New Era (JL) won eight seats and Civic Union (PS) won 14 seats.

** The ZZS is a political union consisting of two political groups, Latvia's Farmers Union and Latvia's Green Party, and they ran for as separate political parties in Riga's 2013 elections.

leader, Nils Usakovs, has served as Riga's mayor since 2009.

Rise of the Radical Right: Tallinn

One significant change observed during Tallinn's municipal election, held 15 October 2017, was the first appearance of the radical-right group, the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE). In 2017, EKRE saw its first successful attempt to secure seats at the municipal level (Table 1). EKRE first appeared in Estonia's electoral politics in the 2013 regional elections as a result of the merger of the radical-right Estonian Patriotic Movement and the rural agrarian People's Union. It had once participated in a governing coalition at the national level in the 1990s but lost its popularity in the 2000s. EKRE's political orientation is based largely, but not exclusively, on Estonian nationalism. This orientation can be associated with both its strong Euroscepticism and a racist ideology. Its leader, Mart Helme, and his son, deputy chairman Martin Helme, publicly support the exclusion of dark-skinned people from Estonia. EKRE's TV campaign in 2015 *Kui On Must, Näita Ust* – meaning 'if s/he is black, send her/

him back', gained a great deal of support from Estonians. EKRE opposes same-sex marriage, has protested the border treaty with the Russian Federation, and organized torchlight parades.⁽⁵⁾

EKRE won six seats in the 2015 national parliamentary (*Riigikogu*) elections, held at a time when the refugee crisis was one of the most significant issues in Europe.⁽⁶⁾ Estonia did not experience a large influx of refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa, as was the case in Western European countries. Still, EKRE won seats in Parliament. Even in the 2017 Tallinn elections, when the question of refugees was losing its urgency, EKRE won. EKRE's success implies that the actual number of immigrants and refugees does not affect whether new radical-right parties can make electoral inroads into parliament. It has been noted that EKRE is attempting to capitalise on the 'growing public disaffection and weariness with existing political parties, portraying itself as a new force' (Auers and Kasekamp 2015: 146). Up to now, such strategies have been working. While the Estonian party system has had national conservative parties like Fatherland (*Isamaa*), there have never been full-spectrum radical-rightist parties. EKRE attracts voters who support not only their ideological message, but are also drawn in by their newness in comparison with the current existing political parties.

Outside the EKRE's initial success in the 2017 Tallinn elections, the Centre Party lost some seats,⁽⁷⁾ while it managed to secure its leading position. The moderate Estonian conservative IRL also lost ground from its position in 2013. The neoliberalist Reform Party increased its support from 2013. In sum, the

(5) The connotation of this torch parade is very controversial. Some argue that it is just for celebrating the day of independence of Estonia in 1918, while some argue that such torch parades symbolise Nazism.

(6) One interesting fact is that the Centre Party (and Tallinn city) is assumed to support EKRE as it decreases some support of the Centre's rival, IRL and Reforms.

(7) This loss occurred in part because of the split of leader Edgar Savisaar from that party

2017 elections demonstrated a drift to the right: those political parties that were less tolerant toward ethnocultural minorities or the economically vulnerable increased in popularity. After the 2017 local election, the Centre Party continued to be the governing party in the Tallinn municipal and national governments. Hence, EKRE became the opposition position and has continued to actively express controversial opinions.

Success of Reformist Populists: Riga

In Riga's municipal election, held 4 June 2017, the pro-Russian Harmony Party secured a majority along with the Proud to Serve Riga (GKR) party (Table 2). It is too simplistic to view this result as based only on ethnic issues, as a victory of Russian speakers over Latvians. Harmony is, indeed, originally a Russian minority political party, but at least in Riga, as Bergmane (2017) pointed out, their partner, GKR, comprises mostly ethnic Latvian politicians.

Harmony, however, lost seats after Riga's 2013 election. There are important reasons for that development. Two newly formed populist political parties became the second- and third-largest in Riga. The New Conservative Party (JKP) and the alliance of the Latvia Regional Alliance and For Latvia's Development (LRA-LA) parties gained nine seats each. LRA-LA is a newcomer to Riga politics, but not for Latvia as a whole. The LRA-LA secured its seats in the 2014 national elections and ranked third in an April 2017 public survey poll (Klūga 2017).

The greatest surprise was the entry of the JKP, a very small party formed in 2014 as the personal party of a former minister of justice, Jānis Bordāns.

after the defeat and internal struggle in the autumn of 2016. Savisaar ran in this election from his own party list and secured his seats in that manner. If we analyse the vote shares of the Centre party and the Savisaar faction in 2017 and compare it with the vote share of the Centre party in 2013, there is no significant difference.

While it includes ‘conservative’ as part of its party name, as EKRE does, its political background and platform are completely different from those of the EKRE. JKP express neither Euroscepticism nor racism; rather, they focus on reforms in public administrations. JKP transformed its party body rapidly by accepting many former staff members of the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) as new members. JKP became popular rapidly after it welcomed a very well-known former KNAB member, Jūta Striķe, into its ranks, and nominated her as a mayoral candidate in the upcoming Riga elections (LETA 2017).

KNAB is an independent bureau, but it has had an important political meaning in Latvia where corruption issues have been long debated and the oligarchy’s influence on politics cannot be ignored. For example, when one prime minister (Aigars Kalvītis), under the strong influences of oligarchs, tried to remove the head of KNAB in 2007, this action created a nationwide protest movement that forced the Kalvītis government to step down. KNAB has been seen as a representative of ‘the pure people’ who are in combat with ‘the corrupt elites’, if we use the dichotomous distinction of Mudde (2004). JKP’s strategy of gathering ex-KNAB staff has worked well. Although JKP’s support rate in April (just two months before the Riga election) was only 1.9%, they received nearly 13.4% support in Riga, beating other existing political parties (Klūga 2017).

While new parties gained seats, all other existing parties decreased their number of seats. Harmony, GKR, Unity, and National Alliance all had fewer seats in the Riga city council. In contrast to EKRE’s victory in Estonia, a radical-right emergence in the party system did not happen, partly because the well-known radical-rightist group All for Latvia! (a political partner of EKRE) had already been active as a faction in the National Alliance (NA) for many years. NA, and its forerunner For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK (TB/LNNK), have joined most of the coalition governments since the restoration of independence.

Some leading social scientists in Latvia (and Estonia) argue that there has been not a distinction or ‘*cordon sanitaire* between the Latvian radical-right and mainstream parties’ (Auers and Kasekamp 2015: 139). Therefore, it seems that such radical-right political orientations are also treated as a part of ‘existing parties’ and are not applied as a political rhetoric for these newcomers.

This effect of party ‘newness’ has been seen in the other cases. The Regional Alliance ‘has nothing new to offer in Latvian politics’ (Bergmane 2017) but has gained support. It attracted voters from the previous Unity and National Alliance Supporters, simply because it was new. In conclusion, the Riga elections saw the entry of several political newcomers, but they were slightly different from the populist radical-rightist parties that often appeared in other European countries.

Conclusion and Implication

The two Baltic capitals held important elections in 2017. In both countries, the governing party lost some of its seats, while nevertheless maintaining its position as the governing party. Both capitals saw the entry of new parties seeking to participate in the capital cities’ city councils. In Estonia, a radical-right EKRE first gained seats in the Tallinn city council. In Latvia, the new anticorruption party JKP gained its first seats in Riga’s city council.

Estonia’s experience was similar to that of other European countries where there had not been strong radical-right parties in the council, but then a political newcomer appeared with a radical-right platform and/or rhetoric. In contrast, in Latvia, where a radical-right group had already existed, political newcomers with anticorruption rhetoric succeeded in getting a place in city government.⁽⁸⁾

(8) Hanley and Sikk (2016) ‘anti-established reformist parties (AERP)’ is suitable to describe such parties.

In both Estonia and Latvia, the ‘newness’ played a key role in the success of outsiders. This phenomenon might relate to the argument by Sikk (2011) that ‘newness’ played a key role in the emergence of new parties in the Baltic States in the early 2000s. The appellation of ‘newness’, however, differs between Estonia and Latvia based on their existing political contexts.

In both cases, the rise of radical-right or populist parties in Estonia and Latvia was neither the result of a massive influx of migrants/refugees nor of serious nationwide Euroscepticism, which are often mentioned as causes of such phenomena, especially in Western European countries. Such newcomer parties (EKRE and JKP) got their support in the context of domestic politics and existing party systems, and in reaction for it. This implies the lesson that we should not oversimplify matters to understand the background in our attempts to understand why new radical-right and/or populist parties win seats. As Meguid (2010) argued, the rise of new parties is a product of a complex interaction between existing party systems and emerging political forces. There is no single unified origin that gives us the explanation for the rise of political outsiders in Europe.

It is ironic that a radical-right party based on chauvinism and racism won seats in Estonia when such a political stance had not been popular earlier, while in Latvia, the reformist anticorruption party won seats when the radical-right party *had* been popular for several years. I argue that this phenomenon is not restricted to the Baltic region but represents a more general trend. If we roughly compare party politics between Germany and France, the country that did not have a radical-right party for many years (Germany) saw the rise of a new radical-rightist party (AfD) in 2017. At the same time, the country that had had a radical-right party for a long time (France) saw the rise of a new counter-establishment party (REM) in 2017. The phenomenon is identical to what occurred in Tallinn and Riga in 2017. Analysing the entry of radical-right and populist parties in lesser-known small countries provide us with a further

understanding of the dynamics of floating party politics, a phenomenon that is haunting Europe.

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