

ESTONIA



The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Estonia

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Abstract

For years, Estonia was an outlier in the European populist Radical Right scene, with no party being elected to parliament. This changed with the electoral breakthrough of the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE) in 2015. Currently, EKRE is the second-most popular party in Estonia, with roughly 20% support and is expected to achieve a record result in the general election in March 2023. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created opportunities and challenges for EKRE to increase its support. The war has offered EKRE fresh opportunities on several fronts. First, it has amped up its nativist agenda with claims that "mass immigration" of Ukrainian refugees will make ethnic Estonians a minority in their own land. Second, it has found fertile soil for populist messaging, given voters' economic insecurities, accusing the establishment of incompetence in managing the high inflation and energy prices. EKRE is in the paradoxical situation of being an Estonian nationalist party attempting to appeal to Estonia's sizeable Russian minority, which shares its "traditional family values", Euroscepticism, anti-establishment grievances, and resentment of Ukrainian refugees. Several factors could explain the party's current positioning, including EKRE's interest in blaming the war's economic effects on the government's incompetence, the party's anti-establishment inclination in a context of a broad foreign policy consensus, and its interest in courting Russian-speaking voters.

Keywords: *Estonia; populism; Far Right; Ukraine; Russian minority*

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Introduction

Estonia lacked a genuine and electorally competitive populist Radical Right party until 2015, mainly because mainstream right-wing parties had already captured the nationalist segment of the ideological spectrum (Auers & Kasekamp, 2009). However, this began to change in 2012 when the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) was founded. Shortly before the 2015 general election, the party began to attract attention for its opposition to measures expanding rights for same-sex couples passed by the Estonian parliament. After the election and in view of the unfolding EU "refugee crisis" in the summer of that year, the party's support spiked again. In the 2019 elections, EKRE came in third and, to the surprise of many, joined a governing coalition with the centre-left Centre Party and the conservative Isamaa party that managed to stay in office until early 2021. A month before the 2023 general elections, polls suggest that EKRE's support will make it the second-largest party in the next parliament.

EKRE checks all the ideological boxes that Mudde (2007) specified for a typical Radical Right populist party, including 1) nativism (xenophobia, racism, anti-globalism, Euroscepticism, welfare chauvinism), 2) authoritarianism (strong leadership, tough on crime, emphasis on traditional family values and cultural identity, toxic masculinity), and 3) populism (anti-elitism, distrust of experts, unfulfillable promises, belief in deep state conspiracies). EKRE has also clearly aligned itself with other populist Radical Right actors, being a member of the Identity and Democracy group in the European Parliament and echoing narratives from the right-wing online media space, such as Breitbart News.

In most Eastern European countries, pro-Russian stances have historically been linked with the Left, especially the successors of the former communist parties. While Estonia has no communist party successor to speak of, the centre-left Centre Party has long been seen as pro-Russian, especially under Edgar Savisaar, its populist leader from 1991 to 2016. The party signed a cooperation memorandum with Russia's ruling United Russia party in 2004 (formally terminating it only in March 2022) and has long enjoyed overwhelming support among Estonia's sizeable Russian-speaking minority (reaching more than 75% at its peak). Although support from Russian-speaking voters has been falling since 2016, it remains the most popular party among this group.

The ‘supply side’ of right-wing populism

EKRE began as an ultra-nationalist party whose discursive core was Eurosceptic and anti-Russian (Kasekamp et al., 2019). In the European Parliament, EKRE is in the anti-Russian wing of the Identity and Democracy group (along with the Finns Party and Poland’s ruling party, PiS). The party has generally been pro-NATO, although the party’s former chairman Mart Helme has repeatedly expressed scepticism about the alliance’s fitness for purpose. For example, in 2019, Helme declared NATO “in crisis”, echoing similar observations by Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron; he has also argued that Estonia should act primarily on its national interests rather than relying on NATO’s common security framework (Voog, 2019).

Unlike many of its Western European counterparts, EKRE has never been an explicitly pro-Russian party. However, in the context of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, the party’s messaging has become more ambivalent. While EKRE has called for greater defence spending to meet the Russian threat, it has also been parroting some of Russia’s propaganda narrative.

Meanwhile, in the past few years, EKRE has consciously sought to woo the sizeable Russian-speaking minority to grow its electoral base; as a result, it has become more ambiguous in its positions on some issues (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2022). Despite being an Estonian nationalist party, EKRE has much in common with the worldview of Russian speakers, who, on average, hold more traditional values, are economically less successful than ethnic Estonians, and hold grievances against the establishment and distrust the elites. An example of how EKRE can gain support from ethnic Russians is the traditional energy sector, where many Russian speakers in the northeast of the country are employed and whose future is most clearly affected by the EU’s climate agenda.

The desire to appeal to Russian minority voters has probably also influenced the party’s foreign policy narrative, which has moderated from outright hostility to calls for Estonia to work towards good neighbourly relations. For example, EKRE was once highly critical of the Estonian-Russian border agreement, which recognizes Russian sovereignty over territory that was part of Estonia before Soviet rule. However, criticism of the agreement is directed primarily at the Estonian political establishment, not at Russia. Rather than calling it an “enemy”, Mart Helme prefers to talk about Russia as a great civilization, emphasizing its global role and the fact that it is a neighbour.



When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, all Estonian parties, including EKRE, condemned the attack. In October 2022, the parliament, including EKRE, unanimously voted to declare Russia a terrorist state (Parliament of Estonia, 2022). Furthermore, when a resolution recognizing Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism came before the European Parliament, EKRE's MEP Jaak Madison voted in favour. Estonia's official position has been to support Ukraine until it is victorious and that peace should be negotiated once Ukraine's territorial integrity has been restored. In this regard, EKRE has sent somewhat mixed messages. For instance, in an interview with a Russophone television programme, Mart Helme echoed some of the Kremlin's talking points:

We find that the best solution would be a peace treaty, no matter how hard it would be for both sides – at least people would no longer have to die. We are not on Russia's side, and we are not on Ukraine's side; we are on the side of peace. (ERR, 2022c)

Later, the party's leadership clarified EKRE's support for Ukraine and excused Helme's "unfortunate wording" while also reiterating the underlying claim, saying, "who wouldn't be for peace?" (ERR, 2022d). The peace narrative is a subtle way of undermining support for Ukraine without appearing to be overtly pro-Russian. EKRE's rhetoric has also been noted and praised by Russia's state-controlled media (Lomp, 2022).

Another populist Radical Right figure, who has been speaking out for good neighbourly relations with Russia, is the leader of the Foundation for the Protection of Family and Tradition (SAPTK), Varro Vooglaid, who has a considerable following on his website Objektiiv (<https://objektiiv.ee>). Vooglaid is now a candidate for EKRE (although he has stopped short of *actually becoming a member*) and is almost certain to be elected to parliament. Vooglaid has also depicted Ukraine as an innocent casualty in a war between Russia and the West, provoked by the latter to bring Moscow into an open military conflict to drain its capabilities and weaken it (Vooglaid, 2022b).

EKRE (and Vooglaid) objected to the government-initiated bill banning the display of symbols under which international crimes, such as the infamous "Z" used by the Russian military, have been committed because the wording is imprecise and interferes with the freedom of speech (Vooglaid, 2022a). Nevertheless, it sided with the government in the heated debate over removing Red Army monuments in the

spring and summer of 2022. As a result, many of EKRE's ethnic Russian activists, who joined the party before the local elections in 2021, left the party (ERR, 2022a). In certain ways, the more liberal right-wing parties have begun to move into EKRE's nationalist and authoritarian niche. For instance, the Reform Party and Isamaa have proposed revoking the right of permanent residents who are citizens of Russia to vote in local elections, initially suggested by EKRE in 2017 (ERR, 2022b).

While taking sides in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict is awkward for EKRE, and it struggles to gain airtime with nationalist statements, the party has been vocal about the war's adverse socioeconomic and cultural effects.

As of early February 2023, 123,000 Ukrainian refugees had crossed into Estonia. Roughly half have moved on to other countries, and 43,000 have applied for temporary protection status (Estonian Social Insurance Board, n.d.), making Estonia the largest recipient of Ukrainian refugees on a per capita basis in the world (Estonia's population is 1.3 million). Trying to appeal to both Estonian and Russian-speaking audiences, EKRE has used a Janus-faced strategy. When communicating with their Russian-speaking audience, they play on their anti-Ukrainian sentiment, claiming that Ukrainian refugees threaten local Russians' job prospects. But when addressing their Estonian audience, they appeal to anti-Russian sentiment and frame the events as a mass influx of Russian-speaking immigrants and a danger to the survival of the Estonian nation, as the share of ethnic Estonians in the population has been falling. EKRE also claims that integrating Ukrainian children into the Estonian school system will result in the russification of Estonian schools and prevents Ukrainians from returning to Ukraine and the Ukrainian school system (Hindre, 2022). Furthermore, EKRE members are fuelling conspiracy theories about the government hiding the actual number and intention of refugees, claiming that Estonia is giving refuge to Ukrainian men who are forbidden to leave Ukraine, thus weakening Ukraine's position in the war (Uued Uudised, 2022). In a speech to the parliament on 13 March 2022, EKRE founder Mart Helme claimed that Ukrainian refugees are bringing communicable diseases like HIV and will engage in prostitution (Delfi, 2022).

While its anti-refugee rhetoric has lessened over time, EKRE remains highly vocal about the economic consequences of the war. For instance, EKRE organized a widely-publicized rally on October 16, 2022, against high energy prices. However, EKRE did not blame the soaring prices on Russia or the war but on the ineptitude of the government and the European Green Deal proposed by Brussels.



Estonia goes to the polls again on March 5, 2023, and the main issues in the election campaign are defence policy and the cost of living. In defence debates, EKRE mainly aims to appear as an expert on which investments must be made to build specific military capacities. It merges these recommendations with its earlier criticism of NATO, claiming that Estonia must build independent defence capabilities (Uued Uudised, 2023). However, the campaign's primary focus is on combating inflation. In a promotional video from December 2022, EKRE promised generous tax cuts and welfare benefits, especially for families, claiming that this would help revive the economy (Birnbaum, 2022). Furthermore, EKRE positions itself as protecting Estonia's national interests while claiming other parties are prioritizing Ukrainian welfare (Karell, 2023).

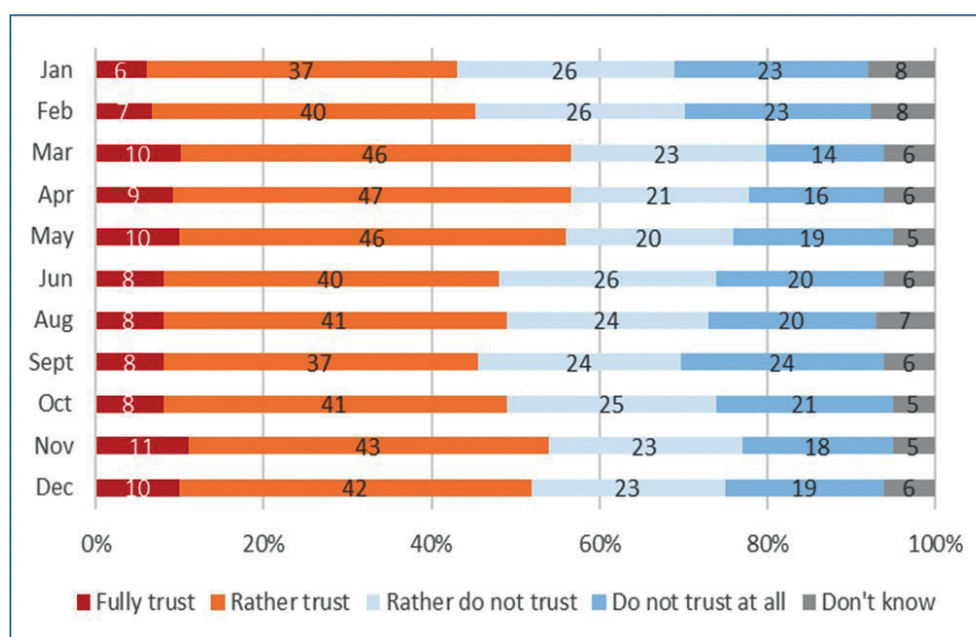
Other parties are keen to accuse EKRE of ambivalence on the war but, aside from the rhetorical inconsistencies mentioned above, do not have much to pin on them. For instance, EKRE's opposition to the bill criminalizing the display of symbols of international crimes against humanity was interpreted as an attempt to safeguard the right of their activists to flaunt Nazi symbols.

The “demand side” of right-wing populism

EKRE surpassed the Centre Party to become the second-most popular party for the first time in 2021. Before the war started, EKRE had steadily been closing the gap with the Reform Party, Estonia's largest by vote share. When Russia attacked Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (Estonia's Independence Day), both the public and political reaction was unanimous in condemning Russia's action and showing solidarity with Ukraine.

Due to the active role of Prime Minister Kaja Kallas and the rally-round-the-flag effect that benefits incumbent parties during crises, both the government as an institution as well as the Reform Party enjoyed a surge in support (see Figures 1 and 2). This suggests that the war has generally reduced the potential success of populist, anti-establishment messaging.

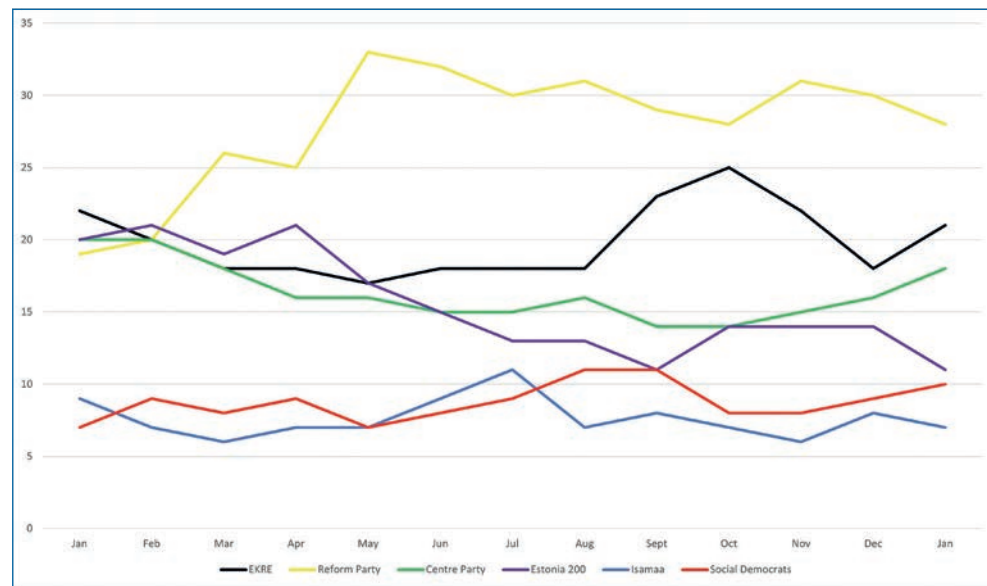
Figure 1. Public trust in state institutions in Estonia (January–December 2022)



Source: Public Opinion monitoring, Turu-Uuringute AS (2023, p. 5).

However, the main loser in the popularity ratings was not EKRE, but the Centre Party, which was in an awkward position as it was also condemning Russia's actions, then being a government party (see Figure 2), which created ambivalent feelings, especially among the party's numerous Russian-speaking supporters. EKRE's ratings initially remained stable but began to grow again and, according to the popularity ratings by Norstat (n.d. a), reached an all-time high of 27% in October 2022 before declining to just under 20% in January 2023. EKRE's ratings seem to have strongly correlated with the Centre Party's popularity, which has recently begun to recover some of its earlier losses. The recent decline in EKRE's relative support can also be explained by the declining share of "undecided" voters, who seem to be breaking for the other parties as the elections approach. While EKRE's supporter base of staunch partisans remains more or less stable, the party seems unable to appeal beyond it, meaning other parties are pulling ahead.

Figure 2. Voting intentions in Estonia, January 2022 - January 2023



Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from TNS Emor (2023)

EKRE's surge of support in the autumn of 2022 can be explained by its campaign efforts. The peak of its popularity coincided with the protest rallies against rising energy prices in October. After that, however, its rating went into evident decline in November after Mart Helme's remarks about being "for peace". Interestingly, the decrease in EKRE's overall rating in November coincided with a surge in their popularity among voters from ethnicity other than Estonian (Norstat n.d. b). This suggests that Helme's ambiguous statements (and their amplification in the media) did have some positive effect on the preferences of the Russian-speaking voters. Still, the ensuing clarifications made it temporary, and its effect on the ethnic Estonian voters was negative.

One reason why EKRE's anti-refugee messaging did not improve its ratings, unlike during the European Migration Crisis in 2015–16, relates to the public's much more accommodating attitude towards Ukrainian refugees. While in 2015, 43–54% of respondents agreed that Estonia should accept refugees (Jakobson et al., 2017); in 2022, 71–81% of respondents agreed that Estonia should accept refugees from Ukraine (Turu-Uuringute AS, 2023, p. 11).

Discussion and perspectives

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had a manifold effect on the Estonian populist Radical Right and has created both challenges and opportunities for it. Initially, EKRE's support plummeted as people rallied around the flag and behind the prime minister's party. Opponents tried to claim that EKRE had been acting as a "useful idiot" for Putin. Furthermore, mainstream parties are beginning to co-opt some items on the nativist anti-Russian agenda. The war also hampered EKRE's plans to expand its electoral base to include a greater share of the Russian-speaking population. However, the high inflation and economic difficulties occasioned by the war and sanctions provided the populists with new possibilities to gain support.

Nevertheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is unlikely to negatively impact EKRE's competitive position in the long run, as the party has solidly institutionalized (Saarts et al., 2021). Significantly, EKRE still retains its near monopoly on many salient issues, such as immigration, Euroscepticism, championing "traditional" values (with a focus on opposing LGBTQ rights), and opposition to the European Green Deal, which will remain on the political agenda for the foreseeable future.

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