



## FAR-RIGHT PARTIES RISING IN THE WESTERN END OF EURASIA: THE CASE OF ESTONIA

The past 10 years have been marked by many events such as global economic crises, migration flows, epidemic diseases and their consequences. In many countries, we are witnessing the effects of the series of negative situations on economic, political, and even social life. In a few years after the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the economies showed a certain level of recovery at the macro-level. However, on an individual level, this improvement was not sufficiently visible in people's daily lives in terms of equitable distribution of income, which was a precursor of significant changes for the coming years. Far-right parties in Europe started to form or strengthen their structures in the early 2010s. They have achieved significant success in the European Parliament and national elections in 2015, by putting more emphasis on the economic problems faced by the public in their populist, racist, anti-system and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The Five Star Movement (FSM), founded by Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio in Italy in 2009 and led by Luigi Di Maio, and the National Rally Party (NRP), led by Marine Le Pen in France, can be shown as two different examples. The FSM, which was established after the financial crisis, attracted attention with its discourse that it could be a solution to the economic problems in the country and succeeded in increasing its voting result from 2% to 24% in 2012-2014. On the other hand, the conservative right-wing party NRP, which was founded in 1972, became more powerful by including economic problems to the classical nationalist, anti-European Union and anti-immigrant discourses.

The work of the far-right parties, especially during 2010-2015, paid off in the elections in 2015-2019, and started to be stepped up. During this period, the far-right parties in Italy and France expanded their electoral base and became one of the leading parties. These developments have inspired far-right parties in other European countries, leading to increased support for such parties at various levels throughout Europe. Thus, the success of the far-right parties spread rapidly in 2015-2019, since they intensely addressed international events, such as the economic recession during these years, and the increased migration flows due to the intensifying civil war in Syria.

Based on these results, many studies have been carried out within the academic community on the reasons for the rising trend of ultra-right parties. Among the main reasons for this trend are anti-immigrant discourses and the fact that usually, in times of economic crises, poorly educated low-income groups living in rural areas vote for these

parties due to their promises to address economic problems.

While Europe was experiencing all these fluctuations, the influence of far-right parties was not much noticeable in the Baltic countries, except Latvia. Far-right currents, which strengthened in 2010-2015 and reached the peak of political influence in 2015-2019, seemed not to reach Estonia and Lithuania. In Latvia, however, the National Alliance Party, established in 2010, made a good start with 7.8% of the vote in its first parliamentary elections in the same year, without avoiding populist discourses in the right-wing conservative direction. In the subsequent 2014 parliamentary elections, the party's voting result increased to 16.6%, but after being included in the government coalition, its electoral support fell to 11% in the 2018 parliamentary elections. One of the main reasons for this decline is the fact that the second far-right party 'Who owns the state?', which also entered the political life of the country, drew a certain number of voters away from the National Alliance Party, especially with its statements suggesting economic reforms.

In the case of Estonia, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (CPPE) was founded in March 2012 by Mart Helme to benefit from the same trend in Europe. Unlike the National Alliance in Latvia, the party did not gain noticeable results in the 2015 parliamentary elections, receiving only around 4% of the vote. At present, the CPPE is led by Martin Helme, a son of Mart Helme. Although the party does not define itself as far-right, it is considered a typical far-right party because of its discourses. The CPPE achieved a major success in 2019 because of the different political strategies implemented in recent years. With 17.8% of voting support in the parliamentary elections, it entered the coalition government with the Estonian Centre Party, led by Juri Rotas. The CPPE members head five key ministries out of 15, including the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Information Technology, and the Ministry of Interior.

In the political scene of Estonia, the Estonian Centre Party and the Estonian Reform Party, led by Kaja Kallas, have been ruling the country as the leading parties for many years. However, in the 2015 parliamentary elections, the electoral support of the other two parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), led by Jevgeni Ossinovski, and the conservative democratic party Isaama, led by Helir-Valdor Seeder, decreased from 25% and 19% to 15% and 10%, respectively, which significantly reduced their influence. In this respect, although the parties

of Ratas and Kallas maintained their electoral bases in 2015 and afterward, the loss of influence by the SDP and Isaama created a gap.

In the meantime, the CPPE managed to receive significant support among rural voters who think that their problems are not addressed – those engaged in agriculture, those with low incomes, and Estonian diaspora groups living in neighboring countries such as Norway and Sweden. Emphasizing the unequal distribution of income and the lack of attention to rural areas, the CPPE received the support of the proponents of the People's Union of Estonia, which was the voice of agricultural workers until 2012, when it stopped its activities. On the other hand, it is expected that there may be a further shift of electoral support to the CPPE from the SDP and Isaama. Moreover, the CPPE seems to have increased its overseas support because of offices opened abroad and one-to-one contact with the diaspora communities in neighboring countries. After increasing the voting support from 4% to 13% in 2015-2017, the CPPE managed to keep it in the 15%-20% range in 2017-2019. The CPPE moves in a different line with various discourses and election strategies within the far-right party profile. The party tries to hold popular support for a longer period with its outlook that handles permanent issues such as unequal income distribution rather than political opportunism-based support in times of economic crises. We see that the far-right forces, which gained strength in Estonia with this agenda, is developing in a different way than such parties as the FSM that quickly reached the top but started to fall after a few years. On the other hand, in a country such as Estonia where liberal and social democratic parties have dominant power, the emergence of the far right without a significant historical background is among the topics that need further research. If we look at the current political situation in Estonia, the CPPE maintains its electoral base and even receives 1.5% more support according to data from February 2020. On the contrary, Prime Minister Ratas' party, which preferred to form a coalition with the CPPE instead of the Reform Party, severely lost its support from 27% in 2019 to 21% in February 2020. This decline can be considered as the result of the warming attitude towards far-right parties in the country. While the CPPE settled in Estonia's political life with quick but lasting steps, it also created camps among voters. This can be seen especially among the Russian minority making up 22% of the population, liberal voters who oppose the views of the CPPE, generally living in large cities such as Tallinn and Tartu, and those who support the CPPE.

## Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- Presidents Vladimir Putin of Russia, Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and Hassan Rouhani of Iran held a trilateral summit via video conference to discuss the process of peaceful settlement of the Syrian conflict. In their joint statement, the parties rejected attempts to create new realities on the ground under the pretext of combating terrorism. They also expressed opposition to the illegal seizure and transfer of oil revenues that should belong to Syria (President of Russia, 01.07.2020).
- According to Russia's Central Election Commission, 78% of voters across the country supported the constitutional reform bill that allows President Putin to run for president again and bans same-sex marriage, among other changes, while 21% voted against. The turnout at the referendum, which was initially planned for April, but delayed due to the coronavirus outbreak, was 65%. For the first time, Russian citizens had seven days to cast their ballots (Deutsche Welle, 02.07.2020).
- The foreign ministers of the five Central Asian states and U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo participated in the C5+1 high-level dialogue held in the online format. The parties discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and conditions to ensure long-term economic resilience of the region. They also addressed regional security issues, including continued support for peace and stability in Afghanistan through increased cooperation (U.S. Department of State, 30.06.2020).
- President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev issued an edict establishing the anti-corruption agency. The new agency is an authorized government body responsible for the implementation of state policy in the field of preventing and combating corruption. The agency will carry out a comprehensive analysis of results of investigations into corruption crimes, study materials related to budget expenses and conduct administrative investigations of corruption offenses (Kun.uz, 29.06.2020).
- In Tashkent, Uzbek authorities detained 11 people who fell under the influence of the terrorist organization "Tawhid and Jihad", which is banned in Uzbekistan. The suspects are charged with downloading extremist videos on the Internet and discussing them in "a clandestine group". According to investigators, the detainees planned to leave for Syria to join "Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad" militants. Previously, the Uzbek Ministry of Internal Affairs conducted several raids and detained about 70 supporters of this organization (Fergana, 01.07.2020).
- The co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group met separately and jointly via video conference with Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers Zohrab Mnatsakanyan and Elmar Mammadyarov to discuss the public health situation in the region, current dynamics in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and next steps in the peace process. The co-chairs assessed positively the relative stability on the ground and expressed satisfaction that the sides continued to use existing direct communication links to avoid escalation (OSCE, 30.06.2020).

## Economy, Finance, and Energy

- The government of Kazakhstan implements an action plan to counteract shadow economy for 2019-2021 by digitalizing tax and customs administration, developing cashless payments and countering the legalization of criminal proceeds. According to the Ministry of Finance, in 2019, the share of shadow economy in the GDP decreased from 27% to 23%, and the next goal is to reduce it to 20% by 2025. This achievement allowed an additional increase in budget revenues by 1.5 trillion tenge, or \$3.7 billion (Kazakh TV, 30.06.2020).
- President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev chaired an online meeting of the management board of the Astana International Financial Center (AIFC). The key item on the agenda was the restoration of economic growth in Kazakhstan and the role of the AIFC in this process. According to Tokayev, markets of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Central Asia could be attractive for foreign investment, and the AIFC, with its unique capabilities, can act as a universal platform connecting the countries of the region (Akorda, 02.07.2020).
- Prime Minister of Belarus Roman Golovchenko met with Chairman of the Board of the Eurasian Economic Commission Mikhail Myasnikov in Moscow. The parties discussed joint measures taken by the commission and the EAEU member states to ensure economic stability in response to the coronavirus pandemic. They also addressed market access problems, such as those arising from Russia's ban on imports and transit of beef produced by Belarusian companies (BelTA, 02.07.2020).
- The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Finance Corporation will provide loans for the modernization of the Indorama Kokand Fertilizers and Chemicals JSC, formerly known as the Kokand superphosphate plant. The financing will help the company to increase its annual output of fertilizers threefold to 350,000 tons and introduce energy-efficient equipment. The state-owned plant was acquired in 2019 by Indorama Holdings, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Indorama Corporation, Singapore (EBRD, 02.07.2020).
- Tajikistan's parliament endorsed amendments to the law on the national budget for 2020. As a result, the budget's revenue plan was cut by more than 2.3 billion somoni (\$228 million), while the expenditure part was reduced by 1.8 billion somoni (\$177 million). At the same time, 1.9 billion somoni (\$185 million) will be allocated to pay additional salaries to doctors fighting the coronavirus and to invest in the construction of the Rogun hydropower plant (Avesta, 01.07.2020).
- According to Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Finance, by the end of 2020, the government plans to attract additional funds in the amount of \$116.2 million to support the country's budget. In particular, \$100 million will be received from the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development as a loan at the interest rate of 1% for 20 years, with a grace period of 10 years. \$16 million will be provided by the European Union in the form of a grant (Kabar, 02.07.2020).

## Society and Culture

- Minister of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources of Kazakhstan Magzum Mirzagaliyev and Minister of Water Resources of Uzbekistan Shavkat Hamraev signed a roadmap on partnership between the two countries in the field of water relations. The document regulates a number of issues in the water sector and should ensure transparency of the distribution of water during the growing season. In particular, the roadmap provides for joint technical study and monitoring of water facilities built and reconstructed since 1991 (Kazakh TV, 03.07.2020).
- The opening ceremony of the television channel named Abai TV took place in Nur-Sultan. The new national TV channel was established as part of celebrations of the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abai, famous Kazakh poet, composer and philosopher. Abai TV is intended to promote richness, heritage and achievements of Kazakh culture and expected to become one of the recognized brands of Kazakhstan (Kazinform, 30.06.2020).
- The International Turkic Academy held an online conference dedicated to the National Day of Dombra, the Kazakh musical string instrument. The management of music and arts educational institutions of Kazakhstan, well-known musicians and scholars attended the event titled "Culture of Dombra: the Continuity of Traditions and Issues of Education". The academy presented the textbook "Dombra", which it prepared at the instruction of President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev for study at secondary schools (TWESCO, 03.07.2020).
- The International Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation organized a virtual art competition named "Let's Protect Our World: Traditions of the Turkic World". Around 700 paintings by talented kids from the member and observer countries of the foundation, including Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, participated in the contest. The project organizers plan to publish an illustrated book with all art works accepted to the contest (AzerNews, 30.06.2020).
- Turkey sent medical supplies to Azerbaijan to contribute to the country's fight against COVID-19. The shipment included 30 ventilators, 55,000 overalls, 50,000 N95 face masks, 100,000 surgical masks, 5,000 glasses, 200,000 gloves, and 40,000 boxes of various medicines. The aid was sent by the Turkish Air Forces cargo aircraft. In a letter accompanying the humanitarian cargo, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan conveyed his condolences to his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev for the Azerbaijanis who lost their lives in the pandemic (Anadolu Agency, 05.07.2020).
- Discovery Channel released a documentary about the Caspian Sea. The film that lasts more than 40 minutes was mostly shot on the territory of Kazakhstan. It shows the natural beauty and wildlife of the sea, such as Caspian seals and saiga antelopes. The authors emphasize that the Caspian Sea is the largest enclosed inland water body on the planet, remarkable for a variety of landscapes surrounding it – from mountains to steppes, from deserts to swamps (Eltar, 02.07.2020).