

A Cartel Party System in a Post-Communist Country? The Case of Estonia

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Introduction

The party systems in Eastern European post-communist countries are usually regarded to be unstable and if at all, showing only slight signs of stabilization and consolidation. The traditional measures (electoral volatility, partisan loyalty, programmatic clarity and persistence of party programs, etc) generally also depict the Estonian party system partially consolidated at best. However, in national elections the ‘menu’ of viable parties changed surprisingly little from the first post-independence elections in 1992 to 1999. The vote shares of individual parties have swung dramatically at times, but for the most part only to shift back in next elections. Also, the programmatic stance of parties had changed to some extent, yet the ranks of key politicians and parties remained for the major part constant through the decade. The general context of party competition in Estonia reflects well the developed western democracies – the electoral campaigns have been quite professional, dominated by mass media and focused on leaders, and the system of public party financing is already well established. However, the parliamentary elections of 2003 brought with it impressive rise of a genuinely new party Res Publica, that at first sight seems to undermine the prior relative persistence of the party system.

Motivated by the abovementioned characteristics of party politics, this paper analyses Estonian developments in the light of the concept of cartel parties. The concept has been developed by Katz & Mair (1995) to account for changes in contemporary western parties. They argue that the parties in Western European democracies have effectively become the agents of the state vis-à-vis the civil society. The voters are offered a basically fixed list of parties to choose from in elections, and as all established parties share a mutual interest in the survival of the cartel, the competition between them becomes toned down. One of the main characteristic features of the cartel party phase is the expansion of public financing of parties. As membership is declining and losing its importance for them, the parties have become increasingly dependent on state for their resources.

The concept of cartel parties has been criticised (most notably by Koole 1996 and Kitschelt 2000), yet many of the changes in the environment of party competition and party organizations pointed out by Katz & Mair are clearly empirically valid. As Koole has pointed out, the application of the term ‘cartel’ that refers rather to party *systems* on the level of individual parties is somewhat unsuccessful (1996: 507). Even though Katz & Mair argued in their response to the criticism that the system level has implications significant enough on the party organizational level to define a new polar type of parties (1996: 526), there are clearly two facets to the described phenomenon – the *systemic* (cartelization of the party system) and the *organizational* (cartel party type). Therefore, the Estonian case will be analyzed below on two levels. First, it will be analysed whether the cartel of parties has existed on systemic level. Second, as the organizational characteristics of individual cartel parties develop mostly in response to country’s institutional arrangements, the development of ‘cartelistic institutions’ (party financing regime, campaign environment, other party legislation) in Estonia will be studied.

Theoretical models explaining the political reality in traditional western democracies should be applied to new democracies only with great caution. The need could be illustrated by the use of social cleavages model of party (system) development. Lipset & Rokkan (1967) explanation of the emergence of Western European party systems was tied to specific historical period and political conditions, but the cleavage model has sometimes far too roughly been imported to the studies of post-communist party systems – the cleavages clearly have significance in structuring politics in a country, yet Lipset & Rokkan approach was profoundly evolutionary, demonstrating how successively emerging social cleavages were ‘politicized’ and gave rise to new (types of) parties. In a situation of abrupt development of party systems in societies characterised by somewhat vague cleavages, their working in structuring party politics should not to be expected to be very similar to the western experience and the relationship between cleavages and party competition is likely not straightforward.¹

¹ An example of successful incorporation of cleavage model is Kitschelt (1995), who bases his analysis on the general idea of cleavages structuring the party system, but does not make assumptions that the cleavages are to be the same as in western democracies. Attempts to confirm that the crucial cleavages in old democracies also matter in post-communist countries, are methodologically problematic as it is always possible to find indications that the social-demographic composition of different parties’ supporters differs (e.g. as Kostelecký 2002 shows), but that does not prove that these cleavages actually structure the party system.

Similarly, Katz & Mair cartel party model should be treated with caution, as it is also in part grounded in specific legacies of the countries that they claimed to have witnessed the emergence of cartel parties. Important among the forces giving rise to the new stage of party development were stimuli created by the previous stage(s). Still, of a foremost importance for Katz & Mair are institutional variables that are relatively independent of the historical context. Even though they see cartel party as the dominant type emerging from the dialectical process on the ashes of catch-all party, the importance of institutional circumstances for the emergence of cartel parties stand out. It has been argued elsewhere (Dalton 2002: 205-6), that the character of political competition in new democracies should in some respects rather be similar to the present state of Western European politics, rather than the historical patterns there. The case can be strengthened by the fact that the public party financing that is central for the emergence of cartel parties, became a standard in Western Europe only after the 1960s (Katz & Mair 2002: 123), but has already been established in most of the Eastern European countries (van Biezen 2000, Ikstens et al 2001).²

The theoretical aim of the paper is to analyse whether the Estonian party system could be characterized as a cartel party system, as well as to analyse the concept of cartel party itself. It is argued below that even though the ‘cartelistic institutions’ exist in Estonia, and until 2003 the parties seemed well to have formed a cartel, the persistence of a party system can still be undermined. As long as there are social forces that can and will support (as voters or financiers) newcomers, the breaking of the cartel is possible. Public financing of parties can indeed make it much more difficult, but it is not sufficient for preserving the *status quo*, even if it were extensive. The rise of newcomers is easier if abstentionism is high – non-voters can be considered a reserve army for new parties to draw party supporters from. Thus it can be hypothesized that restrictions on other sorts of resources and high popular satisfaction with the working of politics in a country could be close to the necessary conditions for cartelization to complement the initial cartelistic institutions outlined by Katz & Mair (1995).

² The dependence of parties on state subventions stands out in the studies on the potential cartelization of post-communist party systems (van Biezen & Kopecky 2001, Szczerbiak 2001, Klíma 1998, Ágh 1998).

Despite its remarkable features, Estonian system of party financing is surprisingly understudied in political science literature. For instance, Estonia is missing from an otherwise detailed study on the post-communist countries by Ikstens et al 2001. Therefore, besides its theoretical aims, much of this paper is devoted to presenting the general framework of party financing and other party regulations with the intention to fill in the abovementioned gap.

The paper starts with a short overview on Estonian electoral system and party development. Thereafter, the dynamics of the Estonian party system will be examined with respect to possible cartelization on the systemic level by analysing the levels of volatility (traditional indicator of party system change/stability) and the level of success of genuinely new parties. That is followed by an analysis of the rise of Res Publica in 2003 parliamentary elections. The second part of the paper analyses the development of abovementioned ‘cartelistic institutions’: party financing and electoral campaign framework and practices, legislative and practical role of membership, and possible indications of at least limited containment of party competition. The paper concludes with a discussion on the congruency of the cartel party model with the Estonian case and possible effects of future developments in Estonian party regulation.

Electoral and Party System in Estonia

Since 1992, Estonia has used the system of two-tier proportional representation with 5 percent national threshold for parliamentary elections. 11 constituencies (101 seats in total, the average magnitude is 9.2) make up the first tier, where the mandates are distributed according to Hare quota without reminders. Nationwide party lists are used for compensational mandates, allocated using a modified d’Hondt formula (with divisors 1, $2^{0.9}$, $3^{0.9}$, etc.), based on the national votes of parties. The exclusion of reminders on constituency level has meant that the national and district level have been of more or less same significance – approximately half of the mandates were distributed on national level until 2003 (from 60 in 1992 to 46 in 1999, Sikk 1999: 27). However, before the last elections the electoral rules were changed so that the party lists that had at least 0.75 of quota in excess after allocation of mandates in

constituency were given an additional mandate. That resulted in substantial decrease in the number of mandates distributed through the nationwide lists – only 27 members of the parliament received a compensational mandate.

The system of proportional representation has brought with it a rather fragmented party system (see Table 1). Still, the number of parties entering the parliament has decreased somewhat over the years (the effective number of parliamentary parties 5.9 in 1992 and 4.7 in 2003³) and the frequency of splits and mergers has declined to some extent (see Grofman et al 2000 that provides a thorough overview on the development of Estonian party system, Table 6 in Appendix provides a general outline of that).

Table 1. Parliamentary Elections in Estonia 1992–2003

	1992		1995		1999		2003	
	votes %	seats	votes %	seats	votes %	seats	votes %	seats
Estonian National Independence Party	8.8	10	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pro Patria Union	22.0	29	7.9	8	16.1	18	7.3	7
Safe Home / Coalition Party	13.6	17	32.2	41	7.6	7	-	-
Centre Party	12.2	15	14.2	16	23.4	28	25.4	28
Moderates	9.7	12	6.0	6	15.2	17	7.0	6
Independent Royalists	7.1	8	0.8	0	-	-	-	-
Better Estonia/Estonian Citizen	6.9	8	3.6	0	-	-	-	-
Pensioners' and Families' League	3.7	0	**	**	-	-	-	-
Farmers' Assembly	2.9	0	**	**	0.5	0	-	-
Greens	2.6	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Entrepreneurs' Party	2.4	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Left Alternative / Justice / Soc Dem Labour Party	1.6	0	2.3	0	***	***	0.4	0
Reform Party	-	-	16.2	19	15.9	18	17.7	19
United People's Party*	-	-	5.9	6	6.1	6	2.2	0
Right Wingers' Party	-	-	5.0	5	-	-	-	-
The Future's Estonia Party	-	-	2.6	0	-	-	-	-
Farmers' Party	-	-	1.5	0	-	-	-	-
Country People's Party (2003: People's Union)	-	-	**	**	7.3	7	13.0	13
Christian People's Party	-	-	-	-	2.4	0	1.1	
Russian Party in Estonia	-	-	***	***	2.0	0	0.2	0
Blue Party	-	-	0.4	0	1.6	0	-	-
Res Publica	-	-	-	-	-	-	24.6	28
Independence Party	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.5	0
Others	2.1	0	1.3	0	0.4	0	0.0	0
Independent candidates	4.3	0	0.3	0	1.5	0	0.4	0
Total	99.9	101	100.2	101	100.0	101	100.0	101
Turnout	67.8		68.9		57.4		58.2	

* – in 1995 electoral coalition 'Our Home is Estonia'

** – with Coalition Party (electoral coalition 'The Coalition Party and Rural People's Union')

*** – with Estonian United People's Party

Sources: Rose et al 1998, *Riigikogu valimised 2003*

³ The number of parliamentary parties appears to be lowest in 1995 in Table 1. However, the electoral coalition of the Coalition Party and Rural People's Union formed three factions in the parliament right after the elections.

Cartelization?

Volatility

Volatility is probably the most important indicator used for assessing party system change or stability (classic studies of Western Europe include Pedersen 1979, Bartolini & Mair 1990). It is a simple index calculated by summing the absolute values of changes in individual parties' vote shares divided by two. The index has been widely used for measuring the stability of Eastern European party systems as well (see e.g. Rose et al 1998, Krupavičius 1999, Tóka 1997, Korasteleva 2000). Here the volatility has on average been clearly higher than in the western countries (see Rose et al 1998, Sikk 2001), even though the latter has been increasing constantly after the 1960s (Pedersen 1979) and has become remarkably higher in the Post-Cold War era (the average volatility in 15 European constant democracies was 8.2 from 1950s to 1980s and increased to 12.6 in the 1990s, Mair 2002: 131; similar trend is confirmed by Dalton et al 2000: 39-41).

The volatility in Estonia was clearly below the Eastern European average until 2003, still being high compared to traditional democracies (see Table 2, disregard two rightist columns for a moment).⁴ However, 2003 brought with it significantly higher volatility, that was almost exclusively due to the rise of Res Publica (for the calculation of volatility indices in Estonia, see Table 6 in Appendix).

Table 2 Volatility in Estonia 1995-2003

	Volatility	Genuinely new parties (votes%)	Genuinely new parties (seats%)
1995	21.4	11.7	5.9
1999	21.0	5.5	.0
2003	31.0	26.6	27.7
Eastern European mean 1991-2000	26.1	11.7	5.0

Source: own calculations based on Table 1, for details see Tables 6-7 in Appendix.

Even though the volatility index is an important indicator of general party system stability, it does not differentiate between the instability among the existing parties and that caused by the emergence of new actors. While very low levels of volatility do

⁴ For a discussion on dealing with the splits and mergers and the method used for calculating volatility in this paper, see note below Table X in Appendix.

suggest that there are no significant new actors, high levels of volatility can be indicative either of changes among the already existing parties or the rise of new parties. Therefore, we turn next to an analysis of the success of genuinely new parties.

Genuinely New Parties

Apparently, not all the parties entering the parliament with a novel name are actually new. Thus, in 1995 the Reform Party, the Right Wingers and Future Estonia's Party contested elections for the first time, while the first of them was the reformed Liberal Democratic Party that contested the 1992 elections under the umbrella of Pro Patria⁵ and the two latter were split-offs from parliamentary groups. Similarly, the Country People's Party and the Russian Party in Estonia that appear for the first time in electoral statistics in 1999 were already represented in previous legislature through electoral coalitions. Thus, there is little genuinely novel in these, and their emergence in fact presents little change in the general party system, compared for instance to the Scandinavian landslides of Progressive Parties in the beginning of 1970s. Below I have chosen to define the genuinely new parties as the ones that are *not successors of any previous parliamentary parties, have a novel name as well as structure, and do not have any important figures from past democratic politics among its major members*. The last condition excludes participation by prime ministers and significant portions of cabinet ministers and members of parliament. It can be argued that only genuinely new parties can pose an authentic threat to the general party system stability and the cartel of parties.⁶

Despite relatively high levels of volatility and seeming instability of Estonian party politics, the change has actually been limited. The inflow of genuinely new actors into party politics was restrained until 2003 (see the two rightist columns in Table 2). In parliamentary elections of 1995 and 1999 the only genuinely new entity entering the legislature was the electoral coalition (and later faction) of ethnic Russian parties 'Our

⁵ Its new leader, Siim Kallas, was until then the president of the Bank of Estonia.

⁶ Fairly similar analysis of Western European countries is offered by Mair (1999), yet his definition of 'new parties' is more robust and applicable only to long-standing democracies – defined simply as parties that first began to contest elections after 1960. Some other accounts on 'new parties' however concentrate on the parties of 'new type' (i.e. green/left-libertarian, new-right or regional) or contrast them to very old ones (i.e. existing prior to the present regime, e.g. Mainwaring & Scully 1995, Tóka 1997).

Home is Estonia'. Its rise can be attributed to the fact that between 1992 and 1995 many ethnic Non-Estonians were naturalized and the share of Russian-speakers in the electorate increased substantially (total number of eligible voters in Estonia increased from 689,241 to 790,392 and by far the most of the rise can be attributed to naturalization). On the other hand, the parliamentary elections in 2003 caused a landslide in respect to the success of genuinely new parties – 27.7 per cent of seats won by Res Publica and 26.6 per cent of votes cast for them and some minor parties is among the most successful performances of genuinely new parties in Eastern European countries during more than a decade of democratic politics (see Table 7 in Appendix).

The high persistence (at least until 2003) of Estonian party landscape is also apparent in Table 3. Until 1999 the parties that were present in the first post-independence parliament filled almost all seats in the parliaments, and even the rise of Res Publica left three quarters of the seats to parties that were already present in 1992 (or their successors). Alternatively, only 18 per cent of the seats in the 1992 parliament were filled by parties that have left no direct heirs in Estonian parliamentary politics.

Table 3. Persistence of Parties in Estonian Parliament 1992-2003

	Percentage of seats held by parties that were present or had ...	
	precursors in the 1992 parliament	heirs in 2003 parliament
1992	100.0	82.2
1995	94.1	94.1
1999	94.1	94.1
2003	72.3	100.0

Source: Own calculations based on Table 1 and Table 6 in Appendix

2003 and the Rise of Res Publica

As noted above, the 2003 parliamentary elections brought with it unforeseen changes in Estonian politics. Even though it was the first time elections were contested by a party called 'Res Publica', the organization by the name had existed for a long time. It was established in 1989 as a right-wing non-party political youth organization. During the 1990s it had connections to Pro Patria and Reform Party – so that many of its members were active in these parties and the organization run at times their own campaign in favour of their members. It had also occasionally contested local

elections in smaller municipalities with own lists. However, Res Publica was never actively present in parliamentary politics prior to 2003. The party itself was established in December 2001, and before that it went through a substantial transformation. Most of its present members are new and its ideological image has come a relatively long way towards centre from the youthfully radical neo-conservatism or libertarianism it often used to have. Res Publica can fairly easily be classified as a genuinely new party – none of their representatives in the parliament were members in the previous one, and only two had any prior parliamentary experience. Also, both of their leaders since the foundation of the party were neither members of Res Publica nor any other parties before (Juhan Parts and Rein Taagepera⁷).

The triumph of Res Publica was preceded by the rise of New Era (another genuinely new party) in Latvia less than a year before. The reaction of prominent Estonian politicians to its success illustrated the presence of a kind of party cartel in Estonia. Both the former prime minister Mart Laar from Pro Patria Union and secretary general of the Centre Party Küllö Arjakas (no matter how far the parties are in domestic political matters) insisted that the Estonian party system is so much more consolidated that Res Publica (that was already on the rise) cannot replicate the New Era's success (Gunter 2002, Arjakas 2002) – only to be proven wrong in less than a year. In fact, Res Publica was already rather successful in the local elections of 2002 (shortly after elections in Latvia), ranking among the three strongest parties in three out of four largest cities and being the most successful party in several smaller municipalities.

Res Publica's campaign rhetoric was not particularly radical, but noticeably anti-establishment. One of their main pledges was for the introduction of 'new politics' to substitute the 'old politics' pursued by the established parties and characterized by unaccountability, suspicious political decisions, self-interest and sleaze. Doing that, the immaculate newcomer set itself apart from the rotten cartel of establishment. It

⁷ Taagepera was a presidential candidate for the Centre Party back in 1992, but left the party almost a decade before joining Res Publica.

also run on the most strongly anti-Savisaar⁸ platform – other parties hostile to him (Pro Patria and the Moderates) had discredited themselves in the government and its ideological antagonist (e.g. in tax issues) Reform Party was in an odd coalition with it. Doing that Res Publica probably managed to mobilize a portion of voters who would have otherwise abstained – the turnout that was expected to fall, slightly increased (see bottom of Table 1), even despite the local elections taking place just few months before (that would presumably cause some ‘voter fatigue’).

Cartelistic Institutions?

Party Financing and Electoral Campaigns

Estonian parties’ resources come from three principal groups of sources: private donations, public subsidies and membership fees, the latter being clearly minor source of income for main parties compared to the two former. Earnings from business (i.e. real estate, see Lewis 1998), that is a significant source of income for some parties with longer organizational history in Eastern Europe, does not constitute important source for any of the Estonian parties. The ex-communist party (The Social Democratic Labour Party) is much weaker here than in most other post-communist countries, and other parties have been established after the 1980s.⁹

Private financing rules have been relatively permissive in Estonia. Only contributions from publicly owned companies¹⁰ and (local) government institutions, as well as donations from companies and organizations abroad are forbidden. Parties have to submit reports of their campaign incomes and expenditures to the Electoral Commission In one month after each election (these are published at their web-site, <http://www.vvk.ee>). Yet, there are neither effective controls over the veracity of the reported sources of income nor the truth-value of the total sums of campaign

⁸ Edgar Savisaar (the leader of the Centre Party) is one of the most prominent Estonian politicians, and even though supported by many, highly disliked by even more. He has been accused by more or less all other parties of populism, leftism, corruption, autocratic leadership of the party etc. He left the national politics in 1995, following a scandal involving secret recording of his conversations with other party leaders, but returned shortly after. He is currently the mayor of Tallinn and his party was in the national government before the 2003 elections (both in alliance with the Reform Party).

⁹ Proceeds for business are in effect prohibited by the party law anyhow.

¹⁰ Except for stock market companies that are publicly owned in part.

expenditures. The sources presented in declarations have at times been suspicious – for example, in 1999 the Reform Party reported receiving 42 percent of its campaign resources from an obscure ‘R-Hooldus’, a company established by some of its leaders that had almost no turnover, and the cases are not limited to that. The declared total expenditures have sometimes been evaluated to be below the actual costs of commercial campaigns with similar extent. Besides donations from companies, some of the parties have relied on sizeable contributions from some of their wealthy top candidates or those on the top of their electoral lists – perhaps most notably the Country People’s Party in 1999, when nine of their top national candidates donated 100,000 kroons each (approximately 20 times the that time average monthly wage). In some cases, doubts have been cast over the genuine sources of donations from candidates – in addition to the abovementioned example, some of the Centre Party’s candidates donated 999 kroons in cash for several subsequent days during the local election campaign in 2002.¹¹

Public financing. Estonian parties have received donations from the state budget from 1996, although the provisions for it in the party law were set down already in 1994. Thus, the system of public financing is much more established than in the other Baltic countries (was introduced in Lithuania in 2000 and is still absent in Latvia, see Ikstens et al 2001). Eligible for income from state budget are the parties that are represented in the parliament – thus the effective threshold for public financing being the national electoral threshold of 5 percent. The subsidies are proportional to held seats in the parliament¹² and fixed in state budget, thus subject to annual changes. The donations come as regular grants and no special reimbursement for election expenditures exists; that stands out against the practices in most other new democracies in Eastern Europe (van Biezen 2000: 408, in Lithuania presidential contenders receive special donation from the state, see Ikstens et al 2001: 28). Some parties have therefore tried to smooth their finances by borrowing money on election years – in 2003 three parties borrowed in total 13.4 million kroons, compared to 1.1 million in 1999.

¹¹ From 2003, private persons may not donate more than 10,000 kroons per year in cash. From 1999, it is forbidden to receive single donations in cash exceeding 1,000.

¹² The fact that the number of seats in the parliament is taken as a basis, favours stronger parties as they are overrepresented due to the disproportionality of the modified d’Hondt formula.

Table 3. Total Donations from State Budget to Parties (millions of kroons)

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004*
Total donations	5	10	13.2	8.4	16	20	20	20	60

* – proposed in the draft state budget for 2004, 'Parteid saavad...' 2003.

Sources: Mikser 2001, State Budget Law 2003.

Table 4. Self-reported Expenditures on Electoral Campaign (millions of kroons)

	1995	1999	2003
Centre Party	0.933	7.906	20.374
Reform Party	2.319	5.117	17.048
Country People's Party / People's Union	1.476	2.924	6.670
Coalition Party		3.823	-
Pro Patria Union	1.228	5.019	4.264
The Moderates	0.845	3.618	2.905
Res Publica	-	-	18.223
The Right Wingers	1.204	-	-
Our Home is Estonia / United People's Party	0.576	1.018	1.039
Total (all parties & individual candidates)	9.759	29.112	71.225

Source: Electoral Commission.

The substantial increase in borrowing was due to the unprecedented expensiveness of the 2003 campaign – the total costs increased almost 2.5 times as compared to 1999 (see Table 4), and that does not include the costs of the most expensive local elections campaign ever just few months before national elections. However, the increase in state donations to the parties matched the increase in campaign expenditures – both in 1999 and 2003, the reported campaign costs for all parties were slightly less than a third of state budget allocations to parties these years.¹³ Thus, for most parties the public funds received during an electoral term covered in principle the outlays for campaign. Nevertheless, much of the total cost of campaign in 2003 was due to Res Publica, who had not received donations from the state budget, and thus state subventions covered actually more of the other parties' expenditures.¹⁴ That is not to say, of course, that parties have used all the income from the state budget for campaign purposes, but given that the electoral expenditures are a cue to parties' overall budget, it can be said that the reliance on public money has increased to a considerable extent.

¹³ While the subventions were relatively low in 1999 and public financing begun only in 1996, but the level of subsidies was higher just before elections in 1998.

¹⁴ For the Moderates, for example, who run a relatively modest campaign, but received considerable donations from the state budget, the campaign costs amounted only to less than a third of their income from the public purse since the last elections.

The electoral campaigns can be characterized as clearly capital-intensive in Estonia, dominated by ads in mass-media and large outdoors posters. There are no limits to campaign expenditures or restrictions on campaign forms – for example, parties can freely buy as much airtime on television or radio as they can afford.¹⁵ This tendency reached an all-time high in 2003, that led the parties to an ‘ads race’, where all major parties tried to outshine the others’ campaigns just by the length and number of TV-ads and quantity and size of their posters beside streets and on buildings,¹⁶ that led in turn to the escalation of campaign costs. The campaign of Res Publica stood somewhat out among the others as it used slightly more canvassing – but even doing that it was innovative in using capital-intensive methods (e.g. sending text messages to mobile phones).

Relatively popular public television and radio networks do not air commercials¹⁷ and campaign broadcasts are limited to special discussion programs there. However, public television has somewhat discriminated against the smaller parties (that are often also extra-parliamentary). Instances of that have included inviting more ‘small’ than ‘big’ parties to a debate program with equal duration and leaving smaller parties in a secondary studio for election-eve debate getting much less airtime than the main studio with fewer bigger parties. This adds to the general disadvantage of small/new vis-à-vis major parties, the latter getting nearly all of the media attention at other times, as already noted by Katz & Mair (1996: 529-30).

After 2003 parliamentary elections, a policy proposal supported by most of the parliamentary parties, has been made by the governing coalition to triple the public support for parliamentary parties, prohibiting donations from business companies at the same time and making some (yet unspecified) campaign restrictions (Coalition Agreement 2003, ‘Parteid saavad ...’ 2003). Ideas have been flowing in that direction for some time already. Somewhat surprisingly these have come foremost from the members of the Reform Party (Lang 2001, Aaviksoo 2001, Rask cited in Mikser 2001), which is generally in favour of free market policies and sceptical of any

¹⁵ Only active campaigning on actual election day is prohibited, but posters rarely are removed before that.

¹⁶ The posters of candidates on buildings reached or even surpassed the size of Soviet-time banners.

¹⁷ Public television does not air ads from July 2002.

government intervention. It is conceivably indicative of the perception among parties being parts of state rather than civil society, that the party which' *raison d'être* is pursuing liberal policies argues for increasing subsidies and restricting private initiative. In any case, the amendments will substantially increase the dependence of parties on the state for their resources – the state may in fact become more or less the sole supply of finances.

Membership

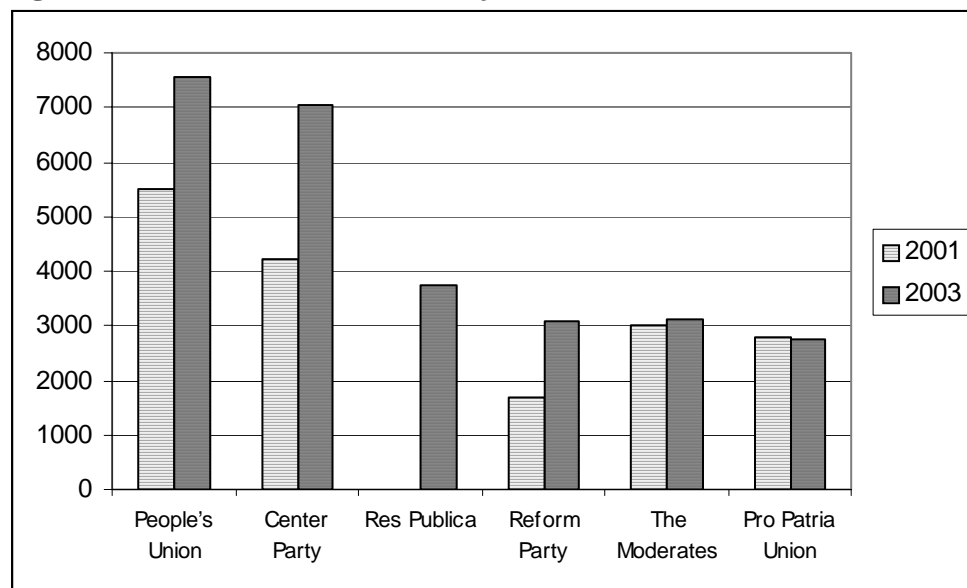
Establishing a party has been a demanding task since the introduction of party law in 1994. Only a party which has gathered a minimum of 1,000 members (approximately 0.12 % of electorate) can be registered and be eligible for contesting elections.¹⁸ Until 1996 the party legislation was even stricter as parties failing to win parliamentary representation in two consecutive elections were to be removed from the register. An exception for 1,000 members rule was made for the parties that were registered before the 1995 elections – their membership threshold was only at 200 members, they had to conform to the common requirement only by October 1998 (BNS 1997). Besides the membership threshold and the condition that the party may not have unconstitutional aims in its program, there are no other significant requirements for establishing a party.

The membership figures of Estonian parties are not particularly low and have been increasing substantially over the years, at least as reported by the parties themselves. Density of membership (members/electorate ratio) is not much lower than in the traditional democracies – in 2003 4.9 per cent of the eligible voters (14,400) were party members, the respective figures in the 1990s being 5.3 for 16 long-standing democracies and 7.2 for the Nordic countries (as reported in Scarrow 2000: 90). However, these are self-reported figures and their adequacy can be questioned. When membership lists were made public in 2002, it appeared that several (if not most)

¹⁸ However, the parties that have lost members and end up below the membership threshold do not get automatically removed from the registry, and thus there are some registered parties that in fact have fewer than 1,000 members. Additionally, individual candidates can contest elections, but their chances of winning are very restricted as they have to gather a quota's worth of votes in a constituency – so far none has succeeded in getting elected. As noted above, non-party-based electoral coalitions are forbidden now.

parties had included in their ranks many people who were not aware of their membership. In some cases, the number of voters for a party in 2003 was actually lower than their reported membership figure. Hence, the Russian Party in Estonia received 990 votes, but claims to have 1355 members. Anyhow, several Estonian parties do have more members than required by the party law. One explanation for that could be that members provide a loyal electorate in an otherwise un-partisan environment, and also help to mobilize other potential supporters ('vote multipliers', see Scarrow 1994: 47). Besides that, the bigger parties have been using their declared membership numbers for public image purposes – for instance, there has been a race between the People's Union and the Centre Party for the title of largest Estonian party. So, the members (or rather membership figures) become valuable also for campaign purposes, and that can partly explain the increase in the membership of most major Estonian parties (see Figure 1).

However, membership figures say little about the actual influence of members in the parties. As for resources, the membership fees do not constitute important source of financing for Estonian parties – all major parties have even not included membership fees in their declaration of campaign income, and in cases that has been done, the proportion of it in the total incomes is minuscule (Table 5). Certainly, the membership fees are probably also used for other purposes, but they are nevertheless rather insignificant. There are no clear signs that in any of the parties common members yield substantial political influence. Some parties have experimented with forms of direct member participation, which have not been that genuine instances of intra-party democracy at a closer look. Res Publica composed their 2003 constituency and national lists according to postal ballot of members, yet the members were assisted by 'recommendations' from central party headquarters; the Reform Party held primaries (that were open both to members and sympathisers) in the run-up for presidential elections of 2001, yet one of the candidates was a completely obvious favourite long before.

Figure 1. Number of Members, Major Estonian Parties, 2001-2003

Sources: Registry of Estonian Parties (2003), BNS (2001).

Table 5. Percentage of Reported Campaign Income from Membership Fees 1999-2003

	1999	2003
Centre Party	2.8	0.6
Reform Party	0.5	0
Country People's Party / People's Union	0.1	0
Pro Patria Union	0	1.2
The Moderates	0	0
Res Publica	-	0.3
Coalition Party	0.5	-
United People's Party	0	0

Source: Electoral Commission.

Other Regulations

Until 1999 parliamentary elections, both single parties and different electoral coalitions (including coalitions between parties and coalitions between other organizations) were allowed to present lists in national elections. The amendment concerning the exclusion of all other lists except for those representing single parties was passed by the parliament only shortly before elections (in November, elections taking place in early next March), and thus several parties run under another party's label – e.g. the Union of Pensioners and Families and the Rural Union candidates were running in the Coalition Party list, representatives of the Social Democratic Labour Party in the list of ethnic Russian United People's Party – to enhance their chances of passing national 5 percent threshold (all of the above examples were

successful in winning seats). Without notable exceptions this practice had vanished by 2003 elections.¹⁹

In addition to the ban on electoral coalitions that worsens the chances of smaller vis-à-vis stronger parties, the rules regarding the changes in parliamentary factions were amended prior to 1999 elections. From then on, each party running the elections may only form one faction in the parliament. After 1995 elections the winning electoral coalition ‘The Coalition Party and Rural Union’ formed three factions in the parliament – one of those contested the subsequent elections on its own (the Estonian Party of Rural People). The amendment was designed to inhibit parties splitting and it has had the anticipated effect as there have been no significant splits in Estonian parties since – the rules have been in fact so inflexible that the faction of the significantly shrank Coalition Party existed in the parliament as an entity some time after it was officially disbanded. Some of its original members had moved to other parties, yet were not allowed to officially belong to other factions and were categorized as not belonging to any factions. In effect, these rules help well sustaining the *status quo* of the party system.

Contained Competition?

One of the characteristics of the cartel party phase pointed out by Katz & Mair is the contained competition between the parties forming the cartel (1995: 19-20). The limitedness of competition is difficult to assess. Apparently, the differences in details and rhetoric are really strong, so that accusing the political rivals in corruption and representing particular business interests is not uncommon. Yet, the differences in the views of major Estonian parties concerning the general political and economic system or international issues are minor. Neither have particular government policies been much dependent on the composition of coalitions – that may leave the voters with an impression that despite sometimes strong disagreements in rhetoric and electoral pledges, it does not matter much who wins and who loses. Also, the political

¹⁹ Before 2003 local elections the governing parties attempted to prohibit all other lists but single parties contesting local elections, but the amendments to the Law on Local Government Elections was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

adversaries have now and then voiced approval of persistence of the parties on the other end of the political spectrum. Hence, in 1999 Edgar Savisaar and Mart Laar (of the Centre Party and the Pro Patria Union respectively, fiercest opponents among the party leaders then) both outlined a significant place for the other's party in their vision of the future of Estonian party landscape (BNS 1999).

Moreover, all major parties have participated in national governments²⁰ and the coalition patterns have often been innovative (i.e. not altered between two distinct blocks). Rather surprisingly, Estonia witnessed a rather stable government coalition between the Reform Party and the Centre Party from 2002 to 2003. They managed to work together despite remarkably different stances on tax policy that was at the same time probably the most heated topic in the electoral campaign. Their friendly cooperation in government on one hand (agreed not to touch issues of disagreement) and fierce electoral struggle raised doubts whether the latter was primarily designed for drawing attention away from the other contenders (especially the newly emerged Res Publica).²¹

Discussion

The above discussion on Estonian party system leads partial support for cartel party thesis. The country has developed relatively strong 'cartelistic institutions' – advanced system of public party financing highly favourable to existing parties standing out among them. Until the 2003 parliamentary elections the institutional framework seemed to have clear cartelizing effects – despite relatively high electoral volatility, the parties in the political scene remained to large extent the same and the newcomers were remarkably unsuccessful. Still, the success of Res Publica in 2003 seems to undermine the conclusion. Even though it had its connections to the established parties, it led a campaign marked by opposition to pre-existing parties and its ranks were for the most part 'untainted' by politicians coming over from other parties.

²⁰ Excluding the ethnic Russian parties. Nevertheless, they have coalesced at different times with nearly all other parties in Tallinn city government, which is politically weighty and has often influenced national coalition politics.

²¹ The parties fought the 'tax-battle' already during 1999 campaign. Their co-operation has proved even more enduring in Tallinn city government, as it has outlasted the change of national government following parliamentary elections that left the Centre Party to opposition benches.

At the same time, the ‘cartelistic institutions’ seem to become stronger rather than weaker after Res Publica has become the major partner in government. That is best indicated by the proposed reform of party financing regime that would make it even more inhospitable towards newcomers, if not completely cutting short their chances. Indeed, if the proposed regime would have been in place already some years ago, it would have likely hindered the emergence of Res Publica itself. Therefore, it seems like Res Publica has broken the cartel to make it stronger after becoming a part of it – that is a sign of willingness of successful new parties ‘to join the establishment that they initially decried’ (as argued about some Western European parties seeking the support of new middle classes by Katz & Mair 1995: 24).

The Estonian case may help to advance the cartel party model further. The 2003 elections demonstrated that no matter how cartel-friendly the institutions, parties that break it can and do emerge. The success of Res Publica suggest that it is probably only possible if the emerging parties can more or less freely substitute for the public money unavailable for newcomers. In other words, public party financing could be a necessary condition for the cartelization of a party system, but it may not be a sufficient condition. Rather, it is the resource structure of parties that matters – public financing is effective in preserving the cartel as long as it constitutes substantial enough share of total party finances. If parts of society are willing and able to substitute for the donations from the public purse and the level of popular dissatisfaction is high (as might be indicated by high level of abstentionism in Estonia), new parties can be successful in breaking the cartel. Rather, a restrictive and strict party-financing regime saturated by public funds can be hypothesized to approach a sufficient condition for an effective cartelization of a party system.²²

The proposed reform of Estonian party financing regime can significantly strengthen the party cartel. Undoubtedly, that would bring with it higher degree of persistence of the party system, as new contenders will have hard time finding any funding that could allow them to compete with state-subsidised campaigns of parliamentary

²² That entails that the resources used by parties are for the most part material – a condition that is relatively well fulfilled in post-communist countries. Parties with relatively limited and/or weak membership and feeble civil society (that are both rather characteristic of the countries in the region) help to limit the availability of non-material resources (free labour, members mobilizing voters etc).

parties. On one hand, it will probably bring more stability that could be beneficial for the political system. On the other hand, there are significant dangers to democracy in fairly artificially closing the party competition. First, the parties in the cartel can simply become comfortable with their position and become less accountable. Second, the popular satisfaction with the regime and democracy might decrease in the long run if (new) popular demands have a greater difficulty in materializing in new parties – yet the existing parties have incentives to pick up new issues for their own advantage (to defect from the cartel, as argued by Kitschelt 2000). And last, new contenders hoping to make it to the national politics, have to catch the eye of the voters. If their material resource base is restricted, they might have to substitute campaigning and building up enduring party organizations with extremist or populist rhetoric for mobilizational purposes (pointed out by Klíma 1998: 87).

Appendix

Table 6. Electoral Volatility in Estonia 1995–2003.

	1992	1995	1999	2003
Better Estonia / Estonian Citizen		-3.3	-3.6	
The Future's Estonia Party			-2.6	
Estonian National Independence Party	}	0.9	8.2	-8.8
Fatherland Union				
Estonian Reform Party			-0.3	1.8
Right Wingers' Party				
Estonian Farmers' Party		1.5		
Moderates		-3.7	2.7	-8.2
Safe Home / Coalition Party	}	12.0	-16.8	-3.8*
Pensioners' & Families' League				
Farmers' Assembly				-0.5
Estonian Country People's Party / People's Union				1.9
Estonian Centre Party		-0.4	9.2	2.0
Estonian Entrepreneurs Party				
Left Alternative / Justice / Social Democratic Labour Party		0.7		
Estonian United People's Party (Our Home is Estonia)		5.9	-0.1	-3.5
Russian Party in Estonia				-1.8
Fourth Power (Independent Royalists)		-8.9	-0.8	
Estonian Greens				
Estonian Blue Party		0.4	1.2	-1.6
Estonian Christian People's Party			2.4	-1.3
Res Publica				24.6
Independence Party				0.6
Others and independent candidates		-4.8	0.3	-1.5
Volatility		21.3	24.1	31.0

* – existence was completed but some of the most prominent members left active politics

Estonia as well as other Eastern European countries has witnessed many splits and mergers of parties since independence. The approach taken to these when calculating volatility can influence the indices substantially. Principally, three main tactics could be used: the split or merged parties could be considered as one in the election where they ran separately (1), taking the largest of parties when running separately as the basis for calculation against the vote share when running together (2, the votes cast for the small(er) partner(s) are considered floating and hence volatility increases), or the merged or split parties could be detached from their predecessors or successors (3).

Obviously, all three approaches have important shortcomings. The third approach inflates the volatility scores unnaturally. The first one is used below, its main advantages over the second being the following:

- 1) It is more appropriate in cases where both splits and mergers have occurred by pooling the vote shares of the relevant parties on both elections.
- 2) The index should be foremost a reflection of the sum of individual vote changes. In the case of splits and mergers the voters who support both the constituent parts and the joint party/electoral coalition are more likely to perceive themselves as vote-retainers than vote-changers. In a situation where the faithful have no other place to go, their seeming vote transitions should not increase overall volatility.
- 3) The second approach might be appropriate when splits and mergers have a clearly identifiable major partner. Many splits and mergers in post-communist countries have been more complex, including two or several more or less equal partners.
- 4) Pooling is also advisable, as the splits and mergers might sometimes be of a tactical rather than substantive nature.
- 5) Most attempts to measure volatility in traditional democracies have been closest to the first approach (e.g., Bartolini & Mair 1990) and using that makes the volatility scores comparable.²³

Table 7. Volatility and Genuinely New Parties in Eastern Europe 1992-2000

		Volatility	Genuinely new parties (votes%)	Genuinely new parties (seats%)
Slovakia	1994	13.6	7.2	.0
Romania	1996	15.1	14.8	.0
Czech Republic	1998	15.6	5.9	.0
Bulgaria	1991	18.5	11.5	.0
Bulgaria	1994	19.1	13.7	5.4
Poland	1997	19.3	4.2	.0
Slovakia	1998	20.2	12.5	8.7
Czech Republic	1992	20.4	29.8	23.0
Estonia	1999	21.0	5.5	.0
Slovakia	1992	21.4	9.0	.0
Estonia	1995	21.4	11.7	5.9
Hungary	1994	23.7	8.1	.3
Slovenia	1996	23.8	4.8	.0
Bulgaria	1997	24.6	4.9	.0
Slovenia	2000	24.6	6.1	4.4
Czech Republic	1996	27.3	6.8	.0
Romania	2000	29.8	9.3	.0
Poland	1993	30.0	3.8	.0
Slovenia	1992	30.5	20.6	13.3
Hungary	1998	32.7	6.3	.3
Romania	1992	34.0	14.5	8.5
Lithuania	1996	35.9	18.7	2.1
Latvia	1995	36.6	16.4	8.0
Latvia	1998	45.2	22.8	22.0
Lithuania	2000	48.5	22.9	22.0
Mean 1991-2000		26.1	11.7	5.0
Std. Deviation		8.95	6.96	7.53

Source: own calculations, mostly based on Rose et al 1998, for methodology see note below Table XX in Appendix and Sikk 2001.

²³ It should also be borne in mind that for any volatility scores to be meaningful their calculation should be based on data of good quality. Fortunately, sufficiently reliable electoral results are easily available in print (Rose et al. 1998) and over Internet for post-communist countries. Moreover, the evolution of individual parties must be mapped carefully. If a relatively popular party that is in fact a continuation of a previous one is counted as new, it can inflate the volatility levels misleadingly. For tracing the evolutionary paths of the parties, Rose et al. (1998) has been used mostly, complemented by encyclopaedias on parties (Day et al. 1996, Szajkowski 1994) and various reliable Internet sources.

Table 8. Donations from State Budget to Parties 1996-2002 (mill of kroons)

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Centre Party	0.792	1.585	2.092	2.038	4.438	5.545	5.545
Pro Patria Union	0.396	0.792	1.046	1.255	2.852	3.564	3.564
Reform Party	0.941	1.881	2.483	1.524	2.852	3.564	3.564
The Moderates	0.297	0.594	0.784	1.146	2.694	3.366	3.366
Coalition Party	0.891	1.783	2.353	0.853	1.110	1.386	1.386
Country People's Party / People's Union	0.297	0.594	0.784	0.559	1.110	1.386	1.386
United People's Party	0.198	0.396	0.523	0.451	0.951	1.188	1.188
The Right Wingers	0.248	0.495	0.653	0.123			
Rural Union	0.446	0.891	1.176	0.221			
Party of Pensioners and Families	0.297	0.594	0.784	0.147			
Farmers Union	0.099	0.198	0.261	0.049			
Russian Party in Estonia	0.099	0.198	0.261	0.049			
Total	5.000	10.000	13.200	8.415	16.008	20.000	20.000

Source: Mikser 2001.

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