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After the elections held in March 2023, the Parliament of Estonia saw six parties securing seats. The government was established through a coalition comprising the liberal Reform Party (Renew Europe), the centrist Eesti 200 (no MEPs currently), and the Social Democrats (S&D). The opposition consists of the now Russophone Centre Party (also Renew Europe), the conservative Fatherland (European People's Party), and the populist radical right and Eurosceptic EKRE (Identity and Democracy).

European Parliament (EP) elections have been relatively muted affairs in Estonian politics, despite the population of Estonia consistently showing overwhelming support for EU membership. That support reached a [historical high of 86% in 2022](#) and has remained on this level since then. This sentiment is reflected across the political spectrum, with EKRE being the most vocal critic of EU policies but not advocating for leaving the Union, and other parties being generally supportive of the EU.

All six parliamentary parties are vying to secure one or several of the seven seats allocated to Estonia in the European Parliament. Out of the current MEPs, only one – MEP Andrus Ansip from the Reform Party – [is not running as a candidate](#), reportedly because of clashes with Prime Minister Kaja Kallas. This places the incumbent MEPs in a favourable position, as they can assert their familiarity with EU affairs and credibly claim to advocate for the interests of Estonia and their respective constituencies. As a result, the dynamics of the 2024 election are anticipated to closely resemble those of the 2019 EP election, with almost the same line-up of leading candidates and likely similar results, despite significant shifts in the global political landscape since then.

A non-start to the campaign

Ahead of the election, it is difficult to point out what has been European about matters in Estonian politics. The outcome of the 2023 national elections solidified the dominance of the Reform Party, making it nearly indispensable for forming a government. The coalition established with

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the Social Democrats and Estonia 200 was predicted to be stable, likely remaining in power for the full parliamentary session – already quite a feat, as rarely has Estonia had one coalition throughout the four-year term. However, the nose-dive in the Centre Party's numbers, from 16 seats to six in a year due to infighting, has further strengthened the coalition, because it has left the conservative Fatherland as the sole viable alternative for the Reform Party if it wished to change partners. Yet the growing poll numbers that Fatherland has enjoyed since the elections, chipping away supporters from both the Reform Party and EKRE, has diminished their prospects of joining the government, because the ruling party prefers partners less popular than they are.

The coalition mathematics are important to explain the dominant characteristic of current Estonian politics: there is strong polarisation between the coalition and the opposition, exemplified by a remarkable level of obstruction in the parliament. Nevertheless, there is little expectation that the power positions will significantly change in the next three years. Russia's war in Ukraine constitutes the most important international issue in Estonian politics, as all parties have securitised the topic; however, there is a broad consensus over how the war is framed in Estonia: as a threat to both European security at large and to Estonia in particular. Thus, the parties disagree over nuances but not the substance of the ramifications that the war and its outcome would have for the future of Estonia.

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is present in Estonian politics, then, but connected with domestic concerns, such as the state of the economy and strategies for revitalising growth and discussions on the substance of tax increases. Furthermore, since the 2023 elections there has been a simmering debate over whether residents of Estonia holding Russian and Belarusian citizenship should retain their voting rights in municipal elections. It is raised again from time to time because it enables Fatherland to position itself as the leading opposition party in national politics.

Naturally, the European level is also present in political discourse, especially in relation to the climate issues connected to forestry and renewable energy sources, but explicit connections to the European context remain limited. For instance, there are almost no mentions of the *Spitzenkandidat* process or discussion on how the top jobs in the EU will be reshuffled after the elections. Sometimes, the question of whether Estonia's prime minister, Kaja Kallas, would be nominated for a top-level position is raised, but even in these discussions, there is a prevailing sense that the decision will be made elsewhere.

Therefore, less than a month before the election, the public interest in the EP elections had risen to just lukewarm. The parties' campaigns slowly started to gain momentum only in late April and early May, but not to a degree comparable to national elections (the EP elections in 2019 occurred just few months after the parliamentary elections, thus one campaign shifted into the other and a fair comparison cannot be made). This lack of campaigning cannot be attributed to a dearth of media interest, as outlets have been publishing opinion pieces, hosting candidate debates and providing information about procedural details. Furthermore, the incumbent MEPs began their re-election campaigns in

late 2023, investing in advertising and content marketing in traditional and social media. However, it appears that the parties themselves show little interest in highlighting the significance of EP elections to the public, instead preferring to focus on domestic affairs.

The competition of the incumbents

So far, the primary question has been which parties might manage to secure two of the seven seats – and if any would even gain three. In contrast to national elections, the EP elections offer all parties the chance to exceed or fall short of their position in national politics. This is due to the significant role of prominent candidates, as Estonia forms a single electoral constituency, and parties use open lists. Moreover, due to disproportionality in allocating seats between the member states and [the relatively low turnout](#) previously seen in Estonian EP elections, a party or candidate only needs approximately 34,000 votes to secure a seat.

This provides an opportunity for prominent candidates to gain additional mandates for their parties. Historically, the Social Democrats have been successful in enlisting their popular politicians to play a better hand than their national support would otherwise suggest. Similarly, the favourite this year, according to the opinion polls, is the incumbent MEP Marina Kaljurand from the Social Democrats. Hence the party will likely secure two seats, possibly the second taken by the other incumbent MEP, Sven Mikser. Likewise, the incumbent MEP Urmas Paet from the liberal Reform Party is individually popular and has a more visible election campaign than many other candidates, giving the Reform Party [the second-best chance](#) for obtaining two mandates.

Their profile is heightened by all three being former foreign ministers and often commenting on international affairs, now especially on issues related to the war. Furthermore, the EP is still seen as a place for foreign affairs by Estonian voters and often by politicians as well (Paet, Mikser and MEP Jaak Madison from EKRE are all members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs), thus candidates well versed in foreign affairs have an advantage in the debates. Defence and security are also prominent, especially after 2022, giving an edge to Fatherland's MEP Riho Terras, a former chief of the Estonian Defence Forces who is immersed in defence industry topics. Yet the prestige of international affairs should not be overstated – Estonia 200, despite having the current foreign minister, Margus Tsahkna, as the lead candidate, will struggle to even get a seat. The party's popularity tanked in April 2023 because of a scandal over misappropriation of charity funds designated to aid Ukraine's war efforts, and it has not bounced back since.

This result would leave Fatherland, EKRE and the Centre Party with one seat each, most probably filled by their incumbent MEPs; although some uncertainty remains as the decline in the support of the Centre Party offers hope to the other two conservative parties that it would be to their benefit. However, this forecast should be taken with a pinch of salt, because the opinion polling gives a close ranking to the four most popular parties and small differences in voting can translate into different outcomes. This is an election of candidates, not of parties, resulting in a high degree of uncertainty of how seats will be distributed.

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The primacy of security

The significance of Russia's war in Ukraine is reflected in the party programmes published for the EP elections, as all manifestoes start with the security of Estonia, while other topics, such as economic growth, migration, climate issues or regional development are, to some extent, securitised. The Reform Party, Fatherland, Social Democrats, the Centre Party and Eesti 200 call for the establishment of a defence commissioner. Furthermore, these parties support EU enlargement, emphasising the importance of admitting new members through a merit-based process, not solely as a political gesture, but without erecting unjustified barriers. All parties underline strengthening defence capabilities and supporting the defence industry. Likewise, border security is a top priority for parties across the spectrum, from EKRE to the Social Democrats, reflecting Estonia's position as an EU border state.

The Reform Party is hoping to repeat its success in last year's elections by prioritising the same themes: security and independence. Specifically, they want to utilise Eurobonds to invest in the European defence industry. Additionally, the Reform Party advocates for the extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) to foreign policy matters concerning sanctions, human rights violations and organised crime. While MEP Urmas Paet has voiced strong support for [the extension of QMV](#) in the past, there is no consensus in Estonian politics on this question and the government maintains that the right of veto should be retained.

Fatherland addresses similar themes in its programme but given its role as an opposition party, a significant portion of the document is dedicated to critiquing the current government. Security is a priority topic both for the Fatherland party and their frontrunner MEP Riho Terras. Thus, in the programme they advocate for increasing defence expenditure to 3% of GDP for all EU member states. They emphasise member states' sovereignty over migration policy, support bolstering the Frontex budget and advocate for securing agreements with North African countries to curb migrant arrivals in Europe. In addition to Ukraine and Russia, they underscore [other potential global threats](#), notably highlighting China as a long-term strategic challenge to democratic nations.

Freedom, fairness and security stand as the cornerstone themes for the Social Democrats. They assert that in the upcoming elections the future of Estonia and Europe is at stake, because of the Russian war of aggression and the global upheavals stemming from economic, health and climate crises. With a pro-EU, pro-NATO and pro-transatlantic relations stance, [the Social Democrats' platform](#) closely mirrors that of the other parties and reflects the prevailing consensus on Estonian foreign policy.

[EKRE calls for](#) the EU to revert to its roots as a union of nation-states. They are in favour of the repatriation of migrants to their home countries, including Ukrainian refugees once the war concludes, and oppose all EU migration quotas. Like other parties, they advocate for increased efforts to enhance the defence industry and support joint procurement of armaments.

To sum up, the most remarkable aspect of the 2024 EP elections in Estonia is the lack of anything remarkable, despite the political upheavals in Europe and around the world in recent years. Barring any unforeseen events, four to six of the next MEPs will be incumbents, which means they are the most experienced candidates, but this has also dampened the emergence of a vibrant political debate.

