

# **Refugee crisis and the populist & radical right in Estonia and Latvia**

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# Why Estonia and Latvia?

- Overwhelming emphasis on the 'return to Europe' after regaining independence (1991)
- *Restoration* nationalism and the symbolic '*decolonization*' from the Soviet era
- A greater stress on the politics of consensus but also a relative state of *fragmentation* across both political landscapes
- ✓ *Virtual* politics of (anti-)immigration and their persistent impact in both societies

# Main questions

- Why do the *virtual* politics of (anti-) immigration generate an apprehension among the political elites as well as within the society in Estonia and Latvia?
- How does the populist & radical right in these two countries seek to gain *political capital* out of the public reservations towards the admission of refugees?

# The refugee question in Central and Eastern Europe

- The European Commission: A *proportional* relocation plan (EU refugee-quota scheme)
  - *Core versus periphery* implications (e.g. Germany 'versus' the Visegrad Four)
  - *Cultural* Euroscepticism and a wave of Islamophobia across Central and Eastern Europe
- ✓ NB. Minuscule presence or absence of Muslim war refugees and/or other migrants
- ✓ BUT: The populist and radical right capitalize on identity-politics and biopolitics (i.e. The *virtual* politics of anti-immigration)

# The refugee question in Estonia: General background

- Estonia agreed to receive 550 relocated persons within a 2-year period (September 2016)
- Approximately 161 of them were based in the country by September 2017 (Ministry of Interior)
- A refugee assistance centre has been functioning in the locality of Vao (Lääne-Viru county, northeastern Estonia)

# The refugee question in Estonia: Political reactions

- The Centre Party/*Eesti Keskerakond*: Submitted a rejected petition to the *Riigikogu* for a referendum on the maximum number of refugees that Estonia can accept (September 2016)
- Social Democrats/SDE: Sensitive to minority and LGBT issues but reserved over the EU refugee-quota plan
- The Reform Party and Pro-Patria Union (IRL): Both parties prefer 'case-specific solutions' to the automatic relocation of refugees by quota across the EU

# The refugee question in Latvia: General background

- Latvia voices its reservations over the EU quota arrangement and opts for *voluntary* measures, instead (PM Laimdota Straujuma, 2015)
- Initial proposition of 40-50 units/Latvia finally commits to admitting 531 refugees within two years (766 in total)
- 367 refugees admitted in the country (January 2018 figures)/BUT: No reliable data is available
- ✓ Refugees complained about infrastructural deficiencies and the scarcity of short-term employment options
- ✓ A fraction of refugees attempted to move to Germany/Sweden for better opportunities (again: no data)

# The refugee question in Latvia: Political reactions

- The two main parties in the government coalition (*Unity*: conservative/liberal and the *Farmers & Greens Union*: agrarian conservative) insist on 'case-specific solutions' instead of the automatic relocation of refugees by quota across the EU
- ✓ Particular stress on these cases that refugees who were initially allocated to Latvia chose to move to the west (mainly Germany)
- ✓ The *Harmony* party largely shares this apprehension to refugee quotas

# Populist versus radical right-wing parties

- The importance of *political origins, evolutionary trajectories* and patterns of (*active*) *political engagement*
- Category 1: Populist right-wing parties usually are byproducts of *top-level* formation processes and strive to promote their political cause(s) principally via the parliamentary and other democratic institutions and procedures (e.g. Sweden Democrats, Finns Party, FPÖ)
- Category 2: Radical/identitarian right-wing parties represent the culmination of *bottom-up* formation processes spearheaded by a political (occasionally *semi-paramilitary*) nucleus, therefore, regularly opting for a more *militant engagement* (e.g. Jobbik, Our Slovakia, Golden Dawn, Ataka)
- Euroscepticism + *nativism* + anti-establishment rhetoric
- ✓ Regional geopolitics + identity & memory politics

# EKRE: Political origins and trajectory of evolution

- EKRE garnered 8.1% of the vote in the latest elections (March 2015) and stands as the third most popular party in most public surveys (2017-2018)
- The evolution of the merger between the People's Union of Estonia and the Estonian Patriotic Movement (2011-2012)
- An *oligarchic* party in terms of intra-party structure
- Endorsing a *civic* outlook
- Drawing inspiration from the Nordic populist right (e.g. Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats)

# EKRE: Policy principles and fundamental standpoints

- High emphasis on *regional geopolitics* and *identity & memory* politics
- *Euroscepticism* (geopolitical, economic, and sociocultural)
- Interlinking demographic issues and immigration with regional security and national survival
- ✓ Brandishing the image of Estonia's genuinely '*anti-establishment*' party that stands for the '*average*' Estonian (interview with Martin Helme, 12/10/2016)
- ✓ Situated somewhere between the populist and the more radical/identitarian right-wing parties in CEE

# National Alliance: Political origins and trajectory of evolution

- NA garnered 16.61% of the vote in the latest elections (October 2014)/member of the ruling coalition
- The evolution of the merger between the (national conservative) 'For Fatherland and Freedom' and the (more 'youthful'/anti-establishment) 'All for Latvia' parties (2010)
- A *horizontal* and decentralized party in terms of intra-party structure
- Endorsing a *civic* outlook
- ✓ NB. A longer trajectory of grass-roots activism in comparison to EKRE

# National Alliance: Policy principles and fundamental standpoints

- Bauska Declaration (2013): Rejecting multiculturalism, 'cultural Marxism' and Euro-federalism
- Preoccupation over demographic issues, immigration, regional security and safeguarding the Latvian language
- A relatively higher concern over depopulation and demographic stagnation in comparison to EKRE (interview with Edvins Šnore, 13/10/2017)
- Interlinking financial protectionism with national survival (interview with Raivis Zeltīts , 13/10/2017)
- ✓ Situated somewhere between the populist and the more radical/identitarian right-wing parties in CEE

# The Estonian and Latvian party-systems: Qualitative differences

- A softer and more accommodating version of the *ethnic democracy* model (Agarin 2016)
- A relatively higher stress on socioeconomic issues
- ✓ Inclusion of the Centre Party into the government (autumn 2016)
- ✓ Informal *cordon sanitaire* vis-a-vis EKRE

- Stricter and more consistent conformity to the model of *ethnic democracy*
- Outward migration+demographic stagnation+regional security
- ✓ Inclusion of the NA into two consecutive governments (far right *entryism*)
- ✓ *Cordon sanitaire* vis-a-vis Harmony

# EKRE and the *virtual* politics of anti-immigration (1)

- Politicization of the refugee question and its sociocultural implications
  - Active *mobilization* of supporters against 'Islamization' (e.g. 'Fortress Europe' network, February 2016)
  - The wave of sexual assaults in Cologne (New Year's eve, 2016): The shape of things to come for the entire Continent if Germany and other *core* states insist on an 'open borders' immigration policy towards the Muslim world
- ✓ Embedding this campaign into a *Eurosceptic* and anti-establishment frame

# EKRE and the *virtual* politics of anti-immigration (2)

- Situating the *present* inside the context of the *past*
- Capitalizing on the politics of *identity & memory* and public anxieties over a new '*colonization*', following that which took place during the Soviet era
- Allusions to the Soviet era and the Russification campaign interweave with references to the 'threat of uncontrolled immigration' (equal pre-occupation with the spectrum of 'East Slav' immigration to Estonia; interview with Martin Helme)
- Correlation between EKRE's capitalization on anti-refugee rhetoric, terrorist incidents, and its increase of popularity during the first half of 2016 (Tuuru-Uringute AS public survey and *Erakonnad* monitoring service)

# Popular outlooks on the refugee question (Estonia)

- Opinion poll by the Estonian Government Office (June 2015): 42% of the sample objected to the admission of refugees
- Opinion poll by Tartu University (November 2015): 39% of the sample harbored no objections to the settlement of refugees in Estonia
- Opinion poll by the Estonian Government Office (December 2016): 30% of the sample were critical/highly critical towards the admission of refugees
- ✓ Estonia remains among the European societies which are mostly reluctant to the admission of refugees (Gallup polling agency, July-August 2017)

# National Alliance and the *virtual* politics of anti-immigration (1)

- Programmatic insistence on the principles of the Bauska Declaration
- Rejecting the EU fixed quotas arrangement/Insisting on the primacy of state legislation over the control of immigration
- ✓ Capitalizing on the politics of *identity & memory* and the public anxieties over a new '*colonization*', following that which took place during the Soviet era (interview with Edvins Šnore, 13/10/2017)

# National Alliance and the *virtual* politics of anti-immigration (2)

- Framing the refugee question inside Latvia's demographic realities (low birthrate + outward migration flows + the persistent impact of the latest economic crisis)
- Interlinking opposition to the refugee quotas with opposition to the *federalization* project within the EU
- ✓ Softer Eurosceptic tones in comparison to EKRE (interviews with Edvins Šnore and Raivis Zeltīts)
- ✓ Opportunity structure for NA to promote its standpoints from *within* the halls of power

# Popular attitudes on the refugee question (Latvia)

- Opinion poll by the TNS polling agency (July 2015): 55% of the sample stated that Latvia should not accept any refugees at all
- Opinion poll by the Latvijas Fakti polling agency (September 2015): 69% of the sample objected to the admission of refugees from Middle East and Northern Africa
- ✓ Opinion poll by the SKDS polling agency (September 2015): Armed conflict/persecution is a legitimate reason for someone to come to Latvia (70% of the respondents)
- UNHCR opinion poll (August 2016): 66% of the sample would not like to have refugees as neighbours
- ✓ Opinion poll by the Gallup polling agency (April 2017): 57% of the sample stated that Latvia should not accept any Syrian refugees at all

# Final remarks

- *Identity & memory* politics (and their appropriation) combine in space with demographic insecurities and narratives of *national survival*
- An overall preference to *case-specific* solutions over the fixed quotas arrangement
- EKRE and NA embed anti-refugee rhetoric into a *Eurosceptic* and anti-establishment frame
- ✓ Resonance with public outlooks on the refugee crisis
- ✓ Opportunity structure for NA to promote their standpoints from *within* the halls of power

**Thank you for your attention! 😊**

