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Meteoric Rise: Res Publica in Estonia, 2001-2004

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Author

Taagepera, Rein

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CSD Center for the Study of Democracy

An Organized Research Unit
University of California, Irvine
www.democ.uci.edu

Four years ago I would have told anyone who cared to listen that Estonia had too many parties. In a study by Grofman, Mikkel and Taagepera (2000), we also noted that no major new player had entered the field since 1995¹. We characterized the party constellation in the early 1990s as kaleidoscopic but gave figures to show that the party system in Estonia seemed to stabilize. Yet, one year after the publication of that article, a new party, Res Publica, was formed and did unbelievably well. A mere 15 months after official formation, it carried the parliamentary elections and formed a coalition government, in which it holds the prime minister's position. In the case of parties that include practically no former politicians, this might be the second-fastest rise to government leadership, next to the Popular Movement for Simeon II in Bulgaria, 2001.

If my scholarly prediction four years ago proved erroneous, I have no one to blame but myself, because I agreed to become the founding chair of this new party. This was a measure of my unease about the country's social condition -- and also of my inherent optimism and belief that something could be done. My tenure was brief, and I am no longer involved in the party leadership except as an elder statesman who is consulted occasionally.² Thus, I describe the meteoric rise of Res Publica from a detached insider's vantage point, combined with that of a political scientist whose main research has been in the effects and determinants of electoral systems (see e.g. Taagepera and Shugart 1989 and 1993). I wish I had time to study the theory of new party formation in more detail while I was engaged in building one, but these were hectic times. So, I am catching up now, and this presentation is part of it. I hope to contribute something based on my experience.

The issues addressed are the following. Is the rise of Res Publica unusual in the world context? Where is Res Publica located in the typology of new parties? Which were the resources that enabled it to succeed? And, most tantalizing, what will be its future? Is it a stable planet or a passing comet? Let us begin by reviewing the background of its rise and its first year in government.

¹ Prepared for the *ecpr* 2004 Joint Sessions of Workshops, 13-18 April, Uppsala Universitet, Workshop 6: New Parties in Government. A November 2004 postscript has been added.

² I have lived outside Estonia since 1944 and in the United States since 1961. For the last twelve years I have spent close to half of my time in Estonia, teaching at the University of Tartu. Twelve years ago I ran a respectable third in presidential elections, as candidate of what is now the Center Party (Taagepera 1993). I left that party in 1994 due to the egocentric opportunism of its leader and remained unaffiliated with any party until 2001.

The Context

The first ten years after restoration of Estonia's effective independence, in 1991, were successful in many aspects.³ In 1994, the Soviet/Russian army finally withdrew from Estonia. A new Constitution adopted in 1992 still stands. Four parliamentary elections were held. If three transfers of power are taken as criterion of stable democracy, Estonia satisfied it by 1999. In fact, by 2002 it had seen 9 different cabinets under 7 different prime ministers, belonging to 6 different parties.

The economy nose-dived at first but began to recover in 1992, as a new currency was pegged to the German mark (and now to the euro). Privatization of the economy reached a steady state, with major energy production still under indirect state control. Budgets were balanced and foreign debt was minimal. Banks either went bankrupt or were so profitable that they were bought up by Scandinavian banks. The tensions between ethnic Estonians and Russian-speaking colonial settlers remained at a low level. Estonia was the first country within the former Soviet boundaries to be invited to talks on joining the European Union.⁴ By most accounts, Estonia was the greatest success story among the post-communist countries of Europe.

And yet, Estonia faced the tenth anniversary of independence restored with a feeling of disillusionment. Economic success was accompanied by social decay. People were overworked -- or hopelessly out of work, now that many Soviet-time skills had become obsolete and the industrial northeast had become a rust belt. Health and education deteriorated, alcoholism and tuberculosis became more prevalent, street children appeared, and AIDS was barely under control. Socio-economic uncertainties kept the birth rate way below the replacement level. Economic inequality reminded one of Latin America. Very coarsely, one-third of the population was clearly better off than under the Soviets, another one-third saw themselves as worse off, and the central one-third was wondering how much the freedom to go vacationing in the Canary Islands was offset by lack of money for doing so.

The tenth anniversary of independence restored made many ponder whether the so-called transition hardships were to remain for the rest of their lives. The notion arose of "two Estonias" -- the haves and the have-nots.

Disillusionment extended to politics. Participation in the local elections of 1999 dropped to 49 %. The six parties in the parliament looked much the same, except that the ethnic Russian party kept changing names and falling apart. Social dissatisfaction could not take a socialist route, because socialism had been utterly discredited by Soviet misrule. So was party membership -- many saw belonging to any party as akin to the former lifelong commitment to the monopolistic Communist Party. And party leaderships heeded little the wishes of their members.

The 1999 parliamentary elections resulted in a three-party coalition cabinet where the Reform Party favored unlimited free enterprise regardless of its social consequences, the Fatherland Union stressed ethnic nationalism, and the Moderates were so moderately social-democrat that it hardly showed in government policy. The growing dissension

³ "Building Democracy in Estonia" was the title of a piece I published in *PS: Political Science & Politics* (Taagepera 1991) just as the newly restored state was admitted to the United Nations. This piece might be a good starting point for taking stock of how building democracy in Estonia has fared meanwhile.

⁴ Membership in both the European Union and NATO is scheduled for spring 2004.

within the coalition brought a surprise in presidential elections of 2001: The largely ceremonial post went to the former head of state of Soviet Estonia, now affiliated with the rural-based populist People's Union. The main bugaboo that held the three-party coalition together was apprehension of the personalistic leader of the relatively leftist Center Party. Yet in late 2001 the Reform Party flipped, joining the Center Party in the city hall of Tallinn, the capital. Soon they formed a new two-party government. Ideology was superseded by either pragmatism or opportunism, whichever term one prefers.

My broad diagnosis of the recent unease is that Estonians have tried to join the western world by adopting its institutions but avoiding changing themselves. In terms of human propensities such an approach is quite understandable, but it has reached a stage of diminishing returns -- hence the growing worries. My recipe is briefly the following: "Foreign rule has changed us, and now we must change ourselves so as to become ourselves again."

In which ways has Soviet occupation altered Estonian attitudes and habits? It has frozen in some attitudes typical of the West 60 years ago -- subordination of women, for instance. Ironically, communism has destroyed communal cooperation, so deep-set in Estonian peasant life, replacing mutual help with dependence on the state. It reduced mutual trust. When the totalitarian state collapsed, naked individualism took its place, possibly reducing interpersonal trust even further (Taagepera 2002). Corruption inherent in totalitarianism blossomed in this vacuum. Compared to other countries with the same cultural-religious background, communism tends to reduce elite integrity (the opposite of perceived corruption) by 40 % (Sandholtz and Taagepera 2004). Estonia is less corrupt than its neighbors east and south, but its Protestant background enhances the psychological disconnect. The lack of interpersonal trust pervades society, ranging from family life to top political institutions. It boosts alcoholism and contributes to early death, especially for men, whose mean life span is 65 years. My solution, proposed in a recent book (Taagepera 2001), is more trust, more involvement, more grass-roots cooperation -- which is more revivalist preaching than a political program.

This is the context for the rise of the new Res Publica party (RP). Its driving force was a group of young people (mostly under 30) who believed in private enterprise but had come to realize the need for social correctives. They stressed openness in intra-party dealings and finances, and they composed a code of political ethics. I did not know how much attention they paid to my preaching, but overlaps were sufficient to make me join the incipient party in July 2001. At the moment of the official founding of the party (8 December 2001), they badly needed a chair who was publicly visible in some political way and yet not tainted with communist and post-communist politics. I agreed to serve when the first period in office was shortened to half a year, which actually became 9 months (up to August 2002).

This period involved break-neck internal organizing, membership recruitment, getting our identity clearer to ourselves and to the society at large -- and arguing among ourselves in the process. Emphasis was on participation, intra-party democracy and building viable party organizations in all districts. This was an incubation period, during which support in opinion polls fluctuated between 4 and 10 %. Given the large share of undecided, the polls meant that RP could be expected to surpass the legal 5 % threshold in parliamentary elections. But a breakthrough in popular opinion was held back by the uncertainty about who would be my more permanent successor.

As my term was ending, Res Publica struck lucky for a second time when the state controller Juhan Parts, 35, was persuaded to give up his non-partisan post, join RP and run for chair. All other potential leaders would either have been lackluster or would have risked internal strife. Parts took over two months prior to October 2002 local elections, which may have been an optimal time span, combining novelty with sufficient time for getting established. His energetic leadership paid off. A party that formally did not exist one year earlier netted 15 % of the votes, making it the second-largest party in Estonia, surpassed only by the Center Party. Electoral participation rose from previous 49 % to 52 %. My guess is that without Res Publica running, participation would have dropped to about 47 %. In other words, one-third of Res Publica's votes may have come from those who otherwise would not have voted -- and this was our greatest victory.

The sudden success in local elections made RP look like the major center-right counterweight to the center-left Center Party, whose personalistic leader, Edgar Savisaar, appealed to many but scared many more. Relentlessly, RP proclaimed that a vote for RP would be the only way to keep Savisaar out of government. It paid off in parliamentary elections, but it also narrowed down Res Publica's options during the post-election coalition talks.

In the parliamentary elections of 2 March 2003, Res Publica broke even with the Center Party. The results are shown in Table 1. Participation was 58 % -- 1 percentage point higher than in the 1999 parliamentary elections. Without Res Publica's entry, it most likely would have continued to dive. The effective number of parties continued to decrease, despite the addition of Res Publica, because now both largest parties were larger than previously.⁵ Apart from the stunning emergence of Res Publica, the other marked development was the fading of ethnic Russian parties. Russophones form maybe 15 % of the national electorate. In 1995 and 1999, the ethnic leaders managed to cobble together fragile alliances so as to surmount the 5% electoral threshold. By 2003, some ethnic leaders had joined the mainstream parties, an alliance did not materialize, and the most successful Russophone party, United People's Party, fell far below the threshold.

The rift between Res Publica and the Center Party left the third-ranking Reform Party in a kingmaker's position. Despite their bluntly rightist platform, they had proven that they could work with the center-left Center Party, by doing so in 2002. After month-long haggling, Parts became prime minister in a coalition cabinet of center-right Res Publica, Reform Party, and the centrist-populist People's Union. The latter's position in the coalition seemed weak, because it could be replaced by the center-right nationalist Fatherland Union. As a result, the Reform Party pushed its program forcefully, taking advantage of its parliamentary experience in the negotiations with the RP newcomers.⁶

⁵ The effective number of parties is $N=1/\sum p_i^2$, where p_i is the vote or seat share of the i -th party.

⁶ All of the RP members of parliament were novices. However, a few had administrative or local government experience. Among the initial core, Ken-Marti Vaher had been on the staff of state controller Juhan Parts. He became Minister of Justice, at 28. Urmas Reinsalu had been the office head of the President of the Republic, Lennart Meri. He became the chair of the parliament's constitutional committee, also at 28. Taavi Veskimägi, present Minister of Finance, had been employed at this ministry and was elected in October 2002 to a small town council. Among those who joined during the year preceding the 2003 elections, businessman Tõnis Palts had joined Fatherland 2 years earlier and had been briefly the mayor of Tallinn. He became Minister of Finance but eventually resigned so as to avoid an impression of conflict of interest while the Tax Office (subordinate to the Ministry of Finance) investigated his old business dealings. Marko Pomerants, who became Minister of Social Affairs, had been the head of a county administration. On the whole, the Res Publica MPs were a motley crowd. They included Nelli Kalikova, an

Table 1. Estonian parliamentary election results of March 2, 2003
(with the 1999 results in parentheses)

Party	% Votes	Seats
Center Party	25.4 (24.4)	28 (28)
Res Publica	24.6 (--)	28 (--)
Reform Party	17.7 (15.9)	19 (18)
People's Union	13.0 (7.3)	13 (7)
Fatherland Union	7.3 (16.1)	7 (18)
Moderates	7.0 (15.2)	6 (17)
United People's Party	2.2 (6.1)	0 (6)
Coalition Party	--- (7.6)	--- (7)
Others	2.8 (7.4)	0 (0)
TOTAL	100.0	101
Effective no. of parties	5.4 (6.7)	4.6 (5.5)

Prior to the referendum on joining the European Union (September 2003) few politicians wished to rock the boat. Only Savisaar rather suddenly began to make anti-EU noises, putting the Center Party under severe internal strain. Joining the EU was approved by 66 % of the voters.

By November, the People's Union came to feel that the Reform Party priorities consistently overrode theirs, including some goals common to the People's Union and Res Publica (such as increasing the tax-free part of personal income). They presented Parts with a rather brusque ultimatum. Parts told them they could leave and began talks with the Fatherland Union. Yet the latter showed no interest in salvaging a coalition agreement in which they had no part. Either the People's Union had to be appeased or the coalition would be reduced to a rightist minority cabinet vulnerable to attempts to form a centrist majority coalition. Parts shifted, and the Reform Party reluctantly agreed to delay its pet project of reducing the flat tax on the taxable portion of income to 20 %, from the present 26 %.

Ironically, the revolt by the People's Union, initially rebuked by Parts, brought the main tenor of the coalition closer to Res Publica's own program. The Reform Party no longer was in the driver's seat. The elections to the Europarlament (where Estonia will have 6 seats) in June 2004 will be the next test of party strengths. The next year's budget talks will be difficult, given the changes introduced by joining the EU. On the other hand, Res Publica has by now acquired some experience in parliamentary and governmental practices. I'll now shift to analysis of Res Publica as a new party.

AIDS prevention activist with Russian home language, several pop culture figures, communal leaders and physicians. There was one political scientist, geopolitics specialist Eiki Berg, a *dotsent* at the University of Tartu.

Is Res Publica unique?

How often does it happen in the democratic world that a brand new party achieves that much power so quickly? Paul Lucardie (2000) counts as successful a new party that wins one seat or a few in the parliament -- and such instances are few in western Europe. To obtain 24.6 % of the votes and 27 % of the seats at the first try, as RP did, is visibly unreal in a mature political system, short of major upheavals such as World War II.

Newly democratizing countries, of course, are more volatile. Half a year prior to RP's triumph in Estonia, a newly formed party won the elections in neighboring Latvia too. Was Latvia's New Era Party a "genuinely new party", with previously untested leaders, as defined by Allan Sikk (2001), rather than a recasting of existing politicians, an occurrence not uncommon in Central Europe? The central founder of New Era, Einars Repše, had previously headed the Central Bank and thus was a public figure, but not party political. I have no clear picture of the incidence of seasoned party politicians in his party. New Era received 23.9 % of the votes in 2002. The resulting coalition cabinet headed by Repše lasted one and a half years, breaking up by early 2004. A new coalition bypassed New Era.

Res Publica was definitely "genuinely new". The founding chair, Taagepera, had been away from party politics and state affairs for some 7 years. He was co-opted by an already functioning central office based on the leadership of a previous debating club. These club leaders had not belonged to political parties. The next chair, Parts, was previously state controller, a non-partisan state office like Repše's. Although Parts had longstanding contacts with the main figures in the RP office, he joined the party only after it had proved its survival ability. In contrast to Repše, Parts was not among the founders of the party.

The speed and extent of Res Publica's success pales, however, when compared to that of a genuinely new party in Bulgaria. The pre-communist tsar of Bulgaria, Simeon II, returned in April 2001, after an exile of 55 years, and founded the Popular Movement for Simeon II. Barely two months later, the coalition that congealed around this Movement won the parliamentary elections (17 June 2001), netting a whopping 42.7 % of the votes and obtaining exactly one-half of the seats (120 out of 240). On 24 July 2001, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha became prime minister of Bulgaria (Harper 2003). He still survives.

In comparison to Res Publica, Bulgaria's new party was clearly personalistic. When excluding such parties, it would seem that RP has few competitors in terms of speed and extent of success.

To what type of new party does Res Publica belong?

In his overview entitled "Prophets, Purifiers and Prolocutors", Paul Lucardie (2000) proposes an approach "Toward a theory of the emergence of new parties". Prophetic parties articulate a new ideology or a new way of thinking, such as environmental concerns or opposition to immigration. Thomas Rochon (1985) calls them mobilizers, but this term does not differentiate them from Lucardie's next type, the prolocutors, who articulate the practical interests of some previously neglected group, without any special ideological content. Purifying parties offer a third type, called challengers by Rochon (1985). They decide to adhere to an existing ideology when they deem that an existing

party has deviated from it. Naturally, they largely consist of former members of that other party.

Plenty of intermediary cases occur. A superficially new ideology may be an old one in a new clothing. Novel and existing features can be mixed. Rochon (1985) considers personalistic parties a separate type.

Let us try to classify the new parties I have mentioned. New Era in Latvia seems a mix of prophetic and purifying. Simeon's is a personalistic party acting as prolocutor for the impoverished majority, proposing an 800 days program for escape from misery (Harper 2003). The 800 days are now over, and some progress may have been made, given the government's survival. Classification is difficult in the case of Res Publica. If they are prolocutors for a segment of the population, then which one is it? Could it be the entire people, in analogy with Simeon? If they are prophetic, then for which new ideology? My correspondence with Lucardie lead to the following.

The very name Res Publica hints at public interest, the *intérêt général* neglected by the existing particularistic parties. The first thing the youthful initiators of the prospective party stressed when recruiting me in spring 2001 was that the Center Party's vision was narrowly social, while that of the Reform Party was narrowly financial; they supposedly aimed at joining the two. By these considerations, they could fit among the purifiers, despite the absence of a classical "pure" ideology. The reason is that Lucardie distinguishes between two subtypes of purifiers: the extremists, and "bridge parties" who aim at bridging the ideological chasms when the existing parties tend to strain the society excessively. The founding of Res Publica certainly coincided with heightened nastiness among the existing parties, albeit for personal rather than ideological reasons.

Thus, Res Publica might be characterized as a purifying bridge party. This classification fits in with the perennial and well-founded griping that RP lacks a clear ideological visage. It could also explain its success, despite lack of such visage -- or precisely thanks to that lack. This characterization applies to RP during the period of its rise. How success could alter RP is another matter.

Members times Money times Visibility

What were the resources that enabled Res Publica to win? Lucardie (2000) observes that what a new party needs is sufficient membership, financial support, and visibility. These alone will not guarantee success, but without each of these success is impossible. Social scientists have a bad habit of resorting to addition of all sorts of factors, when multiplication actually is needed. This observation applies here too. Even the largest conceivable membership will not bring success, given utter absence of money -- and vice versa. Lucardie (2000) stresses that each of the three factors must be present to a sufficient degree. This is what a multiplication expresses:

$$\textit{Prospect of success} = \textit{Membership} \times \textit{Financial Support} \times \textit{Visibility}$$

A successful new party often starts out as a non-party. It may be a pressure group, a political club, or a social movement the joining of which does not look like a big deal. It also does not exclude belonging to an existing party. If the decision is made later on to become a party, then this previous phase supplies a ready-made core of members.

This is precisely how Res Publica started, as a discussion club. The club had members, a longstanding structure, and a leadership able to decide on whether to become a party. Upon official founding of the new party, those club members who were members of existing parties partly stuck with their old party, partly left it for the new one. The other club members largely remained members, by conviction or by inertia, giving the new party an instant core of members. However, a large portion of the founding party members had joined the club merely half a year prior to official party foundation, a period during which the intention to become a party was manifest. Why did they join? They visibly sensed, as mentioned earlier, that Estonia had gotten on the wrong track and had to escape from it. But how did the potential new members come to know about the organization? For this, money and visibility were needed.

There are two ways in which a new party can receive funds and similar support (including contacts and skills, by some accounting). Local or nationwide administrators can start a party top-down, using (legally or illegally) the labor and services of public employees. Grass roots parties, on the other hand, may depend on the structure and the limited financial means of an existing association, magnified by the enthusiastic activity of some of the members. Res Publica profited both from the existing structure of the club and from enthusiasm, but an indispensable extra ingredient was one that Lucardie (2000) does not seem to mention -- the support by some business circles.

Why did some business circles support the creation of a new party? One businessman, in particular, was an essential initiator. His name was Olari Taal. During my tenure as chair, I stressed the need to keep any individual supporter's share down to at most 10 % of Res Publica's income, so as to avoid excessive dependence. It was not easy to reap in sufficient support from elsewhere so as to keep Taal's contribution below if not 10 % then at least 12 % of the total. At the very beginning his share must have been much higher. And a major argument for getting support by other businessmen was that Taal already did. But why finance a fledgling new party? Those who wish to buy influence or access can do it more directly through existing parties. The practice is widespread in the world for major corporations to contribute to all serious parties, though not to an equal extent, so as to have access regardless of who wins. But why invest in a new party?

One can offer all sorts of unsavory reasons, especially when one does not intend to evaluate critically whether they can hold water. But on my part I'll propose farsighted egoism as a possible factor. The fortunes rapidly amassed in the murky 1990s could evaporate with equal speed, if social instability continued or even worsened -- as it looked around 2000 or 2001. The need to secure existing wealth outweighed the desire for risky new opportunities to increase it. The existing parties had fallen in a rut that exacerbated social problems. Hence, sanitation of the society called for a new party. One may add the further possibility that, like George Soros, a person may become bored with accumulating wealth and find it more challenging to use it for social purposes, especially in the atmosphere of Estonia 2000-2001. However, so as to make it harder for the cynics, I'll limit myself to the hypothesis of farsighted egoism.

Visibility as a separate factor may surprise. It might be thought that, given sufficient money, visibility can always be purchased. But it isn't that simple. Lucardie (2000) presents the example of the rather well-financed Natural Law parties in Western Europe and North America of the 1990s that failed nonetheless. The Dutch Socialist Party had plenty of money and thousands of members, but five elections went by without

their winning a single seat, until they finally succeeded in 1994. The press will not take a new party seriously until a threshold of visibility is reached, and paid advertisement does not convince until the press starts to play along. Why did the Estonian press take Res Publica seriously right from the official foundation moment on (and actually even much earlier) when it had ignored earlier new parties in the late 1990s, such as the Christian Party or the intellectual-oriented Blue Party?

Res Publica made its entrance at a propitious moment. Its official foundation coincided with the last days of the triple coalition (Fatherland-Reform-Moderates), and the looming new coalition of Reform and Center Parties struck many as an unholy alliance. Thus, people were receptive to the idea of a new and possibly more constructive party. Yet on the other hand, the ongoing power struggle overshadowed the RP founding congress in the press and thus hurt the visibility of RP, who had put much effort into advertising its congress.

The RP visibility was undoubtedly enhanced by the evident support of Lennart Meri, former president of Estonia (1992-2001), who attended and spoke at the RP founding congress (but did not become a member). But let us assume that Meri had attended the founding meeting of some follow-up of the Blue Party. Public opinion and the press would have yawned and noted that the ex-president has become queer. Meri could contribute to Res Publica being taken seriously only because RP was already being taken seriously. The public was willing to take more note of new enterprises thanks to the crisis of (self)confidence that prevailed in 2000-2001, but only up to a limit.

I can describe my own first impressions, in spring 2001, of the twenty-five-year-olds who transformed the club into a party. Businesslike pragmatism. Ambition. Thinking things through and carrying them through. Social concerns expressed in a rightist framework, but without the sterile indifference toward the poor that characterized the Reform Party. It could be play-acting, but if so, then it was good acting, which gradually molds the actor himself. Maybe such impressions were shared by many, although both the press and people in the street asked, with good reason: "What is your real message?" This is what Juhan Parts asked me as late as in June 2002, two months before taking the plunge, giving up his state controller's position and the concomitant accumulated pension.

Charisma made Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha prime minister of Bulgaria, and charisma is usually a very personal thing. Is a collective charisma possible that carries a movement along regardless of the identity of its formal leader?

Planet or comet?

Is Res Publica a durable planet on Estonia's firmament, or is it a passing comet? It remains to be seen. It can stop affecting politics in two different ways: by vanishing as an organization, or by transforming itself so as to become indistinguishable from the existing parties. As chair, I stressed both in my accession and exit speeches that RP had a 50-50 prospect of succeeding mechanically but losing its soul in the process. After all, the previously existing parties hardly intended to become what they have become.

To what extent can RP change the existing political culture, and to what extent will it be house-broken into the existing political style? It already has altered a few aspects, while manifestly foundering in some others. In winter 2001/02 the very founding of RP moderated existing political discourse, because the established parties realized that

continued mudslinging would not shift votes among the establishment but give a boost to the newcomer. Res Publica introduced an intra-party code of ethics unique in Estonia and intended to require its future coalition partners to adhere to it. This requirement didn't survive a single day when RP actually had to cobble together a coalition. Parties used to pack the lucrative boards of state-owned enterprises with their own leaders. Instead, RP promised to appoint politically neutral specialists, but once in power, the RP leaders appointed themselves.

Party leaders used to control candidate ranking on the ballot, which matters in Estonian elections. In contrast, Res Publica introduced intra-party primaries, putting pressure on other parties to do the same. Ranking candidates in general elections according to membership preferences is rare anywhere. Only about 25% of the Western European parties follow this practice (Bille 2001, Table 1). It is also debatable whose power is increased by intra-party primaries. LeDuc (2001) maintains that it actually weakens the local leaders, by allowing the central leadership to bypass them in its appeals to the members, and Katz (2001) and Hopkin (2001) are of the same mind.

This was definitely the case in intra-RP elections. The rules gave each member a number of votes roughly equal to one-half of the positions to be filled. E.g., for the ruling board of 20 (excluding party chair and vice-chairs), each member had 10 votes. Even if a member's first preferences might be the local leaders, she was likely to give her remaining votes to candidates promoted by the central leadership. The latter, receiving lukewarm support from all across the country, would crowd out the regional candidates. My attempts to reduce the number of votes per member were skillfully sidetracked. The central leadership's ability to reach members and bypass the local leaders is enhanced in the age of e-mail. Instead of costly and slow mailings, the push of a button enables him who has the full membership list to reach all those who have e-mail addresses -- meaning at least two-thirds of the RP membership. They receive about 5 central messages per week.

The lowest blow struck by Res Publica is the proposal, likely to be passed by the parliament, to prohibit political contributions by corporate bodies. Instead, parties would be funded by the state proportionately to their representation in the parliament and local councils -- with zero funding for parties not yet represented. In other words, RP proposes to prevent any future new party from making use of the strategy used by RP itself. Restricting business involvement in financing politics is a worthwhile endeavor, but the shift is self-serving in the case of Res Publica. Worse than that, it may prove to be stupid, for reasons to which I'll come.

What is the outlook for RP regarding mechanical success and failure? Could it lose the next elections in as spectacular a way as it won them in 2003? And how resilient would it be in the face of even a modest setback typical of a party that carries the brunt of governmental responsibility? A wave of heightened expectations carried Res Publica to its present position, which means that disappointment could be severe. The risk of missteps is enhanced in the case of a party with no previous parliamentary practice. However, the riskiest first year is soon over.

The ideological position of Res Publica is still fluid. Is it more centrist or more rightist? Both wings exist in the leadership and, indeed, in the minds of individual leaders. Which way will RP be seen to tilt in practice? It is in coalition with the right-wing Reform Party, which has a track record of achieving its goals while shifting the

blame for unpopular measures on its partners. I suspect that the bulk of RP voters are centrists -- otherwise they would have voted for the Reform party. If RP veers to the right -- or is seen to do so -- will they follow suit or look for other options?

As seen in previous Table 1, the coalition partners of the Reform Party in 1999-2002 suffered heavy reverses in 2003. Fatherland Union went from 18 seats down to 7, and the Moderates from 17 to 6. They have survived, because an established party has core supporters who have been with the party for many electoral ups and downs. But if a newly established party loses in popularity, this trend may become self-reinforcing. If RP should drop from 28 seats to 10 in the elections of 2007, would it have the resilience to survive? Even if it does, it would be reduced to a fraction of the state financial support enjoyed by its more successful competitors. Then RP might well curse the moment it prohibited business contributions.

Conclusions

In their study of "Fission and fusion of parties in Estonia, 1987-1999", Grofman, Mikkel and Taagepera (2000) observed that six of the seven major parties of the late 1990s had distinct core constituencies, contributing to their survival:

... the newly wealthy for the Reform Party, the *nomenklatura* wealthy for the Coalition Party, Estonian nationalists for Fatherland, Russian nationalists for the United People's Party, poorer people for the Center Party, and the rural population for the Country People's Party [present People's Union -- RT]. ... Only the Moderates risk being torn apart...

In the next four short years, one of the seven parties vanished (the Coalition Party) because the *nomenklatura* wealthy became indistinguishable from the newly wealthy. The Russian party fell far below the legal threshold of representation because ethnic cleavage lost its salience beyond anyone's expectations. So much for core constituencies. Yet, the lack of a core constituency kept hounding the Moderates, who recently renamed themselves Social Democrats. Whether this change can wean the working class from the Center Party remains to be seen.

Like the Moderates, Res Publica does not have a clear core constituency. As newness and promise of quick visible change wear off, an open, participatory style remains the only distinct focus -- provided that Res Publica can maintain it in the face of external success. Indeed, intra-party democracy may be an early casualty, as leaders concentrate on solving nationwide conundrums. Structures that form overly fast may lack resilience in the face of adversity. Much depends on whether the young leaders can learn from their mistakes. Res Publica may prove to be a permanent addition to the Estonian party landscape, but it cannot be taken for granted.

Postscript, November 2004

Rather than altering my text of April 2004, a postscript is added, so as to address some of the questions (shown in *italics*) posed in the concluding part ("Planet or Comet?") of the main text. This way, one can see to what extent the political landscape changed within the subsequent 6 months. By fall 2004, Res Publica looked like a passing comet rather than a permanent new planet in the Estonian party constellation.

"Could it lose the next elections in as spectacular a way as it won them in 2003?"

It did. Res Publica's declared goal in the elections for the Parliament of the European Union (13 June 2004) was 3 out of the 6 seats allocated to Estonia, but it failed to win a single seat. Its vote share dropped to 7 %. The Social Democrats (former Moderates) won 3 seats, and one seat each went to Reform Party, Center Party and Fatherland Union. Res Publica was cut off from European politics.

Res Publica's leaders explained the debacle in terms of Social Democrats running an unusually attractive foreign affairs person. But a poll carried out one week later by Tartu University's Department of Political Science showed a deeper shift. Among those who voted for Res Publica in 2003 and also participated in the Euroelections, only one-fifth voted again for Res Publica. As many as three-fifths voted for Social Democrats, and one-fifth went for various other candidates, including the non-party Greens. When asked for their preferences in hypothetical parliamentary elections, only one quarter of former RP voters voiced continued support for Res Publica. Another quarter preferred Social Democrats, and nearly one-half said they would stay home. Indeed, Res Publica plummeted to as low as 5 % in subsequent opinion polls. Remarkably, all this erosion happened without any major scandal having taken place. So what went wrong? An arrogant governing style plus an insidious shift to the right were to blame.

"I suspect that the bulk of RP voters are centrists -- otherwise they would have voted for the Reform party. If RP veers to the right -- or is seen to do so -- will they follow suit or look for other options?" The RP leadership did veer to the right, and its voters did look for more centrist options. Back in 2002, Res Publica had filled a void at the center right. Among the existing centrist parties, the Moderates were too mushy, Fatherland was too nationalistic, Center Party was its leader's personal fief, and People's Union was rural-oriented. In contrast, Res Publica projected a decisive, pragmatic, participatory and urban alternative. It had advertised *"social concerns expressed in a rightist framework, but without the sterile indifference toward the poor that characterized the Reform Party. It could be play-acting, but if so, then it was good acting, which gradually molds the actor himself."* It did turn out to be play-acting that faded after victory in parliamentary elections. Res Publica's campaign for Euroelections carried a shrill anti-Social Democrat message that backfired.

The surprising part is that, after defeat in Euroelections, the leadership did not return to centrist play-acting that had served it so well.⁷ To the contrary, in September

⁷ As early as in April, I told a party leader that, in the upcoming Euroelections, I intended to vote for Social Democrats as the closest approximation to what Res Publica's centrist program had promised. It turned out

2004 they activated talks of a merger of all right-wing parties, which sounded like a fire sale. *"The ideological position of Res Publica is still fluid. Is it more centrist or more rightist? Which way will RP be seen to tilt in practice?"* In its anti-socialist rhetoric, it now sounds more rightist than the Reform Party. The businesslike pragmatism I observed among the core of young activists three years ago increasingly passes through a rightist ideological filter.

"Like the Moderates, Res Publica does not have a clear core constituency. ... An open, participatory style remains the only distinct focus -- provided that Res Publica can maintain it in the face of external success." It has not been maintained. Intra-party democracy has become a facade. Have paid party employees meddled in intra-party elections, phoning up members, advising for and against specific candidates? I cannot prove it. But *"the push of a button enables him who has the full membership list to reach all those who have e-mail addresses."* This has been used to the fullest so as to promote rightist views and exclude the centrist. It has led to Pyrrhic victories. At party meetings the leading core gets what it wants, but in Euroelections party supporters and even members stayed home or voted for those accursed Social Democrats.

Res Publica *"can stop affecting politics in two different ways: by vanishing as an organization, or by transforming itself so as to become indistinguishable from the existing parties. As chair, I stressed both in my accession and exit speeches that RP had a 50-50 prospect of succeeding mechanically but losing its soul in the process."* It has lost it. It no longer matters for the quality of Estonian politics whether RP vanishes or survives.

"And how resilient would it be in the face of even a modest setback typical of a party that carries the brunt of governmental responsibility? If RP should drop from 28 seats to 10 in the elections of 2007, would it have the resilience to survive?" With the RP core talking merger with the Reform Party, the question becomes moot. An actual merger is made unlikely by present imbalance: While RP has many more seats in the parliament, the Reform Party has double the RP support in opinion polls. The Reform Party can wait.

"Structures that form overly fast may lack resilience in the face of adversity. Much depends on whether the young leaders can learn from their mistakes." As yet, they aren't recognizing that they have made any mistakes.⁸

"Res Publica may prove to be a permanent addition to the Estonian party landscape, but it cannot be taken for granted." Its permanence has become highly questionable. Moreover, it no longer matters. It was a 50-50 risk, from the beginning, that

I had plenty of company! At the party assembly held two weeks after the Euroelections, I proposed a declaration of solidarity with all centrist forces, explicitly including the Social Democrats. In response, several of the top decision makers claimed there was no such thing as a center-left position, all leftists being extremists. My motion was not put to vote.

⁸ Only Olari Taal, the party's financial godfather, acknowledged in an interview that "Professor Taagepera was right when he warned us that it would be extremely dangerous for us if we win too many seats in the parliament and join the government" (*Eesti Päevaleht*, 17 September 2004).

it would lose its purpose. In the face of such odds, one does one's best and isn't surprised when things do not work out.

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