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Meteoric Trajectory: The Res Publica Party in Estonia

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Formed in 2001, Res Publica won the Estonian parliamentary elections in 2003, and its leader became prime minister. It failed to win a single seat in the European Parliament in 2004 and was down to 5 per cent in opinion polls in 2005 when it dropped out of the cabinet. The founding chairperson of the party analyses here the causes for Res Publica's rapid rise and fall, reviewing the socio-political background and drawing comparisons with other new parties in Europe. Res Publica was a genuinely new party that involved no previous major players. It might be characterized as a 'purifying bridge party' that filled an empty niche at centre right. Its rise was among the fastest in Europe. For success of a new party, each of three factors must be present to an appreciable degree: Prospect of success = Members \times Money \times Visibility. Res Publica had all three, but rapid success spoiled the party leadership. Their governing style became arrogant and they veered to the right, alienating their centrist core constituency. It no longer mattered for the quality of Estonian politics whether Res Publica faded or survived.

Key words: new parties; Estonia; Res Publica; rightist politics

Democratization includes developing a workable party system. Around 2000, I would have told anyone who cared to listen that Estonia had too many parties. A study by Grofman, Mikkel and Taagepera¹ also noted that no major new player had entered the field since 1995. 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 this study a new party, Res Publica, was formed and did unbelievably well. A mere 15 months after official foundation, it carried the parliamentary elections and supplied the prime minister for a coalition government. Apart from the Popular Movement for Simeon II in Bulgaria 2001, this may have been the fastest rise to government leadership among parties that included practically no former politicians.

If our scholarly prediction proved erroneous I have no one to blame but myself, because I agreed to become the founding chairperson of this new party. This step was a measure of my unease about the country's social condition – and also of my inherent optimism, my belief that something could be done. My tenure was brief, and thereafter I have been a rank-and-file member.²

This study describes Res Publica's meteoric trajectory from the unusual vantage point of a political scientist who was more than a 'participant observer' in two

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respects. First, rather than just observing, I affected significantly the party's policies. Second, I was not there to gather research materials. It was genuine – an attempt to promote more open politics and participatory democracy. New parties has not been my main field of academic research, which has focused on the effects and determinants of electoral systems.³ When suddenly engaged in building a new party, I had no time to study the theory of new party formation. I hope to contribute to it now, based on my experience.

The issues addressed are the following. What was the context of Res Publica's successful rise? Was its speed unusual? What resources enabled it to succeed? Where was Res Publica located in the typology of new parties? And why did it look like a passing comet rather than a stable planet, merely two years after its electoral triumph?⁴

Res Publica's Rise

The first ten years after restoration of Estonia's effective independence, in 1991, were successful in many aspects.⁵ A new constitution adopted in 1992 still stands. In 1994, the Soviet/Russian army finally withdrew from Estonia. 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 nine different cabinets under seven different prime ministers, belonging to six 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 Scandinavian banks bought them up. Tensions remained low between ethnic Estonians and Russian-speaking settlers brought in during Soviet occupation. Estonia was the first country within the former Soviet boundaries to be invited to talks on joining the European Union. (It eventually joined both the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Spring 2004.) By many accounts, it was the greatest success story among the post-communist countries of Europe.

Yet, in 2001, as the tenth anniversary of restoration of independence approached, Estonians felt disillusioned. 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 spread, street children appeared and AIDS was barely under control. Socio-economic uncertainties kept the birth rate well below 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 notion arose of 'two Estonias' – the haves and the have-nots. The tenth anniversary of restoration of independence made many wonder whether the so-called transition hardships were to remain a way of life.

Disillusionment extended to politics. Participation in the local elections of 1999 dropped to 49 per cent. Party leaderships barely heeded the wishes of their members. 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 path, because socialism had been utterly discredited by Soviet misrule. So was party membership, given that many saw belonging to any party as akin to the former lifelong commitment to the monopolistic Communist Party.

The 1999 parliamentary elections resulted in a three-party coalition cabinet where the Reform Party favoured 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 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 fear that held the three-party coalition together was of the strong-willed leader of the relatively leftist Centre Party, Edgar Savisaar. Yet in late 2001 the Reform Party changed direction, joining the Centre 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 unease was that Estonians tried to join the Western world on the level of institutions but were reluctant to adopt the corresponding values and habits. Such reluctance was understandable, but institutional change alone had reached a stage of diminishing returns, and hence the growing unease. I claimed that 'Foreign rule has changed us, and now we must change ourselves so as to become ourselves again.'

In which ways had Soviet occupation altered Estonian values and habits? It froze in some attitudes typical of the West 60 years ago, such as the subordination of women. Ironically, communism had destroyed genuine communal cooperation, so deep-set in Estonian peasant life, replacing mutual help with dependence on the state. Mutual trust suffered. When the totalitarian state collapsed naked individualism took its place, in some ways reducing interpersonal trust even further. 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 corruption perception index) by 40 per cent.⁶ Estonia was less corrupt than its neighbours east and south, but its Protestant background enhanced the psychological disconnection between norms and reality.⁷

In Ronald Inglehart's two-dimensional cultural map⁸ Estonia occupied one of the most imbalanced positions in the world, as high as Norway on secular-rational values (as opposed to traditional religious values), yet as intent as Morocco on survival values (as opposed to self-expression values of the developed world). As part of the survival-orientated outlook, lack of interpersonal trust pervaded society, ranging from family life to top political institutions. It boosted alcoholism and contributed to early death, especially for men, whose mean lifespan was 65 years.

My solution, proposed in a slim book,⁹ was more trust, more involvement and more grass-roots cooperation.

This was the context for the rise of the new Res Publica party, on the basis of a long-existing rightist debating club. Its leaders were young men (mostly aged under 30 years) who believed strongly in private enterprise but claimed they had come to realize the need for social correctives. They composed a code of political ethics and stressed openness in intraparty dealings and finances. Overlaps with my preaching of trust and cooperation appeared to be sufficient to make me join the incipient party in July 2001. When the party was officially founded (8 December 2001) they badly needed a chairperson who was visible in some political way, yet not tainted with communist and post-communist politics. I agreed to serve, but only for a short initial period, which lasted until August 2002.

My acceptance speech set an initial goal of 10–15 seats in the 101-seat parliament. I stated that winning more heavily in our first elections could destroy us, by making us arrogant and imposing too-heavy responsibilities on a party still learning the parliamentary game. I warned that we faced a 50 per cent risk of succeeding in terms of seats and yet rendering this victory pointless by fully adopting the negative habits of the existing parties.

I spent the first three months of my tenure teaching at the University of California, Irvine, and later resided in the university town of Tartu. This means that I was more of an honoured guest than a hands-on manager at the party office in Tallinn. This period involved hurried internal organizing, membership recruitment, making our identity clearer to ourselves and to society at large – and arguing among ourselves in the process. Emphasis was on participation, intraparty democracy and building viable party organizations in all districts. The party programme was centre right, as exemplified in tax policy. Estonia had a flat income tax of 26 per cent, with the first 1,000 kroon per month (about one-seventh of the mean income) tax-free. While the Reform Party proposed reducing the flat rate to 20 per cent, which would benefit the high earners the most, and the Centre Party called for a graduated tax, Res Publica proposed doubling the tax-free amount, which would benefit the low earners the most.

During this incubation period, Res Publica support in opinion polls fluctuated between 4 and 10 per cent. Given the large share of undecided, these polls meant that Res Publica could be expected to surpass the legal 5 per cent threshold in parliamentary elections. My name recognition contributed to an increasing membership, but a breakthrough in popular opinion was held back by the uncertainty about who would be the more permanent leader of the party.

As my tenure was ending, state controller Juhan Parts, aged 35 years, was persuaded to give up his non-partisan post (and the concomitant accumulated pension) so as to join Res Publica and run for chairperson. All other potential leaders were either lacklustre or risked internal strife. Parts took over two months prior to October 2002 local elections, which was an optimal time span, combining novelty with sufficient time to get established. His energetic leadership paid off. A party that formally had not existed one year previously gained 15 per cent of the votes, being surpassed only by the Centre Party. Electoral participation rose from a previous 49 per cent to 52. My estimation is that without Res Publica running, participation

would have dropped to about 47 per cent. In other words, one-third of Res Publica's votes may have come from those who otherwise would not have voted. This increased participation was our greatest victory.

Success in local elections made Res Publica appear to be the major centre right counterweight to the centre left Centre Party, whose charismatic leader, Savisaar, appealed to many but scared many more. Relentlessly, Res Publica proclaimed that a vote for Res Publica would be the only way to keep Savisaar out of government. It paid off handsomely in parliamentary elections, but it seriously 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 Centre Party in terms of seats (see Table 1). Participation (58 per cent) was one percentage point higher than in the 1999 parliamentary elections. Without Res Publica's entry, it probably would have continued to drop. The effective number of parties¹⁰ decreased, despite the addition of Res Publica, because both largest parties were larger than previously, and the ethnic Russian parties faded. Russophones formed about 15 per cent of the national electorate. In 1995 and 1999, their leaders managed to put together fragile alliances so as to surmount the 5 per cent electoral threshold. By 2003 some ethnic leaders had joined the mainstream parties, and an alliance among the rest did not materialize. Even the most successful Russophone party, United People's, fell far below the threshold.

Hostility between Res Publica and the Centre Party precluded a two-party coalition and left the third-ranking Reform Party in a kingmaker's position. Despite their rightist platform, they had proved that they could work with the centre left Centre Party by doing so in 2002. The Reform Party consequently pushed its programme forcefully, taking advantage of its parliamentary experience in the negotiations with the Res Publica newcomers.¹¹

After month-long arguing, Parts became prime minister in a coalition cabinet of Res Publica, the Reform Party and the centrist-populist People's Union. Regarding income tax, the surprising agreement was to implement, over four years, both programmes, namely doubling the tax-free amount (as proposed by Res Publica and

TABLE 1
ESTONIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULTS OF 2 MARCH 2003
(WITH 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)

also by People's Union) *and* reducing the flat rate on the rest from 26 to 20 per cent (as proposed by the Reform Party). The resulting steep loss in government revenue was bound to make budget negotiations tense. This cabinet was to last for 24 months.

Regardless of who was formally elected to which party body, the real control of Res Publica's bureaucracy and decision-making remained in the hands of a foursome of young men born around 1975 who chose to advertise themselves during the 2003 elections as The Incorruptible Ones. Did they know this was Robespierre's nickname? Voters did not. These four were the driving force in converting the former debating club into a political party. After the electoral victory of 2003, Ken-Marti Vaher became Minister of Justice at the age of 28, Taavi Veskimägi soon became Minister of Finance, Indrek Raudne led the Res Publica parliamentary group and Urmas Rein-salu chaired the Parliament's Constitutional Committee.¹²

As politicians 24 hours a day their energy made the rise of the party possible, but they wanted to control everything tightly and felt threatened by the least show of autonomy. They usually got their way, either by skilful agenda-setting or by selective implementation of decisions by party bodies. As chairperson, I moderated some of their control-orientated practices and rightist tendencies. Later, Parts went along with them.

As my tenure ended I avoided being named honorary chairperson of the party, because by this time I had too many misgivings about the state of intraparty democracy. While I received many credible complaints, the only case that left a paper trail was the secretary general reproving on a member for coming directly to me with her problem. He claimed the chairperson could be approached only through proper channels, meaning himself. The iron law of oligarchy made itself felt, and intraparty democracy was becoming a façade. While open dissent was defused, the party members' enthusiasm gradually waned.

Res Publica as a New Party

This account now shifts to an analysis of Res Publica as a new party. Was it really new, and was its rise unusual in the world context? Where was it located in the typology of new parties? Which were the resources that enabled it to succeed?

Was Res Publica a 'Genuinely New' Party?

How often does it happen in the democratic world that a brand new party achieves so much power so quickly? Paul Lucardie deems a new party successful if it wins at least one seat in the parliament.¹³ Such instances are few in Western Europe. To obtain 24.6 per cent of the votes and 27 per cent of the seats at the first try, as Res Publica did, is visibly unreal in a mature political system, short of major upheavals such as the Second World War.

Newly democratizing countries, of course, are more volatile. Thus, half a year prior to Res Publica's triumph in Estonia, a newly formed New Era party won the elections in neighbouring Latvia. Many new parties in Central East Europe involve a rearrangement of existing politicians. In contrast, Allan Sikk has defined a 'genuinely new party' as one with previously untested leaders.¹⁴ Was Latvia's New Era

Party such a 'genuinely new party'? Its central founder, Einars Repše, had previously headed the Central Bank and thus was a public figure, but not a party politician. His party included few seasoned party politicians. New Era received 23.9 per cent of the votes in 2002. The resulting coalition cabinet headed by Repše lasted one-and-a-half years, breaking up by early 2004. The next coalition bypassed New Era.

Res Publica was definitely 'genuinely new' by Sikk's criteria. It emerged from a previous debating club with an already functioning central office. With minor exceptions, the club leaders had not belonged to political parties. The founding chairperson they coopted had been away from party politics and state affairs for some seven years. The next chairperson, Parts, was previously state controller, a non-partisan state office like Repše's. In contrast to Repše, however, Parts was not among the founders of the party. Although he had longstanding contacts with the main figures in the Res Publica office, he joined the party only after it had proved its survivability.

The speed and extent of Res Publica's success pales 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), gaining a massive 42.7 per cent of the votes and obtaining exactly one-half of the seats (120 of 240). On 24 July 2001, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha became prime minister of Bulgaria.¹⁵ His cabinet survived until new elections in June 2005.

In comparison to Res Publica with its collective leading core, Bulgaria's new party was clearly personalistic. When excluding such parties, Res Publica has had few competitors in terms of speed and extent of success among genuinely new parties.

To What Type of New Party did Res Publica Belong?

In his overview entitled 'Prophets, Purifiers and Prolocutors', Lucardie proposes an approach 'Toward a theory of the emergence of new parties'.¹⁶ Among these, *prophetic parties* articulate a new ideology or a new way of thinking, such as environmental concerns or opposition to immigration. Thomas Rochon calls them mobilizers,¹⁷ 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, close to what Rochon calls challengers. 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. A variety of intermediary cases occur. A superficially new ideology may be an old one in new clothing. Novel and existing features can be mixed. Rochon considers *personalistic parties* a separate type.

Let us try to classify the new parties mentioned previously. The New Era in Latvia seemed a mix of prophetic and purifying. Simeon's was a personalistic party acting as prolocutor for the impoverished majority, proposing an 800-days programme for escape from misery.¹⁸ Some progress may have been made, in view of the government's survival. Res Publica is harder to classify. If it was prolocutor for a segment of the population, then which segment? Could it be the entire people, in

analogy with Simeon? If prophetic, then for which new ideology? My correspondence with Lucardie led to the following.

The very name 'Res Publica' hints at public interest, the *intérêt général* neglected by the existing particularistic parties. The youthful initiators of the prospective party stressed in Spring 2001 that the Centre Party's vision was narrowly social, while that of the Reform Party was narrowly financial; in contrast, they supposedly aimed at joining the financial and social concerns. Hence they might fit among the purifiers, despite lacking a classical 'pure' ideology. Indeed, 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.

In that light the nascent Res Publica might, hesitantly, be characterized as a *purifying bridge party*. This classification fits with the well-founded complaint that Res Publica lacked a clear ideological visage. It could also explain its success, despite the lack of such visage – or precisely thanks to such a lack. This characterization applies to Res Publica during its rise. How success altered Res Publica will be considered later.

Members × Money × Visibility

What were the resources that enabled Res Publica to win? Lucardie observes that a new party needs sufficient membership, financial support, and visibility.¹⁹ These alone will not guarantee success, but if any of these three factors is absent success is impossible. Social scientists have a bad habit of adding factors that should logically be multiplied. Here multiplication is a must. Even the largest conceivable membership will not bring success, when money is utterly absent, and vice versa. Each factor must be present to a sufficient degree. This is what a multiplication expresses:

$$\text{Prospect of success} = \text{members} \times \text{money} \times \text{visibility}$$

A successful new party often starts out as a non-party. Be it a pressure group, a political club or a social movement, joining it does not seem to be an important issue to potential members. It also does not exclude belonging to an existing party. If the decision is made later to become a party, then this previous phase supplies a ready-made core of members.

This is precisely how Res Publica started, as a debating club of long standing. The club had members, structure and a leadership able to decide on whether to become a party. Upon official founding of the new party, most of those members who did not belong to an existing party became members of the new party by conviction or by inertia, thus giving it an instant core of members. Club members who belonged to existing parties faced a choice.

A large portion of the founding members of the party, however, had joined the club merely half a year prior to official party foundation, when the intention to become a party was manifest. Why did they join? Most of them sensed that Estonia had got on to the wrong track and had to escape from it. Yet how did the

potential recruits come to know about the organization? This is where money and visibility were needed.

A new party can receive funds and similar support (including contacts and skills) in two ways. Local or nationwide administrators can start a party top-down, making use (legally or illegally) of the labour 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 a further ingredient entered, one not discussed by Lucardie, namely support by some business circles.

One businessman, in particular, was an essential initiator: Olari Taal. During my tenure as chairperson, I stressed the need to keep any individual supporter's share down to at most 10 per cent of Res Publica's income, so as to avoid excessive dependence. It was not easy to reap sufficient support from elsewhere so as to keep Taal's contribution below, if not 10, then at least 12 per cent of the total. At the very beginning his share must have been much higher. A major argument for encouraging other businessmen to support Res Publica was that Taal already did.

Why would some business circles finance a fledgling new party? One can buy influence or access more directly through existing parties. Throughout the world, major corporations contribute to all serious parties, although 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 unsavoury reasons, especially when one does not intend to evaluate critically their validity in practice; but a person may also become satisfied with accumulating wealth and find it more challenging to use it for social purposes. George Soros comes to mind. Finally, farsighted egoism must also be considered. The fortunes rapidly amassed in the murky financial climate of the 1990s could evaporate with equal speed, if social instability continued or even worsened, as looked possible in Estonia around 2001. The need to secure existing wealth could outweigh the desire for risky opportunities to increase it. The existing parties had fallen into a rut that exacerbated social problems. Hence, playing it safe may have called for a new party.

Visibility as a separate factor may come as a surprise. It might be thought that, given sufficient money, visibility can be purchased, but it is not as simple as that. The well-financed Natural Law parties in Western Europe and North America failed none the less in the 1990s. The Dutch Socialist Party (not to be confused with the Labour Party) was well financed and had thousands of members, but they competed unsuccessfully in five elections before landing seats in 1994.²⁰ The press will not take a new party seriously until a threshold of visibility is reached, and paid advertisement alone does not convince the public until the press starts to play along. Why did the Estonian press take Res Publica seriously, even before its official foundation, when it had ignored earlier new parties in the late 1990s, such as the Christian Party or the intellectually orientated Blue Party?

Res Publica filled a marked void at the centre right. Among the existing centrist parties, the Moderates were too poorly defined, Fatherland was too nationalistic, People's Union was rural-orientated and Centre Party was its leader's personal fief.

In contrast, Res Publica projected the image of a decisive, pragmatic, urban and participatory alternative. It also 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 Centre struck many as an unholy alliance. Thus, people were receptive to the idea of a new and possibly more constructive party. It is true that the ongoing power struggle also reduced press coverage of the Res Publica founding congress and thus hurt the visibility of Res Publica, who had invested much effort in advertising this congress.

The Res Publica visibility was undoubtedly enhanced by the apparent support of Lennart Meri, former president of Estonia (1992–2001). He attended and agreed to speak at the Res Publica founding congress, although he 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 acted strangely. Meri could contribute to Res Publica's being taken seriously only because Res Publica was already being taken seriously. The public was willing to take note of this new enterprise thanks to the crisis of social (self)confidence that prevailed in 2000–1, but only up to a limit.

My own first impressions in Spring 2001 of the 25-year-olds who transformed the club into a party were the following: business-like pragmatism; ambition; thinking things through and carrying them out; also, social concerns expressed in a definitely rightist framework, but without the callous indifference towards the poor that characterized the Reform Party. It could be play-acting but if so, then it was good acting, which gradually moulds the actor himself. Many people may have shared such impressions, although both the press and people in the street kept asking, with good reason, 'What is your real message?'. This is what Juhan Parts asked me as late as June 2002, two months before he took the plunge.

Res Publica's Decline

A new reformist party can fail in two ways: by vanishing as an organization or by transforming itself so as to become indistinguishable from the existing parties. Did the Res Publica leadership really wish to change the existing political culture, and to what extent was it possible? Most new parties are socialized into the existing political style.

Res Publica did alter some aspects of Estonian politics, while manifestly foundering in some others. In Winter 2001–2, the very founding of Res Publica moderated existing political discourse, because the established parties realized that continued mudslinging would not rearrange votes among the establishment but give a boost to the newcomer. Once it achieved power, Res Publica discovered both its limitations and temptations.

Res Publica introduced an intraparty code of ethics unique in Estonia and declared that it would require its future coalition partners to adhere to it. This requirement did not survive a single day once Res Publica actually had hastily to put together a coalition. In contrast to the existing parties, Res Publica had promised seriously to consider worthy proposals by the opposition, but once in power they considered no

such proposal worthy. The existing parties used to fill the lucrative boards of state-owned enterprises with their own leaders. Res Publica promised to appoint politically neutral specialists, but once in power the Res Publica leaders appointed themselves. Res Publica bylaws prohibited parliament members from also belonging to local city and township councils, but at a critical stage in Tallinn city politics several Res Publica heavyweights joined the city council without ceding their seats in the parliament. Bylaws were changed only later.

A low blow struck by Res Publica was passing a law 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, along with just a pittance for parties not yet represented. In other words, Res Publica made sure that no future new party could repeat Res Publica's own business-supported rise. Restricting business involvement in financing politics may be a worthwhile endeavour, but in the case of Res Publica the shift appeared mendacious.

The leading cores of the previously existing parties used to control candidate ranking on the ballot for parliamentary elections. In contrast, Res Publica introduced intraparty 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 per cent of the Western European parties follow this practice.²¹ It is also debatable whose power is increased by intraparty primaries. LeDuc maintains that it actually weakens the local leaders, by allowing the central leadership to bypass them in its appeal to the members, and Katz and Hopkin agree.²²

This was definitely the case for intra-Res Publica elections, which appeared very democratic but led to central control of the party council in the following way. The rules gave each member a number of votes roughly equal to one-half of the positions to be filled. For example, for the party council consisting of 20 seats, each member had a generous 10 votes. Now suppose a member prefers most strongly her local leaders, of whom there are less than 10. The voter is likely to give her surplus votes to candidates promoted by the central leadership. The support for these central candidates may be only lukewarm in every given region, but as their votes pile up all across the country, the central list can crowd out the regional candidates. Local representation can be enhanced by reducing the number of votes a voter has. However, my proposal to that effect, already approved by the party assembly, was skilfully sidetracked by the Incorruptible Ones.

The central leadership's ability to reach members and bypass the local leaders is enhanced in the age of e-mail that does away with costly and slow mailings. Whoever has the full membership list can, with the push of a button, reach all those members who have e-mail addresses—meaning at least two-thirds of the Res Publica membership. These members receive close to one central message per day. Behind a democratic façade, the leaders' ability to set the agenda and present one-sided arguments becomes immense. The Res Publica top decision-makers aimed at very thorough and detailed control.

Individuals have told me that paid party employees meddled in intraparty regional elections, telephoning members and advising for and against specific candidates. There was no paper trail to pin it down. What was quite visible was that the intraparty

communication monopoly was used to the fullest so as to promote rightist views and exclude the centrist. It led to Pyrrhic victories. At party meetings the leading core always got what it wanted, but the party image suffered.

As the leading governmental party much was expected of Res Publica, and it bore responsibility even for those unpopular measures undertaken under pressure from coalition partners. The Res Publica leaders had promised much, and conflicting planks in their programme became visible once they had to make decisions. The aforementioned broken promises regarding reforms in political style became apparent as intracoalition tensions arose. The general public gradually came to see Res Publica as arrogant youngsters who often shifted course and acted as if all wisdom was contained in their heads.

Res Publica campaigned forcefully for a 'yes' vote in the referendum on joining the European Union (EU) in September 2003, as did all major parties except the Centre Party. Joining the EU was approved by 66 per cent of the voters. The cabinet survived tense budget talks in fall 2003.²³

In May 2004 Estonia joined the EU, and the elections to the Parliament of the EU (13 June 2004) became the next test of party strengths. Res Publica ran a Eurosceptical campaign, at odds with its previous support for EU. It now presented EU as a socialist fortress that Estonia had to breach. 'We shall break through!' was the main slogan. Scaring the voters with a Savisaar victory had served Res Publica well in the parliamentary elections and it was now looking for another bogey, but its shrill anti-Social Democrat message backfired. Res Publica declared a grand goal of winning three of the six seats allocated to Estonia, yet failed to win a single seat. Its vote share dropped to seven per cent. The Social Democrats (former Moderates) won three seats, and one seat each went to Reform Party, Centre Party and Fatherland Union. Res Publica was cut off from European politics.

What had gone wrong? Two factors overlapped. The first was hubris, after triumph in parliamentary elections. Many former Res Publica supporters shared the general feeling that Res Publica top leaders acted arrogantly. The second factor was a shift to the right. Recall that the Res Publica debating club that preceded the party was strongly rightist. After the heady victory in parliamentary elections, the Res Publica decision-makers felt they could return to this position, abandoning many of their centrist promises. The bulk of Res Publica voters, however, were genuine centrists – otherwise they would have voted for the Reform Party in the first place. As Res Publica veered to the right these voters looked for a more centrist option, finding it with the Social Democrats.²⁴

Res Publica's leaders explained the debacle in terms of the 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 away from Res Publica. 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 Res Publica voters voiced continued support for Res Publica. Another

quarter preferred Social Democrats, and nearly one-half said they would stay at home. Indeed, Res Publica plummeted to as low as four per cent in subsequent opinion polls.

Remarkably, all this erosion happened without any major scandal having taken place. An arrogant governing style combined with veering to the right sufficed. The altered stance on EU contributed to the impression of shiftiness. Res Publica alienated the anti-EU voters at the 2003 referendum and the pro-EU voters at the Euroelections.

The surprising part is that, after defeat in Euroelections, the Res Publica leadership did not return to the centrist positions that had served it so well.²⁵ The business-like pragmatism I observed among the core of young activists three years previously had mutated into rigid ideology. With their anti-socialist rhetoric, they sounded more rightist than the Reform Party.

In January 2004 Parts and the then leader of the Reform Party signed a detailed memo of understanding for merger of the two parties, where Res Publica was supposed to acquire more than one-half of the joint party posts. When asked at party meetings about rumours of merger talks Parts denied everything until the autumn, when the Res Publica leaders suddenly raised the issue and pushed a merger agreement through at party plenary. However, given the drastic decline in Res Publica popularity, the Reform Party was no longer interested. The Res Publica leaders published the January memo, simultaneously accusing the Reform Party of breach of agreement and blandly denying having lied to their own members – allocating positions in a future joint party supposedly did not amount to merger talks.

In autumn 2004, a Res Publica–Reform coalition replaced the longstanding Centre–Reform coalition in the city government of Tallinn, after some Centre councilmen defected amid rumours of bribes by Res Publica. Yet, Res Publica acted increasingly towards the Reform Party like a rebuffed suitor. It induced or forced two Reform ministers to be replaced. In March 2005 Res Publica switched to a Res Publica–Centre coalition in Tallinn. Those voters who were afraid of Savisaar now knew that Res Publica could sell them out if the price was right.

In April 2005 the Parts cabinet collapsed. Playing tit-for-tat for having to replace two of their ministers, the Reform Party led a vote of no confidence against Res Publica's justice minister Vaher. Parts chose to construe it as vote of no confidence in himself and resigned. At an extraordinary party plenary called in June, he desisted from running for chairperson. Less than 1,000 of the party's 5,500 members bothered to vote. Veskimägi, one of the Incorruptible Ones, easily beat a slightly more centrist challenger.

As the preparations for the October 2005 local elections speeded up Res Publica openly declared a rightist stand, while the Reform Party included social responsibility planks in its platform. Their relative positions seemed reversed. Res Publica would try to wean the rightist vote from a successful Reform Party, while its former centre right voters would, at best, disperse among the other parties, or at worst, would abstain. A main achievement of Res Publica was that its rise stopped the steady decrease in electoral turnout; it remains to be seen what effect its decline could have.

Conclusions

Res Publica's Place in Estonian Politics

In their study of 'Fission and fusion of parties in Estonia, 1987–1999', Grofman, Mikkel and Taagepera 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 . . .²⁶

In the next four 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. Thus, even parties with core constituencies were not safe.

As a catch-all centre right party, Res Publica never had a distinct socio-economic core support group. Reform politics based on a participatory style was its only distinct focus. Yet by 2005, intraparty democracy had become a hollow façade and Res Publica was seen as sharing all the flaws of the older parties. Res Publica's permanence had become questionable. It looked like a passing comet rather than a permanent new planet in the Estonian party constellation.

Structures that form overly fast may be brittle in the face of adversity. If a newly established party loses in popularity, this trend may become self-reinforcing. In 2003 the Moderates dropped from 17 to six seats in the parliament (cf. Table 1), yet survived. If Res Publica should drop to six seats in the elections of 2007, would it have the same resilience? Even if it does, it would be reduced to a fraction of the state financial support enjoyed by its more successful competitors. Then Res Publica might well curse the moment it prohibited business contributions. Much depends on whether the young leaders can learn from their mistakes. As of 2005, they did not recognize having made any of those mistakes the press and public opinion ascribed to them.²⁷

A reformist new party 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. By 2005, Res Publica had lost its centre-right reformist strivings. It no longer mattered for the quality of Estonian politics whether it vanished or survived.

The overall impact of Res Publica on Estonian society has been mixed. It brought a new emphasis to participatory democracy even while flouting it in practice. It raised new issues, and its challenge forced the existing parties to re-examine themselves. On the negative side, Res Publica mobilized and then wasted scarce reserves of idealism in a society that was already overly survival-orientated. Perhaps future historians will write that Res Publica was a reaction to a moment of social self-doubt and helped the

nation to weather it, even while failing as a party. As a member of the European Union and NATO, Estonia may now be past this moment of self-doubt.

Broader Implications

What are the broader implications of Res Publica's trajectory for democratization in Central East Europe? Along with Latvia's New Way and Bulgaria's Popular Movement for Simeon II, it tells us that stabilization of party systems in that region is far from complete. Not only can existing parties lose two-thirds of their previous votes from one election to the next, and old politicians can form new parties, but 'genuinely new' parties²⁸ – those that involve no previous political figures – can rise from nothing to victory in the first election they contest. Recall that in Western Europe a new party can be considered successful if it wins any seats at all.²⁹ For Central East Europe, such stability still seems many years in the future.

Entering their first coalition government is always risky for a new party anywhere, given that new parties almost by definition voice protest against business as usual, while participation in a coalition makes them part of business as usual. This was a main theme of an entire workshop on 'New Parties in Government' at the European Consortium of Political Research 2004 Joint Sessions of Workshops (13–18 April, Uppsala). Coalition is doubly risky when the new party is so successful that it is foisted into a leadership role within the coalition, as was the case for Res Publica. Such a new party faces more experienced coalition partners who know how to promote their goals while pinning responsibility on the newcomer. The new party supporters' disappointment is the greater, the greater the apparent opportunity it had, as cabinet leader, to implement its promises.

The extent of promises, success and subsequent disappointment are linked. A new party can win overnight only by promising too much. Even during unfinished democratization, as in post-communist Central East Europe, it may be advisable for a new party to go slower than over-promising could enable it to go. Such caution would guard against excessive governmental responsibility too soon. However, Simeon of Bulgaria, who blatantly over-promised and faced full responsibility, still managed to attenuate the decline in support.³⁰ This is where succumbing to hubris enters. Even when arrogant behaviour and shift in party ideology brought reverses, the young leaders of Res Publica proved psychologically unable to change course. Hard as it is for a new party to win, coping with victory may be even harder.

NOTES

1. Bernard Grofman, Evald Mikkel and Rein Taagepera, 'Fission and Fusion of Parties in Estonia, 1987–1999', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2000), pp. 329–57.
2. I have lived outside Estonia since 1944 and in the United States since 1961. Since 1992, I have spent close to half my time in Estonia, teaching at the University of Tartu. In 1992, I ran a respectable third in presidential elections, as candidate of what is now the Centre Party – see Rein Taagepera, 'Running for President of Estonia', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1993), pp. 302–4. As the Centre Party became increasingly leader-centred, I left in 1994 and remained unaffiliated with any party until 2001.
3. See, for example, Rein Taagepera and Matthew S. Shugart, *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1989) and 'Predicting

- the Number of Parties: A Quantitative Model of Duverger's Mechanical Effect', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. (1993), pp. 455–64; and Rein Taagepera, 'How Electoral Systems Matter for Democratization', *Democratization*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1998), pp. 68–91.
4. An early version of this study was presented at the European Consortium of Political Research 2004 Joint Sessions of Workshops, 13–18 April, Uppsala Universitet.
 5. For a baseline, published just as the newly restored state was admitted to the United Nations, see Rein Taagepera, 'Building Democracy in Estonia', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1991), pp. 478–81.
 6. Wayne Sandholtz and Rein Taagepera, 'Corruption, Culture, and Communism', *International Review of Sociology*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2005), pp. 109–31.
 7. Rein Taagepera, 'Baltic Values and Corruption in Comparative Context', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2002), pp. 243–58.
 8. Ronald Inglehart, Miguel Bazañez, Jaime Diez-Medrano, Loek Haman and Ruud Luijckx (eds), *Human Beliefs and Values: A Cross-Cultural Sourcebook Based on The 1999–2002 Values Surveys* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2004), p. 12.
 9. Rein Taagepera, *Võta võim! [Empower yourself]* (Tallinn: K-Kirjastus, 2001). Table of Contents and Introduction available in English.
 10. 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.
 11. All Res Publica members of parliament were novices. Only a few had administrative or local government experience. There were several pop culture figures, communal leaders and physicians, an AIDS prevention activist and one political science *dotsent*.
 12. Ken-Marti Vaher had been on the staff of state controller Juhan Parts. Taavi Veskimägi had been employed at the Ministry of Finance and was elected in October 2002 to a small town council. Indrek Raudne had been on the Tallinn city council. Urmas Reinsalu had been the chief of staff of the previous President of the Republic, Lennart Meri.
 13. Paul Lucardie, 'Prophets, Purifiers and Prolocutors: Toward A Theory of The Emergence of New Parties', *Party Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2000), pp. 175–85.
 14. Allan Sikk, 'How Unstable? Volatility and The Genuinely New Parties in Eastern Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2005), pp. 391–412.
 15. Marcus A. G. Harper, 'The 2001 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections in Bulgaria', *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2003), pp. 335–44.
 16. Lucardie, note 13, pp. 175–85.
 17. Thomas Rochon, 'Mobilizers and Challengers: Toward A Theory of New Party Success', *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1985), pp. 419–39.
 18. Harper, note 15, pp. 335–44.
 19. Lucardie, note 13, pp. 175–85.
 20. See Lucardie, note 13, pp. 175–85.
 21. Lars Bille, 'Democratizing and Democratic Procedure: Myth or Reality? Candidate Selection in Western European Parties, 1960–1990', *Party Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2001), pp. 363–80, especially Table 1.
 22. Lawrence LeDuc, 'Democratizing Party Leadership Selection', *Party Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2001), pp. 323–41; Richard S. Katz, 'The Problem of Candidate Selection and Models of Party Democracy', *Party Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2001), pp. 277–96; Jonathan Hopkin, 'Bringing The Members Back In?', *ibid.* (2001), pp. 343–61.
 23. By November 2003, the People's Union came to feel that the Reform Party priorities consistently overrode theirs – and even some goals they had in common with Res Publica, such as increasing the tax-free part of personal income. Faced with a brusque ultimatum Parts eventually gave in, and the Reform Party reluctantly agreed to delay its pet project of reducing the flat tax on the taxable portion of income to 20 per cent. Ironically, the revolt by the People's Union brought the main tenor of the coalition closer to Res Publica's own programme of increasing the tax-free part of personal income.
 24. Two months before the elections, I told one of the Incorruptible Ones that I intended to vote for the Social Democrats as the closest approximation to what Res Publica's centrist programme had promised. He took it as a joke; but it turned out that I had plenty of company.
 25. 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, Taavi Veskimägi and Indrek Raudne claimed there was no such thing as a centre left position, all leftists being extremists. My motion was not put to the vote.
 26. Grofman, Mikkil and Taagepera (note 1), pp. 329–57.

27. Olari Taal, the party's financial godfather, did acknowledge 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). He did not go into specifics.
28. Sikk (note 14), pp. 391–412.
29. Lucardie (note 13), pp. 175–85.
30. While Res Publica and Latvia's New Way had to hold together coalition cabinets, Simeon's party had the advantage of controlling 50 per cent of the seats in the parliament. But, recast as the Liberal Party, it was also able to preserve a credible presence at the next elections (25 June 2005), maintaining close to one-half of its previous votes (20 per cent compared to 43). It remained the second largest party, behind the Socialists, who received 31 per cent.

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