



Estonia — Va-PoReg Country Report

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09/10/1721 Start Part of Other Country [of Russia]: Estonia had become a part of the Russian Empire after Russia's defeat of Sweden in the Great Northern War in 1720. With the Peace Treaty of Nystad, concluded on 09/10/1721, King Frederick of Sweden formally recognized the transfer of Estonia, Livonia, Ingria and Southeast Finland to Russia in exchange for two million silver thaler, while Russia returned the bulk of Finland to Swedish rule.¹ Under Russian rule, the German elites thrived. They controlled the Lutheran church, the legal system, education and local and town governments. During the 1905 Russian Revolution, the first Estonian voices demanding freedom of press and assembly, universal franchise and national autonomy were heard.² After the Russian February Revolution, the autonomous Estonian Governorate was formed in April 1917. This was a response to the Estonians' demand for autonomy. In the spring of 1917, the Estonian Land People's Association (Eesti Maarahva Liit, EML) was formed around Jaan Hünerson to represent the wealthier part of the Estonian small farmers. The EML positioned itself against radical land reform. On 03/15/1917 universal suffrage declared by the Russian Provisional Government (in control of the then governorate of Estonia). In the parliamentary elections in July 1917, the EML became the strongest party. After the mixture of coup and mass rebellion led by the Communists in St. Petersburg on 11/04/1917, the Estonians did not recognize the new Communist government. The Communists then forcibly dissolved the Estonian parliament and called new elections. LIED and V-Dem do not provide data for Estonia before 1917.

11/05/1917 Continuation Part of Other Country [of Russia, Constitutional Monarchy]: On this date the Estonian Bolshevik leader Jaan Anvelt took over power by means of a coup d'état against the elected Maapäev (Russian official).³ On 02/3-4/1918 elections to the Estonian Constituent Assembly, which were organized by the Bolsheviks, were held on 02/3-4/1918 with universal suffrage. Despite the Communists' threats, the Bolsheviks only achieved 37 per cent of the votes and parties advocating Estonian national independence achieved almost two-thirds of the vote. Therefore, the Communists promptly dissolved the assembly and proclaimed the elections null and void.⁴ The Estonian Constituent Assembly was never convened, therefore, the regime period can neither be classified as independent nor as electoral.⁵ LIED identifies political liberties as absent. On 11/07/1917 the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was proclaimed and Estonia was de facto part of the Bolshevik-controlled Russian state, not an autonomous Soviet republic. The Bolshevik takeover in Tallinn under Jaan Anvelt followed the October Revolution in Petrograd and was fully subordinated to the Soviet leadership there.⁶ No autonomous governmental structure or separate Soviet republic was proclaimed. Local Bolsheviks acted on directives from Petrograd, and the dissolution of the elected Estonian Constituent Assembly directly mirrored Lenin's actions in Russia. Estonia remained legally and politically part of the RSFSR, with no recognized sovereignty or self-government during this period.

02/25/1918 End Part of Other Country [of Russia, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [Germany, Constitutional Monarchy]: To put pressure on the new Bolshevik regime of Soviet Russia to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Germans landed on the mainland of Estonia on 02/18/1918. On 02/25/1918 Tallinn was occupied.⁷ Estonia became part of the German Ober Ost (military administration) until the end of World War I in November 1918.⁸ On 02/19/1918, between Russian retreat and German occupation, the "Salvation Committee" declared Estonian independence. The members of the Salvation

Committee were Konstantin Päts, Jüri Vilms and Konstantin Konik.⁹

11/11[-14]/1918 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Germany, Constitutional Monarchy]/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: Between these dates, after the German Revolution, the representatives of Germany formally handed over political power in Estonia to the national government. However, the departure of German troops left a void and the Russian Bolshevik troops moved in. The Estonian War of Independence followed. Estonian Bolshevik leader Jaan Anvelt took over power in Narva. The Commune of the Working People of Estonia was an unacknowledged government asserting control over the Bolshevik-occupied regions of the Republic of Estonia during the Estonian War of Independence and the Russian Civil War.¹⁰ The regime instituted a reign of terror from November 1918 to January 1919. However, we code here the non-electoral transitional regime with three provisional governments all led by Konstantin Päts. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are somewhat present. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust.

04/05[-07]/1919 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: New elections for the Constituent Assembly were held in this period.¹¹ On 02/02/1920 a peace treaty (Treaty of Tartu) was signed between the Republic of Estonia and the Russian SFSR. This marked the end of the Estonian War of Independence. On 06/15/1920, the first Estonian constitution was adopted. In the 1930s an anticommunist antiparliamentary movement named Vaps emerged.¹² The distribution of power in the constitution ratified on 06/15/1920 divided authority among the judiciary, executive, and legislature.¹³ With the new constitution, the head of government was no longer the prime minister, but the "Elder of the State", who functions as a combination of president and prime minister. The governing parties and coalitions alternated frequently, indicating that governments were not very stable.¹⁴ Estonia's enactment of the cultural autonomy law for ethnic minorities in 1925 was widely regarded as one of the most progressive in the world during that period.¹⁵ According to LIED multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. For this period, LIED categorizes elections as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as somewhat free, fair and clean. However, LIED scores that political liberties were coded as absent. V-Dem's PCLI declares them as present since 1920. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. Estonia is in this period a borderline case between a liberal and electoral democracy. From 1920 to 1933, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For 1934, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited.

01/24/1934 End Electoral Democracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: After an October 1933 constitutional referendum organized by Vaps, Konstantin Päts took over as acting president in January 1934, and with the help of General Lohan Laidoner, Päts declared a state of emergency to prevent opposition candidate General Andres Larka from winning the upcoming election and initiated a wave of repression against opposition figures (Taylor 2018: 38-39, 44, 48, 63-64, Casey et al. 2020: 7). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. During the whole regime period, LIED categorizes elections as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as ambiguously free, fair and clean. According to LIED political liberties were absent. According to V-Dem's PCLI political liberties were ambiguous in 1934 and not really present since 1935. While quantitative indicators point into the direction of an electoral hybrid regime, Estonia is in this period a clear case of an electoral autocracy according to our reading of the research literature. From 1936 to 1940, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was only subject to minor institutional constraints. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the

executive were limited.

06/16/1940 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by USSR, Communist Ideocracy]: Facing the imminent threat of a Soviet invasion, Estonia yielded to Soviet demands, and shortly thereafter, the Red Army took control of Estonia (Taylor 2018: 60, 88-89, Casey et al. 2020: 7).

08/09/1940 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [USSR, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]: The Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic formed under the occupation regime became a member of the USSR. Estonia within the Soviet Union represents a contested borderline case, as it functioned de facto as a constituent Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR federal structure and was governed through Soviet institutions. However, many Western states never recognized Soviet annexation as legitimate, maintaining diplomatic recognition of Baltic governments-in-exile and treating the territories as occupied rather than legitimately integrated. Va-PoReg's de facto classification principle prioritizes actual governance structures, leading to Part of Other Country classification based on factual integration into Soviet administration, with the contested nature and subsequent independence restoration (1990-1991) warranting this borderline designation. Especially in the early days of the annexation, the regime was similar to the occupation regime before. On 07/23/1940 all land, banks, and major industrial enterprises in Estonia were nationalized by the Soviets, and the state launched an economic transformation under Soviet central planning. Sovietization included population transfers and purges of non-communist elites. The Estonian SSR was molded as a model Soviet republic, but with the promotion of in-migration from Russia and other Soviet regions. Soviet planners prioritized all-union economic chains, disregarding local environmental and social needs. The Estonian language and national symbols were suppressed in public life, with Russification stronger here than in most other western Soviet republics. The local Communist Party was controlled directly from Moscow, with ethnic Russians and a minority of loyal Estonian communists in leadership positions. The First Secretary of the Communist Party of Estonia held de facto power but was usually subject to frequent rotation and central vetting.

08/28/1941 End Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Germany, Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy]: On this date, German troops captured Tallinn, after having invaded Estonia on 07/05/1941. During the occupation, Estonia was exploited for the war effort and tens of thousands of people, including Estonians, Jews, Romani people and Russians, were murdered. For the duration of the occupation, Estonia was incorporated as Generalbezirk Estland, subordinated to the Reichskommissariat Ostland an administrative subdivision of the German Reich.¹⁶

09/22/1944 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Germany, Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy]/Start Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]: On this day, Soviet troops captured Tallinn. German troops had begun to withdraw from Estonia on 09/17/1944.¹⁷ Beginning in 10/1944, the anti-communist guerrilla group "Forest Brothers" hid in the Estonian forests and waged war against the Soviet troops. They continued resist against the Soviet forces until 1953.¹⁸ Soviet mass deportations of Estonians in 03/1949, as well as the collectivization of farms lead to many partisans to give themselves up. Between 06/14/1987 and 09/06/1991 the "Singing Revolution" and mass civic mobilization marked Estonia's peaceful struggle for independence.¹⁹ On 03/03/1991 an independence referendum in the Estonian SSR (alongside a similar referendum in the Latvian SSR) was approved by 78.4% of voters with an 82.9% turnout. Between 1940 and 1990 LIED and V-Dem do not provide data for Estonia.

08/20/1991 End Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Democratizing Regime: On this date independence was restored by the Estonian Supreme Council.²⁰ In August 1991, an agreement was brokered between the radical and moderate factions of the independence movement, resulting in the formation of a Constitutional Assembly and the attainment of complete independence for Estonia from the Soviet Union (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 26). During the transitory phase, elected representatives from the Supreme Soviet of Estonia were still in place, with the de facto head of state being Arnold Rüütel who was elected by the legislative body in 1990 and would go on to become president in the 1992 elections.²¹ Therefore, while

according to LIED multiparty executive and legislative elections were present, in this short regime period neither legislative nor executive elections were held. As per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was on par with or below that of other branches, reflecting executive parity or subordination. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. As per FH's classification for this regime period, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. LIED identifies political liberties as present, and V-Dem's PCLI is likewise classified by us as indicating that political liberties are present.

09/20/1992 End Democratizing Regime/Start Liberal Democracy: On this date the first parliamentary elections after regaining independence from the USSR took place. They are considered to be free and fair (Marshall 2018d).²² Estonia is a parliamentary democracy with a unicameral parliament. Citizens who are 18 and older have the right to vote. On 03/05/2023 parliamentary elections were held (OSCE 2023b). The political landscape in Estonia is free and competitive. Estonia is well known for its advanced e-governance services as well as its high level of government transparency. Freedom of religion, freedom of assembly and freedom of association are guaranteed.²³ Democratic institutions in Estonia are independent and stable and political rights and liberties are respected. Per FH's scoring for 1993 and 1994, the country is classified as free with a score of 5, which falls into our interpretation of the rather free category. From 1995 onward the country is classified as free, scoring between 2 and 4, which we also place in the free category. Therefore, both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI underline that political liberties were present ever since 1992. Ongoing challenges are posed by the fact that around 5% of the population are considered "stateless" and are excluded from elections. In recent years, right-wing forces have started to become louder. Corruption and discrimination against Russians and LGBT+ people among other are persistent issues. New challenges arose from the wave of Ukrainian refugees (around 60.000) and Russian immigrants (around 300.000) caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In September 2022 Estonia closed its borders to most Russian citizens.²⁴ The Estonian political landscape is marked by several key parties with distinct ideological orientations. The Estonian Centre Party (EK) is a center party with moderate political values. It advocates for social justice, economic stability, and multicultural integration. The Estonian Reform Party (ER) is a liberal party that has been influential in shaping Estonia's economic policies, promoting neoliberal economic ideologies and the promotion of flexicurity in labor relations. The Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) represents right-wing nationalist interests, emphasizing traditional values and national sovereignty. The Social Democratic Party (SDE) aligns with center-left ideologies, focusing on social justice, equality, and welfare policies. These parties have contributed to a dynamic and pluralistic political environment, reflecting a broad spectrum of ideologies and policy preferences within Estonia's democratic framework. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Since its independence, LIED categorizes elections as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as free, fair and clean. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also comprehensive.

Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Hiden/Salmon 1991, Iwaskiw 1995, Laur et al. 2000, McHale 1983, Parming 1975, Siaroff 1999, Sikk 2010)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Nystad

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Estonia

- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaan_Anvelt
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonian_Provincial_Assembly; https://dbpedia.org/page/1918_Estonian_Constituent_Assembly_election
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1918_Estonian_Constituent_Assembly_election
- ⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaan_Anvelt
- ⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_occupation_of_Estonia_during_World_War_I
- ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_occupation_of_Estonia_during_World_War_I
- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonian_Salvation_Committee
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commune_of_the_Working_People_of_Estonia
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1918_Estonian_Constituent_Assembly_election
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Estonia
- ¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Estonia
- ¹⁴ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html> , see narratives for version 5.0, Estonia_R: 1.
- ¹⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonia#Independence>
- ¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_occupation_of_Estonia_during_World_War_II
- ¹⁷ <https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/europerussiacentral-asia-region/soviet-unionestonia-1940-1991/>
- ¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonian_Soviet_Socialist_Republic
- ¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singing_Revolution
- ²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991_Estonian_independence_referendum
- ²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_R%C3%BC%C3%BCtel
- ²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1992_Estonian_parliamentary_election;
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Estonia_2015?lang=en
- ²³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/estonia/freedom-world/2023>
- ²⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/estonia/freedom-world/2023>

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