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Emilie Louise Bryant

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Northern but not Nordic? Social Democracy in Estonia

Emilie Louise Bryant

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Guntis Šmidchens

Department of Scandinavian Studies

Estonia is geographically northern, closely neighboring Scandinavia. It shares much in common with the Nordic region, including similarities in religion, culture, language, and many parts of its history. The Nordic countries have a long tradition of social democratic parties holding power, a tradition which continues to the present day. In 2023, the majority of prime ministers in the region come from social democratic parties, and their parties hold sizable numbers of seats regardless of whether or not they are currently in government. However, this is not the case in Estonia. The country has a prominent and historically significant social democratic party, but it has significantly fewer seats than its Nordic counterparts. This thesis seeks to explain why this difference has occurred, despite the many similarities between Estonia and its northern neighbors. It finds that while small, the Social Democratic Party has been a stable presence in parliament, and that the different role it plays may be attributed to the comparative weakness of civil society and of trade union political power, and that the left-leaning vote is split between the SDE and Centre parties, with no bloc system to unify them.

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# Introduction

Estonia and the Nordic countries are quite geographically close to one another, but are not always treated as being part of the same sphere. However, Estonia shares many aspects of its history and culture with the Nordic region. At various points in its history, the territory which now makes up Estonia was controlled by the Teutonic Order, Swedish Empire, Kingdom of Denmark, all before Estonia eventually was absorbed by the Russian Empire and later Soviet Union. Since the Soviet occupation was the most recent, in the popular consciousness Estonia is often most associated with the rest of the post-communist bloc in the east. But given its long history of involvement with the Nordic world and current level of integration into western institutions, it could also be considered as part of this cultural and political sphere. One of the most widely discussed aspects of the Nordic world is the region’s strong social-democratic parties and governments. The countries have an international image of successful social-democratic government, and domestically the parties of this nature hold a significant amount of power. The leaders of two of the six Nordic countries are from social democratic parties as of June 2023, and if not in government, the parties remain undeniable forces within the national parliaments.

Vote Share of Primary Social Democratic Party by Country (PES member parties only)

Norway	Sweden	Denmark	Finland	Estonia
<b>23.6%</b> Vote share 2021	<b>30.2%</b> Vote share 2022	<b>27.6%</b> Vote share 2022	<b>19.9%</b> Vote share 2023	<b>9.3%</b> Vote share 2023
<b>48/169 seats</b>	<b>107/349 seats</b>	<b>50/179 seats</b>	<b>43/117</b>	<b>9/101</b>

Figure 1. Unless otherwise noted, all election results are sourced from official national government websites: Storting.no, riksdag.se,

In Norway, the PM as of June 2023 is Jonas Gahr Støre, who has held the office since 2021. He is the leader of the Labour Party, which holds 48 out of the 169 seats in the Storting. In

Sweden, the PM is Ulf Kristersson who is from the Moderate Party, which is within the conservative block. However, the current government is a minority government, which is in power due to the block's confidence and supply agreement with the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats. The Social Democrats continue to hold the largest share of seats of any single party with 107 seats out of 349. The SD alone also holds more seats than the entire current governing coalition. Magdalena Andersson, who is leader of the SD party was PM briefly in 2021. Her premiership and political position was not anomalous either, with her party dominating the governing roles in the country since 1932 (Wallenfeldt n.d). In Denmark, PM Mette Frederiksen is also leader of the Social Democratic Party, which holds 50 out of the 179 seats in the Folketing. In Finland the outgoing PM Sanna Marin, is from the Social Democratic Party, which is in government and holds 40 of the 117 available seats. Marin's government lost the governing position in the 2023 election, but her personal popularity remained high and her party's vote and seat share actually increased since the last election, increasing their seat number to 43.

## Research Question

Because Estonia has much in common with the Nordic countries in terms of culture and history, one might assume that it would have a similar political landscape now that it has been independent from the Soviet Union for thirty years. However in this respect, Estonia appears to diverge to some degree. The Estonian Social Democratic Party (SDE) has been a fixture of the political spectrum ever since independence, but it has never commanded the same kind of power that similar parties do in the north. The SDE currently holds only 9 of the 101 seats in the Riigikogu, with a vote share of 9.3%. This result is within their typical result range, and the party has stable support throughout the last thirty years. Given that there is a 5% cut off under which a

party does not get seats in the Riigikogu, it is often easy for a small party to disappear for an election. However, SDE has never fallen below that line. The SDE does not hold the prime minister's office, with PM Kaja Kallas belonging to the center-right Reform Party. While the Social Democrats are currently in coalition government with Reform, they are a comparatively smaller force in parliament than their equivalent parties in the Nordic region. The goal of this thesis is to explore why this may be the case, and why the SDE has so consistently remained in parliament for so long, despite their small size.

In order to do this, this thesis will first define what Nordic is and outline the connections Estonia has to the region. Second, it will cover what the Nordic Model is, and discuss the importance of trade unions for social democratic development. Third, it will review the history of the SDE, describe the Estonian national electoral system, and present the national and European election results for the SDE. Fourth it will review several key figures in the party's history and the SDE political program and ministerial appointments. Finally, it will review two parties who may compete with SDE for votes, and describe SDE's relationship with each.

## What is Nordic?

The terms 'Nordic' and 'Scandinavian' are often used interchangeably in English, but have slightly different meanings. Generally Scandinavia refers to the core continental North Germanic nations which are located on the Scandinavian peninsula: Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Nordic refers to a larger area, stretching from Greenland all the way to Finland, and including the Iceland, Faroe Islands, Åland Islands, and the core Scandinavian countries (Hilson 2019). This group of countries is united by cultural and political similarities which have developed over the last several centuries. Much of the region was under either Swedish or

Danish rule at some point in its history, and so were part of similar power structures. The Kalmar Union (lasting from 1397-1523) was the last power to incorporate the region into one unified body, which at the time was ruled by the Danish crown. In the modern era, institutionalized interactions through the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers furthered integration and led to the development to a distinct Nordic voice within Europe (Ruse 2014). The Nordic Council was founded in 1952, and led to the establishment of a labor and customs union between the nations. This made it easier for people to move between the Nordic member nations and strengthened the policy unity between them, bringing the group even closer together (Hilson 2019).

## Estonia as a Nordic Country

Estonia has a long history of participation in the Nordic sphere stretching back to the middle ages. Most of the land and the Estonians who lived on it were owned by feudal landlords who were of German origin and eventually became an entire class of Baltic-Germans (Kasekamp 2018, pg. 62). The power of the Baltic-German nobility lasted from the middle ages when the Teutonic order gained control, on to 1918 where Estonia gained independence (Kasekamp 2018, pg. 91). However German influence was not the only Germanic influence in the region.

Connection with Denmark reaches far back into the past, and in some cases into national legend. According to legend, the *Dannebrog* originates from a battle in 1219 in what is now Estonia, where it fell from the sky to the Danish king Valdemar II (Kasekamp 2018 pg.13). The Danish crown controlled various parts of Estonia from 1219 to 1579. The area controlled by the Danes shifted over time, but there was a Danish presence in at least some part of the modern territory of Estonia during this period (Kasekamp 2018, pg.13-15). The impact of this history is

still perceptible today. Toompea Castle in Tallinn, which now houses the Riigikogu, was called *castrum danorum* in Latin records, and *taani linna* (Danish castle) in the Estonian of the time (Vidović 2021). The name of Tallinn itself also displays the Danish influence in the region, with one possible etymology of the name deriving from the old Estonian for Danish fort: *Taani Linn* (Vidović 2021).

Arguably Sweden has made the most material impact on Estonian history of the other Nordic nations. This is primarily because Sweden ruled Estonia from roughly 1558 when Northern regions came under Swedish control, to 1710 when Sweden lost the territory to the Russian Empire. This period has been generally well remembered by Estonians, with it being referred to as “the good old Swedish times” (*vana hea Rootsi aeg*). According to Kasekamp, it is the only period of domination which is remembered as ‘good’ (Kasekamp 2018, pg. 47). The period was not without many hardships, but is well remembered largely because the Swedish monarchy was relatively effective at curtailing the behavior of the Baltic-German nobility who owned most land. Therefore improving life for much of the enserfed population living on it (Kasekamp 2018, pg. 47). The crown did not do away with the gentry, but it regulated the relationship between landlord and serf, so that the exploitation of the latter was lessened. Corporal punishment was also outlawed, and in 1687 serfdom was nominally banned by the Swedish monarch. However this directive was not consistently followed, and so in practice serfdom continued well into the 19th century (Kasekamp 2018, pg.47). Additionally, one of the greatest legacies of the Swedish period was the improvement of education. In 1632 the reigning Swedish monarch, King Gustavus Adolfus, also established the University of Dorpat (later called Tartu). In 1992, a statue of him was re-erected in its original spot which had been removed in

1928 ('History of the University of Tartu'. 2021), which demonstrates that this period has resonance in modern Estonia. Additionally, there were reforms under the Swedish Crown which established native-language primary schools in each parish in 1686 (Kasekamp 2018, pg. 46). All of these reforms improved the lot of those living under serfdom, and this well remembered time was likely a foundation for further positive connection between Sweden and Estonia. In more recent times 30,000 Estonians migrated into Sweden as refugees from the advancement of the Red Army during the second World War (Kasekamp 2018, pg. 127). There were attempts to form an exile government in Sweden after the war, but Sweden's neutral position did not allow it to play host to a government-in-exile (Taagepera 2018, pg.81). However, this diaspora has been useful to Estonia, and they advocated for Estonia's freedom and eventually provided useful western connections for the new state and its re-emerging political parties. The social democratic politicians who went into exile in Sweden during the Soviet occupation, were instrumental in establishing the new SDE party upon their return to Estonia after the fall of the USSR.

Finland and Estonia share perhaps the closest cultural connection, since their languages are related, and Estonians had exposure to Finnish media during much of the Soviet period due to physical proximity. They also have had more recent shared experiences of history. Finland and Estonia both belonged to the Russian Empire, and both gained independence following the first World War and the Russian Revolution. The modern connection between the two also exists in physical infrastructure. The first western-oriented electrical infrastructure , a cable called Estlink, which connected Estonia to the rest of the EU also came from Finland. This cable was completed in 2006, and has been followed by several more cables linking under the Baltic Sea due to the high demand (Vidović 2021). Now the majority of imported electrical power in

Estonia comes from the Nordic region. The Nordic countries also sponsored a project called Baltic Ring, which aimed to create common energy markets in the Baltic Sea region (Smith 2002). This physical integration into the Nordic electrical power exchange underscores the broader push for integration into European structures, and especially Nordic ones.

In a speech to the Swedish Institute for International Affairs in 1999, future Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves made the case for Estonia being a Nordic country. He argued that the Estonian language shares a form of the word 'Yule' and similar accompanying celebrations with all countries across the northern edge of Europe, from the UK to Finland. He argued that this belies a cultural continuity shared among that set of Northern European nations (Ilves 1999). He goes on to illustrate this point by referring to the frank and businesslike disposition, protestant heritage, and industrious mentality which are among other cultural traits which are common to the region. He also notes that while the Baltic States cooperate frequently and have good relations with one another, they do not share a common identity (Ilves 1999). Many of the Baltic states shared experiences are negative, and each has its own distinct culture. In many way Lithuania is more tied to Poland than to Estonia, and Estonia is closer to the Nordic countries (Auers 2015, pg.214-215). Ilves' speech was intended to bring in new investment into Estonia, as well as to build a new national image during an era in which Estonia was keen to distance itself from its Soviet past.

During the negotiations around European Union accession Estonia was assisted by the Nordic countries, and upon Estonia's entry into the union it has become part of a coalition of the Nordic and Baltic countries usually called the NB6 (Ruse 2014). It is not formed on any one legal agreement, but was a Swedish initiative intended to bring the Baltic states into more EU

decision making (Ruse 2014). This framework has helped to create a Nordic-Baltic coalition of sorts, within the EU.

## Economic & Development Comparison Between Estonia and the Nordic Countries

The Nordic region contains some of the most prosperous countries in the world.

According to surveys conducted by Eurobarometer in 2022, Estonia and the three Nordic countries within the EU are similar in several respects. According to Freedom House rankings from 2023, Norway, Sweden and Finland all have total freedom scores of 100, and Denmark has a score of 97, making them among the most free countries in the world in terms of civil liberties and political rights. Estonia is also among the most highly scored: holding a 94, which is the same score held by Iceland (Countries and Territories-Freedom House rankings 2023). The countries also have very high levels of human development on a global scale. Norway ranks first, Denmark sixth, Sweden seventh, Finland eleventh, and Estonia a while later at thirty first (United Nations HDI 2022). The whole region has very high literacy rates, nearing 100%, and Estonia ranks in the top ten in PISA tests in reading, math, and science (PISA Haridus-Ja Teadusministeerium 2022). This ranking is higher than any of the Nordic countries.

A casual observer may note that there is a wide economic development gap between Estonia and its Nordic neighbors. Estonia's per capita GDP was 27,943.7 in 2021, whereas Sweden's was 61,028.7, Denmark's 68,007.8, Norway's 89,154.3, Finland's 53,654.8, and Iceland's 68,727.6 (World Bank 2021). Obviously there is a very large discrepancy between these numbers. However, since per capita GDP is not an entirely accurate way of viewing quality of life, it is useful to compare the Human Development Index ratings of the countries as well.

The HDI is a broader measure of wellbeing, which takes factors like housing and purchasing power into account. According to the 2022 HDI rankings Norway holds rank 2, Iceland 3, Denmark 6, Sweden 7, and Finland 11. Estonia is ranked as 31st (HDI 2022). Estonia is highly developed, and the quality of life there is on par with many other EU countries, but still significantly lower than the Nordic region. The GINI index measures inequality within countries, and in this Estonia has a score of 30.9, while Sweden has 28.9, Norway 27.7, Denmark 27.5, Finland 27.1, and Iceland 26.1 (World Bank- GINI Index). All of this indicates that Estonia is close to the Nordic countries in many measures of development. Additionally, as the Nordic and Baltic regions become more integrated with one another, the convergence of the two may quicken.

## The Nordic Model, and Trade Unions as a Source of SD Power

This long history of integration explains why a similar societal and political structure grew across the whole Nordic region. The Nordic Model is a societal arrangement having origins in the policies of the labor movement which promotes universalized welfare policies, and high taxes to support public goods. The Nordic Model is the feature which is most associated with social democracy, and it is important to understand what the Nordic Model is in order to understand SD parties in the region.

According to Hilson of Aarhus University the Nordic Model can also refer to “the preference for consensual decision making in politics, and the centralized structures for resolving conflict in the labour market” in addition to the welfare state itself (Hilson 2019). In his influential 1990 book, *“The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism”*, Gøsta Esping-Andersen

outlines the three types of welfare state: Liberal, Corporatist-Statist, and Social Democratic (Esping-Andersen 1990, pg.27). Esping Andersen contends that the Nordic model of welfare adheres closely to the social democratic model which he describes. The social democratic model is universal, in which benefits are received by all levels of society in some capacity. The goal of this model is to prevent people from needing the ‘safety-net’ aspect of the welfare state by making it unlikely that a person will be in dire circumstances. This also is intended to less personal burden, ensuring that one’s personal and family resources are not exhausted before necessary services are delivered. It also removes some sectors from the market, and the view is that the state is better at distributing some societal needs than the private sector. Most often these include education, social services, and regional development.

In contrast, the liberal approach most common in the US and UK generally treats welfare more like a commodity which is available alongside private options, and is used as a last line defense against poverty which is used only when a person’s individual and familial resources are no longer sufficient. Access to benefits is means-tested, and targeted at low income citizens only (Esping-Andersen 1990, pg.43).

Like many welfare policies across the western world, the Nordic model has its origins in the goals of the labor movement. However the region’s has developed in a different way in large part due to the strength of social democratic parties and the trade unions associated with them.

SAMAK is a a co-operation committee between the social democratic parties of the Nordic region and labor organizations (trade unions). The goal of the committee is to secure and develop the Nordic model. Because all relevant parties are present, SAMAK’s published materials are a useful barometer of what the Nordic model is, and what role SD parties have

Figure 2: Lövdin, Anders. 2016. '2 | THE NORDIC MODEL FOR DUMMIES'. SAMAK.



played in its development. The above chart is sourced from SAMAK’s website, in their “*The Nordic Model for Dummies*” pamphlet. It demonstrates the structures which make up the Nordic model: open economies with high tax revenue, trade, and high employment: high levels of universalized public services: and a highly organized and unionized labor market which keeps wages at higher levels (Lövdin 2016). The first two parts of the series are likely the most discussed components of the model: strong, open economies with high levels of tax and services. However, the third factor of trade union strength and involvement in politics is perhaps less often discussed. Trade unions are an important structural element which supports the past and present strength of SD parties in the Nordic countries. Estonia’s differing history in this regard has had a clear impact on the modern role of the SDE.

The Nordic countries have had very high levels of trade union influence in politics for the majority of the 20th century (Redvaldson 2019). The main goal of the labor movement in the

19th and early 20th century was to improve the conditions of the emergent industrial working class. In order to do this, they needed to set up unions to protect workers rights and wages, and these unions needed political power to enshrine these protections in law. For labor unions, social democratic parties were an effective way to grow the union membership, and gain access to government. For the parties, associating with unions meant financial support for their campaigns, and the electoral backing of union members. Considering that the majority of the workforce has been and is unionized, this membership is of no small consequence for election outcomes (Allern 2010).

Social democratic parties in the region continue to be structurally aligned with trade unions, and often operated as the political wing of the labor movement. In early 20th century Denmark the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions movement were a single organization. The trade unions and labor movement grew to have so much influence within their own section of society that it was possible to live life entirely within the labor movement (Redvaldson 2019). The labor movement set up gathering places and celebrations which constructed a strong layer of civil society attached to the labor movement and therefore to the Social Democratic party. In the years before World War II, social democratic parties were elected to national office upon making strategic alliances with agrarian parties and liberals. These agreements stabilized government in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, and in the case of Sweden allowed SD-led governments to rule nearly uninterrupted until the mid 1970's (Redvaldson 2019). In Sweden, there is still a 'Trade-Union Committee' in which labor organizations (LOs), SD party members, and other labor movement groups meet once a month. The trade unions still play a large role in support for the party, and therefore influence the party's platform. However,

this is less the case in Denmark, where in recent years the relationship between the two groups has lessened (Allern 2010). Allern argues that one of the reasons for the shift away from LO and SD unity in Denmark is in the ability of the SD party to effectively maintain a voter base, and deliver policies which are friendly to those constituents. As an SD party loses power in parliament, they also lessen their attractiveness as a political partner for labor unions to lend their support to.

The large economic shifts which have occurred since the heyday of the labor movement have also likely been a factor in the power of its political wing. Increasingly, the share of the populace employed in urban industrial work is diminishing in favor of a more service-oriented economy, and therefore often white-collar workforce. This means that the constituency of SD parties has shifted over time, and so has the platform. Instead of solely representing the industrial working class, SD voters have come to include white-collar workers. The expansion of the constituency and the change in political climate has changed the program of SD parties, and moved them toward the center, and further from their labor roots. This combined with their long tenure in government has in some cases caused the SD to be seen as representing a status quo, rather than being a vanguard to worker's rights and protections. When the status quo becomes unacceptable, this has caused a share of workers who are traditionally part of the SD base to turn to right wing parties like Sweden Democrats to express their political voice (Redvaldson 2019). This reordering of constituents has likely effected the role SD parties take across the region.

## Trade Unions in Estonia

One of the crucial points of divergence between Estonia and the Nordic countries is its level of unionization, and the role that unions play in politics. The table below describes the

levels of unionization in the region, and how much of the workforce is covered by a collective bargaining contract.

Unionization Levels in the Region

	Norway	Denmark	Sweden	Finland	Estonia
<b>Collective Bargaining Coverage</b>	70%	80%	88%	91%	33%
<b>Proportion of Employees in Unions</b>	52%	67%	70%	74%	10%
<b>Board-level representation</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Figure 3: ETUI. n.d. ‘Countries | Worker Participation’. Accessed 4 June 2023. <https://www.worker-participation.eu/National-Industrial-Relations/Countries>.

The Nordic countries are clearly highly unionized and Estonia is much less so. Without the membership and funding from strong unions, it would be difficult for the Social Democratic party in Estonia to reach the same level of power and influence that the SD parties of the Nordic countries enjoy. Trade union participation was high during the Soviet period, but did not take on the same character in civil society. Additionally, their membership fell drastically upon independence. Trade unions, like other elements of civil society, have remained weak even as Baltic governments themselves stabilized and strengthened (Auers 2015, pg. 155). When independence was won, there was a pervasive distrust of political parties. Trade unions actually distanced themselves from the Social Democrats, who would have otherwise been their natural ally, out of concern that participation in politics would undercut their support and decrease their membership, rather than bolster it (Arter 1996, pg.205). Without that high level of unionized workforce, it is difficult for the SDE to attain the same position its sister parties hold.

## Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond (SDE) History Early 20th Century

Social democracy has a long history in modern Estonian politics. The Social Democratic Party is the oldest continuously active party in Estonia (Social Democratic Party Faction). The party was founded in 1905, which is prior to Estonia's first period of freedom after it left the Russian Empire in 1918.

In May 1917, they held 9 of the 62 seats in Estonia's first parliament (Raun 2001, pg. 100). In April 1919 in the elections for the Estonian Constituent Assembly, the SD replaced the Bolsheviks as the major voice of the left in the Estonia and secured 33.3 percent of the vote and 41 of the 120 seats. This election had high levels of participation (80%) and the Bolshevik party was now legally barred from the elections, because Estonia was fighting for independence from a Bolshevik-led Soviet Union at the time (Raun 2001 pg. 109). The Independent Socialists received 7 seats and 5.8% of the vote, and the Labor Party received 30 seats and 25% of the vote. However at the time the Labor Party was not considered a leftist party, but rather a center party (Raun 2001, pg. 109). When the SDE entered parliament in 1919, were recognized members of the Socialist International ('История'. 2016). The non-communist left (the SD and SR) combined in 1926 to form the Socialist Worker's party (Raun 2001, pg. 114). During the independent republic years, the SD party had the following results:

### Early 20th c. Seats in Parliament (out of 101)

	1920	1923	1926	1929	1932
Social Democrats (SD)	18	15			
Independent Socialists (SR)	11	5			
Socialist Workers' (Merger of SD and SR)			24	25	22

Figure 4: Raun, Toivo U. 2001. *Estonia and the Estonians*. pg.113. Updated 2nd ed. Stanford, Calif: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University.

Despite strong results, the left was not dominant in government during the first independent period and 10 out of the 21 cabinets from 1919-1933 were headed by parties from the right and center. The SD and SW only took part in 6 cabinets in the same period (Raun 2001, pg.114). The left wing parties which did gain power made significant changes such as land reform, which were popular with the masses. They then lost power after having accomplished those goals, since they had created a new land-owning class who were less radical than the unlanded peasantry or proletariat were wont to be (Kasekamp 2018, pg.97).

In 1931 economic depression hit the Baltic states, and the parliamentary system became increasingly unstable. Konstantin Päts was a key figure in the Farmer's Union party, and previously been head of state. He advocated for the introduction of a presidency, and was under pressure from the fascist-style group Vaps to do so (Kasekamp 2018, pg.99). A presidency was created by a constitutional amendment which had been opposed by the socialists, but supported by 73% of the voters (Kasekamp 2018, pg.99). The Social Democrats were wary of creating a strong executive in the form of a presidency. In the lead-up to the April 1934 presidential

election, it seemed that Vaps might win, so Päts declared martial law before the election took place. He claimed that this action was taken in order to protect the democratic government from fascist takeover, but the bulk of power remained in his hands for the duration of his rule.

During the Päts dictatorship, some political opposition continued especially in liberal circles in Tartu (Kasekamp 2018, pg.102), but activity was not significant challenge to the government (Kasekamp 2018, pg.101). All political parties were eventually banned, and the SD party was no longer a force. Although Päts had been instrumental in the establishment of an independent Estonia, he did not have high regard for party politics (Smith 2002), saying that democracy was not suited to the national character and that the parties had been too immature to succeed. His regime was contemporary with the rise of fascism in CEE, but itself was not precisely fascist, and occupied a generally right-wing space presented with the aesthetic trappings of fascism (Kasekamp 2018, pg.101). There were none of settling of political scores through violence which existed under other contemporary dictatorships in Europe (Smith 2002).

Following the Soviet annexation of Estonia, and the deepening of dictatorship, members of the SD went into exile in Sweden in 1945 and remained there until Estonia regained independence in 1991 (Kasekamp 2018, pg. 127). As we will later discuss, this exile party was crucial to the development of the modern SDE. The SDE was deeply involved in the movement for the re-establishment of independence, with several of its early leaders being members of the Popular Front. The party rejoined the Socialist International again upon the renewal of independence and remained members until 2017 ('История' Sotsid.ee).

## The Modern Party

The modern Social Democratic Party (SDE) has its origins in 1990's Tallinn, when it was founded by a merger of three smaller parties: The Estonian Democratic Labour Party, The Estonian Social Democratic Independence Party, and the Russian Social Democratic Party of Estonia (Gudžinskas 2020). The chairman of the party following this merger was Marju Lauristin, who had been an influential figure in the independence movement and one of the leaders of the Popular Front (История Sotsid.ee). The merger was a practical one, as none of the parties could muster enough members to meet the minimum requirements for party registration. Sharing resources amongst one another would strengthen the social democratic bloc, and make the group a viable part of the political spectrum. Additionally, the Socialist International only accepted one party per country, and so it was pragmatic to join forces with the similar parties in the Riigikogu (Arter 1996, pg. 173). It is worth noting that elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, the Communist Party remained a major political player, albeit in new forms, well into the independent period. This is not the case in Estonia (Taagepera 2018, pg.101). Although leaders of the popular front had been Communist Party members, the CP itself did not transform into a major party in the new country (Taagepera 2018, pg.101).

Estonian social democracy was itself a fusion of many influences in some ways. There had been an existing party during the interwar years, but the modern form of the party was influenced not only by the native traditions, but also by collaboration with other Northern European social democrats. In January 1990, The Estonian Social Democratic Forum was held in Tartu. In attendance were social democrats from fourteen countries, including the Labour Party from the UK, and the Swedish Social Democrats (Arter 1996, pg. 172). This event was

intended to help establish social democratic parties within the republics of the USSR. As the party was developing in the 1990's, the influence of Swedish, and sometimes British, politics would prove impactful on the SDE.

The most impactful part of this influence was the exile community in Sweden. The SDE was represented in exile abroad by the Estonian Socialist Party's Foreign Association, a group of Estonian politicians formed in Sweden in 1945 (Social Democratic Faction, Riigikogu.ee). This group was particularly important for the formation of the party in its early years. The leader of the ESPFA was Johannes Mikkelson, who was involved in trade unions and social democratic politics internationally during the 1980's (Johansson 2008). He was in contact with many other political parties and figures, often through the Socialist International. In 1990, several Estonian SD groups had meetings with Mikkelson and the other members of the Estonian exile organization. These contacts provided vital political experience and training to early SDE members, and allowed them to have political experience outside of the Soviet system or Communist party. Marju Lauristin herself commented on the large role Mikkelson played, and that contact between the exile group in Sweden and Estonia's nascent independent SD party was significant for the development of the Estonian Social Democratic Party. She even said that it would have been impossible to create the party without the network of contacts within the Swedish and Finnish SD parties (Johansson 2008). Beyond the impact of developing the foundation of the party, the exile party and Nordic contacts are significant because they provided continuity from the inter-war independent period and allowed the new party to develop along European, rather than Soviet lines. The political ties to the Nordic countries also strengthened the

possibility that an independent Estonia would have a political environment in which a Nordic style SD party could thrive.

Through the course of the 1990's the party then went through several iterations in the early days of the re-established nation, including coalition with the Rural Centre Party in 1992, and being part of the explicitly right-wing Pro Patria alliance headed by Mart Laar, and eventually becoming the Moderates in 1995 (Johansson 2008). One of the primary reasons for the name change was that empty Soviet rhetoric had soured public opinion towards anything which seemed leftist, and made it difficult for the Moderates (SDE) to explicitly associate themselves with social democracy or leftism in general. This also made it hard for them to advocate for economic policies which could protect the poorer sections of the population and ease the enormous economic pain that the country was experiencing (Taagepera 2018, pg.113). Instead, they had to present themselves in such a moderate way, that often their potential constituents were not able to see the benefit in voting for the Moderates, and they were not able to find secure purchase until 2007, when they were more consistently above the 5% threshold (Taagepera 2018, pg.113).

In all of this transition, it was important for all parties to find their identity, and advocate for the version of the country they wanted to see. Much of Estonian politics was dominated by larger-than-life figures like Savisaar and Laar. The importance of personality was a very visible aspect of the post-Soviet landscape in which there was a dominant anti-party sentiment (Arter 1996, pg.205). It was especially important for SDE's survival that their base of support not entirely tied to the actions and public perception of a single, highly visible individual. Since everything about public systems and government was being rebuilt and there were a lot of

possible directions which Estonia could take, and SDE leaders were split on which course would best suit the nation: some leaders wanted to emulate the Nordic model, and others thought that a more moderate route might be better suited for the Estonian context (Johansson 2008).

Given the role Scandinavian political parties played in the founding of the SDE, it is not surprising that the Nordic model was a popular model for the new party. Andres Tarand, who was prime minister in addition leading the SDE from 1996-2001 thought that the Nordic model was the best model for Estonia to follow, both for the security of society and for Estonia's belonging to the Nordic world (Johansson 2008). According to founding SDE member & leader Marju Lauristin, the model of Nordic social democracy was the one which the party aimed to pursue. She was active in promoting universal welfare policies during her time as Minister of Social Affairs. This was derived in some ways from the programs of the SDE's sister parties in the Nordic region. However much of a proponent of the Nordic model she was, she was wary of its potential to stunt the economic growth of the country at a time when Estonia desperately needed economic development (Johansson 2008). Lauristin said that she preferred the Nordic model to the US or Blair-ite version in the UK (Lauristin 2009).

Despite the enthusiasm for the Nordic model from leaders like Lauristin, Blairism did have an impact on the future of Estonia's political spectrum. The German SPD and New Labour brought new ideas into the center-left section of the political spectrum in the 1990's, and were highly successful in the elections of 1998 and 1997, respectively. 1999 was the year that Schröder of SDP and Tony Blair of New Labour announced a joint program called Die Neue Mitte and the Third Way respectively (Johansson 2008). These approaches differed greatly from the heyday of social democracy in Western Europe which had occurred from the 1940's through

the 70's. Following the wave of conservatism of the 1980's which gave rise to Thatcher, a new form of the left was necessary to invigorate the opposition's electability. Blair and Schröder's new programs were more neoliberal than their predecessors, and in the case of Blair were keen to distance themselves from the power of the unions and membership which had once underpinned their party's power (United Kingdom - New Labour). Johansson argues that Blairism was influential in part because of the different context in post-soviet Estonia. Blair's New Labour program was lower tax and lower spend than either previous Labour policy, or the contemporary Nordic model (Johansson 2008). In Estonia, there was a need for social support and protection of the less well off, but there was also concern that a Nordic style program would be too costly for the emerging economy, and might be unpopular in a country whose public opinion was considerable more right-wing. It was also less explicitly socialist, as the party removed the commitment to "common ownership of the means of production" from its program in 1995 (United Kingdom - New Labour). Additionally, a version of social democracy which did not rely heavily on a strong labor movement and its accompanying civil society infrastructure must have seemed attractive for the Estonian context in which labor unions did not have such a large political footprint. Andres Tarand, leader of the SDE from 1996-2001, expressed his admiration for how Tony Blair thought about society, even though Tarand himself was not entirely in agreement with New Labour's policies (Johansson 2009).

In addition to more direct influence from other SD parties in Europe, the desire to adhere to European norms and images provoked a Europeanization of the SDE. In 2004 the party reverted to being called Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond (Social Democratic Party). Since Estonia entered into the EU and NATO in this year, the move was meant to signal that the party

conformed to the mold of European Social Democratic Parties. SDE joined the Party of European Socialists in EU Parliament, and remains the only party from Estonia to be in the group (Members, pes.eu). Although traditional socialist internationalist rhetoric has tended to be unpopular in independent Estonia, Europeanization did not provoke similar negative associations. Association with European socialist groups helped to re-brand social democracy as a European form of politics rather than one weighed down by Soviet baggage. This is enhanced by the SDE's strong support and consistent for European accession, with prominent SDE members like Toomas Hendrik Ilves at the front of this campaign (Johansson 2008). European accession and the subsequent rebranding of the party also allowed the SDE to establish themselves as representatives of the political left without worry. Being able to take more distinctly leftist positions solidified their place in parliament by differentiating them from other competing parties (Taagepera 2018, pg.113).

## Estonian Election System

In order to understand the following election results, it is necessary to comprehend how Estonian national elections function. There are 12 electoral districts in the country, each of which reflects the population distribution. Each district has a set number of seats, and the total seats in the Riigikogu is 101. A party must receive 5% of the vote in a given electoral district in order to receive any seats at all. Upon meeting that threshold, mandates are distributed by proportional representation using the D'Hondt method (Valimised. n.d.)(Auers 2015, pg.82). The calculation has district mandates, personal mandates, and compensation mandates. District mandates are given to a candidate when there are enough votes to meet a quota in the electoral district, and the compensation votes are meant to adjust a party's seats according to their national results.

Personal mandates are derived from a candidates winning sufficient votes in their own right to meet a quota, with candidates selected from a list presented to voters (Valimised, n.d). The system of personal mandates helps to reinforce the importance of individual personalities in politics, as often the most popular candidates are placed at the top of the list as ‘locomotive’ candidates, although the elected positions may be held by another party member if those above them do not take their mandate (Whyte 2023) (Auers 2015, pg.83). Additionally, voters in Estonia are able to vote online in all elections (Auers 2015, pg.83) It is also worth noting that a member of the Riigikogu doesn’t represent their district in the way that an MP in the UK system does (Whyte 2023).

### SDE Election History

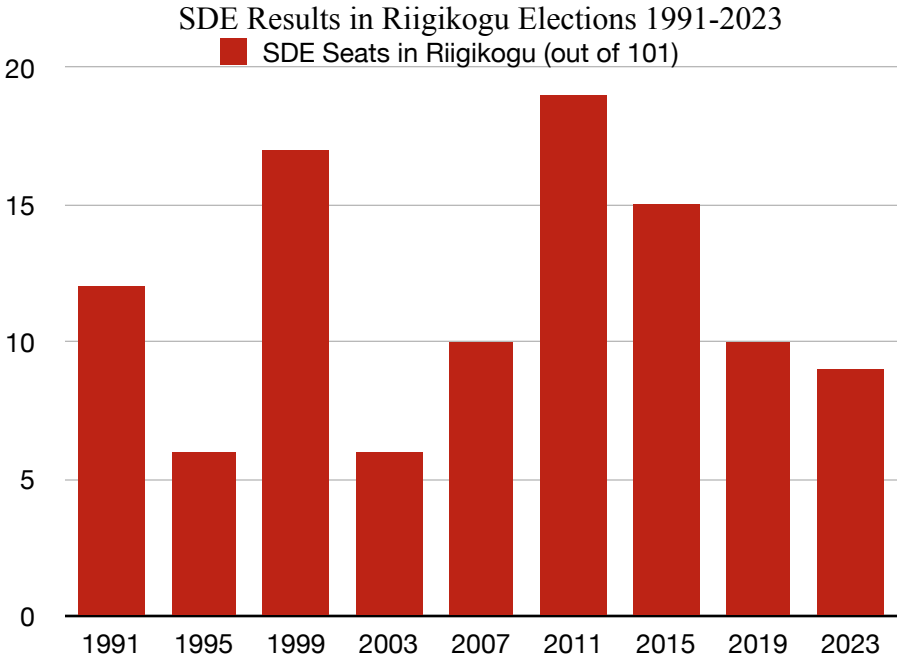


Figure 5: All data sourced from ‘Valimised’. n.d. Riigikogu Valimised 2023. Accessed 7 June 2023.

In the 2023 national elections, SDE got 9 seats of the 101 seats in the Riigikogu, and 9.3% of the vote. This showing is well within the usual range for the party. The SDE has stable

representation in parliament, and has been a part of every Riigikogu since independence. Since 1990, the party has an average of 12 seats in parliament, ranging from 6 at the lowest, and 19 at the highest. Since the total number of seats in the chamber is 101, the number of seats is often quite close to the percentage of the vote share which a party receives. The highest number of seats in modern electoral history occurred in 2011, when SDE received 19 seats. The chart below displays the national results for SDE since 1990. According to Taagepera, the Moderates became stable by 2007, when they changed their name back to the Social Democrats, and solidified their role as the European-style SD party (Taagepera 2018, pg.113)

### Regional Distribution of Votes

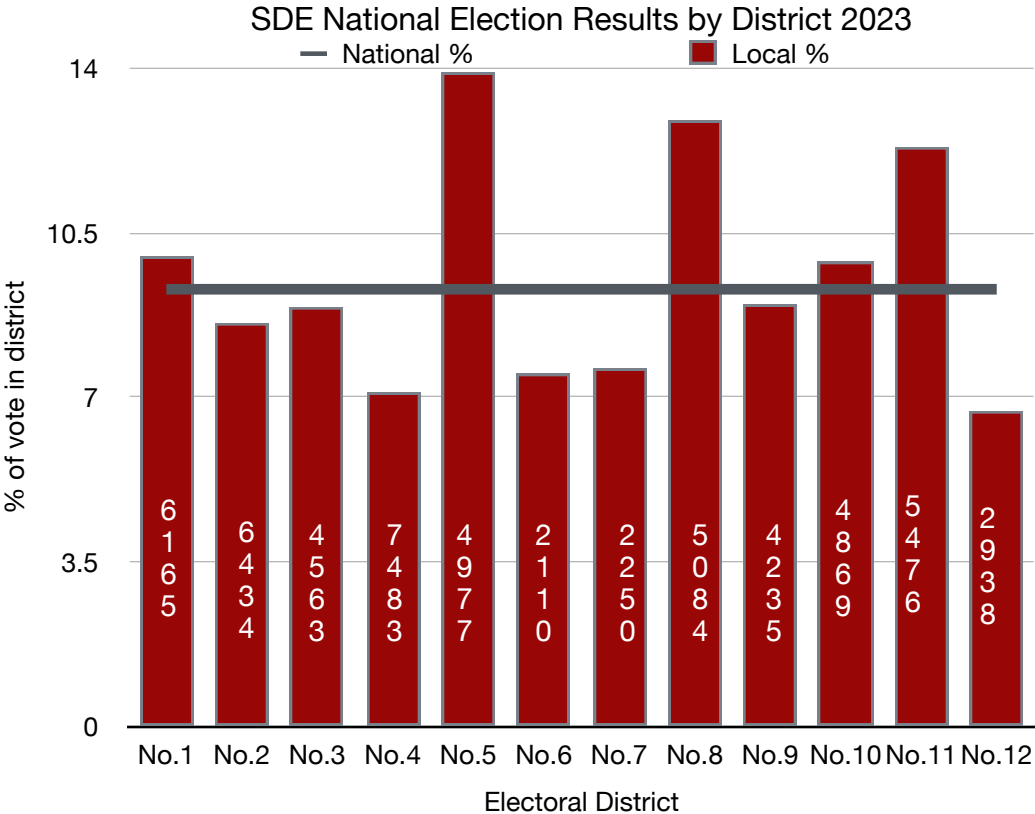


Figure 6: All data sourced from 'Valimised'. n.d. Riigikogu Valimised 2023. Accessed 7 June 2023.

The chart above shows the results of the SDE the 2023 national election. Each bar represents the vote share percentage which SDE received in each electoral district, and the

number on the bar itself represents the total number of votes SDE received. From this it is clear that SDE is especially popular in districts 5, 8, and 11 (See map, Figure 7). According to the regional distribution of their 2023 results, the SDE seems to be similarly popular throughout the country, and no one locality holds all of their support. Despite the fact that a few districts supporting them more heavily than others. All of the districts in which they performed particularly are quite rural, and none contain a major city. All three districts have a population density between 2.9 and 571.7 people per square kilometer, with the exception in district 8 of

Electoral Districts in which SDE Received their Highest Vote Share

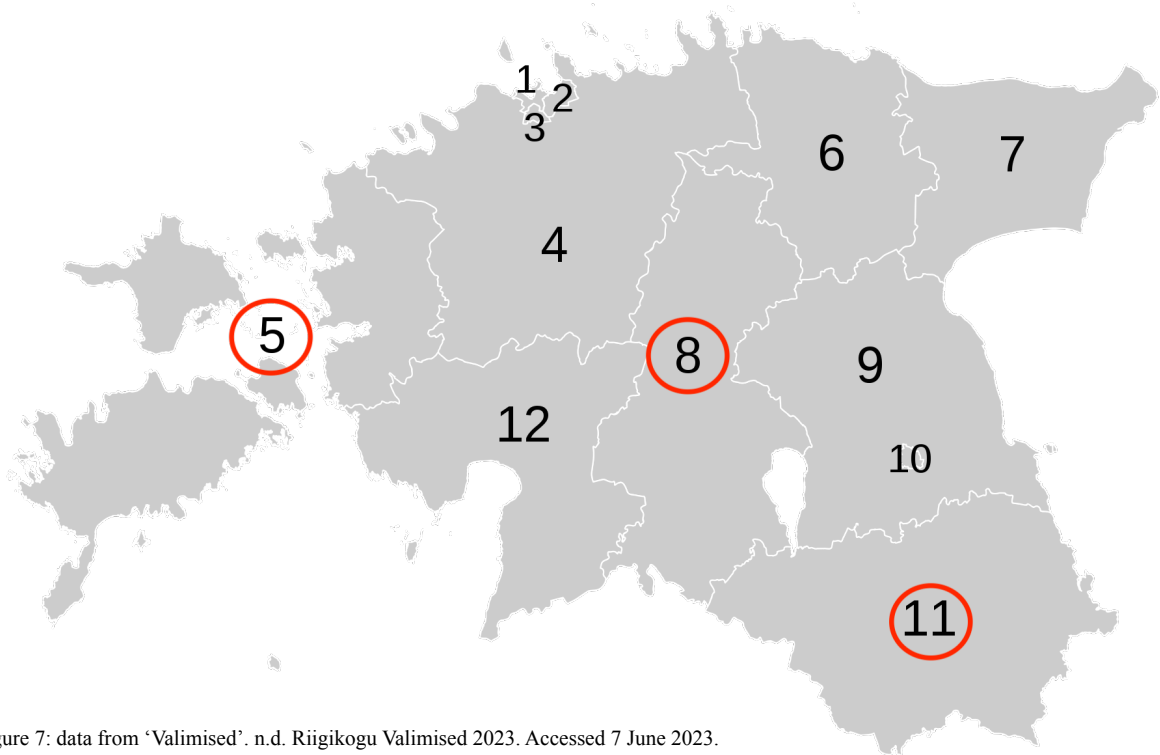


Figure 7: data from ‘Valimised’. n.d. Riigikogu Valimised 2023. Accessed 7 June 2023.

Viljandi city which has 1182.9 per km<sup>2</sup> (Statistics Estonia. 2022).

<b>SDE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Läänemets</li> <li>• Ossinovski</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Padar</li> <li>• Talve</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kreitzberg</li> <li>• Õunapuu</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saks</li> <li>• Tarand</li> </ul>
<b>National</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allas</li> <li>• Pikhof</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kütt</li> <li>• Nestor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kõua</li> <li>• Mikko</li> </ul>	<b>2003</b>
<b>Election</b>	<b>2019</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anvelt</li> <li>• Raud</li> <li>• Ossinovski</li> <li>• Hard</li> <li>• Pikhof</li> <li>• Hanso</li> <li>• Palo</li> <li>• Saar</li> <li>• Marrandi</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suur</li> <li>• Vassiljev</li> <li>• Kütt</li> <li>• Ossinovski</li> <li>• Kuttas</li> <li>• Allik</li> <li>• Rütli</li> <li>• Lember</li> </ul>	34,837 votes 7% 6 seats
<b>Results</b>	55,175 votes 9.8% 10 seats			<b>1999</b>
<b>1991-2023</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kaljurand</li> <li>• Mikser</li> <li>• Ossinovski</li> <li>• Raik</li> <li>• Padar</li> <li>• Kütt</li> <li>• Sikkut</li> <li>• Pikof</li> <li>• Kõva</li> <li>• Saar</li> </ul>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2007</b>	73,630 votes 15.21% 17 seats
(Source of all results is valimised.ee)		98,307 votes 17% 19 seats	58,365 votes 10.61% 10 seats	<b>1995</b>   32,381 votes 6% 6 seats
<b>2023</b>	<b>2015</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mikser</li> <li>• Palo</li> <li>• Nestor</li> <li>• Saar</li> <li>• Anvelt</li> <li>• Pikhof</li> <li>• Padar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kreitzberg</li> <li>• Saar</li> <li>• Padar</li> <li>• Nestor</li> <li>• Soosaar</li> <li>• Mikser</li> <li>• Pikhof</li> <li>• Tõnisson</li> </ul>	<b>1991</b>   44,577 votes 12.25% 12 seats
56,484 votes 9.3% 9 seats	87,190 votes 15.2% 15 seats			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kaljurand</li> <li>• Kallas</li> <li>• Kaljulaid</li> <li>• Sikkut</li> <li>• Kütt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mikser</li> <li>• Vakra</li> </ul>			

## European Elections

The SDE does particularly well in European elections. Estonia has seven MEP's representing it in the European Parliament, of whom two are currently held by members of the SDE: Sven Mikser and Marina Kaljurand. This puts SDE share at 28.5% of Estonia's total seats, which is much more similar to what Nordic SD parties receive in their national elections. (MEPs - Estonia). This result may be partly the product of a common phenomenon where smaller parties tend to be overrepresented in EUP compared to their domestic parliaments. It also due to the fact that the SDE has historically been very pro-EU, and was a strong advocate for Estonia's accession to the block ('История' Sotsid.ee). In 2004, the first EU parliamentary elections in which Estonia participated, were an especially good year for the SDE. They won 3 of Estonia's

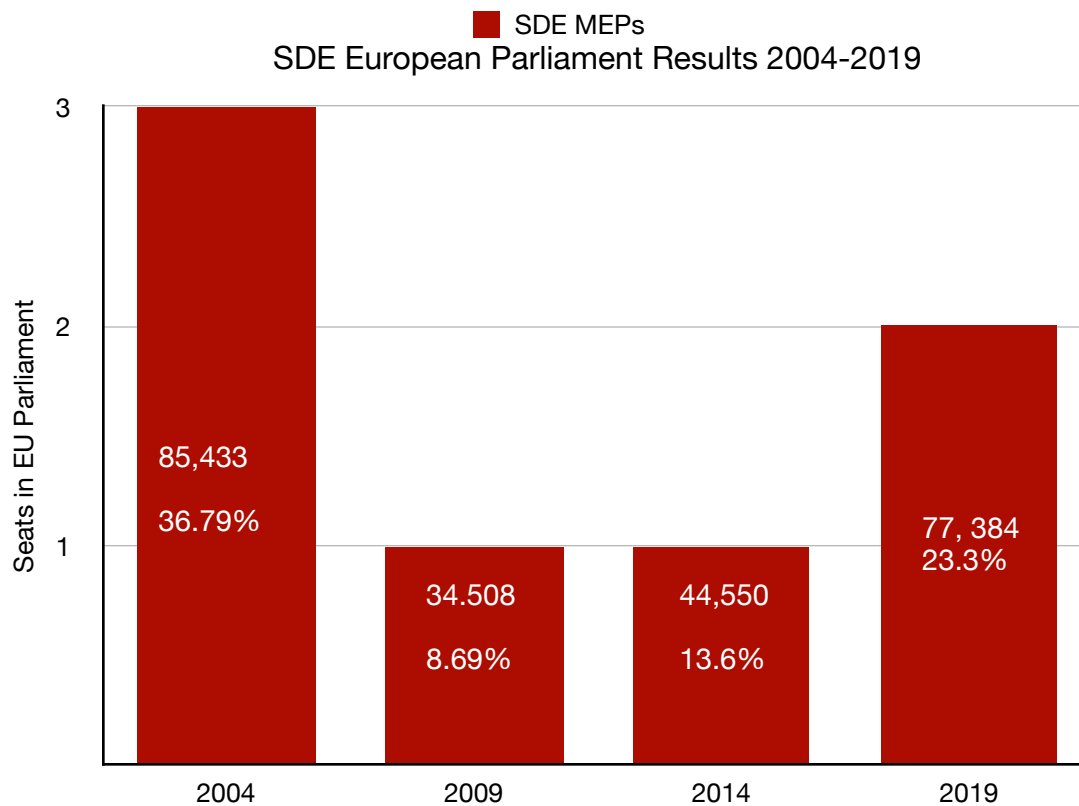


Figure 8: data from ‘MEPs | European Parliament | Estonia’. n.d. Accessed 27 April 2023.

then 5 seats. In addition to the party’s pro EU stance, this was also likely due to the prominence of Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who was a prominent SDE member who was seen to have extensive international experience (Ehin 2023). The chart above shows Estonia’s SDE representation in EUP since accession.

The SDE is part of the Socialists & Democrats group within EU parliament, and is the only current Estonian party to be grouped there. S&D grouping has representation by all of the major SD parties from the Nordic countries as well. They are also members of the Party of European Socialists (PES) of which their Nordic counterparts are also members. The PES is a group which brings together the “*Socialist, Social Democratic, and Labour parties of the European Union*” to advocate for shared progressive policy goals. The Estonian SDE is considered to be on the right wing within PES, but is still well within the spectrum of politics for the grouping.

## Key Figures of the SDE

One notable feature of Estonian politics is the general anti-party sentiment which has persisted since the early days of democracy. Emerging from a single party state in which the CP dominated public life, people were wary of political parties and tended to trust individual figures more, often with less regard to their political platforms (Arter 1996). This has meant that individual leaders or members of parties have had outsized impact of the party's political fortunes compared to other European democracies. Although this tendency to prefer individuals over party platforms was strongest in the 90's, it still has an impact on how people vote today. This is enhanced by the personal mandate component of the national election system (Whyte 2023). In order to better understand the SDE and its role in modern Estonian politics, this section will give an overview of several key figures within the SDE who have had an impact on the party's results. This section includes a brief overview of the public lives of Marju Lauristin, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Marina Kaljurand, and Jevgeni Ossinovski. These figures were chosen because they are each representative of key periods or aspects of the SDE's trajectory since the 1990's.

Marju Lauristin (b.1940) was leader of the SDE from 1990-1995. As a founding member of the SDE and leader in the independence movement, Marju Lauristin is crucial to the trajectory the party took from the outset. She is the daughter of the first Soviet premier in the ESSR, Johannes Lauristin. Her father was executed by the Soviet government in 1941. Marju Lauristin was one of the signatories of the "Letter of Forty", which was an open letter written in 1980 by forty Estonian intellectuals to protest Soviet Russification policies (Arter 1996, pg. 104). As previously discussed, she went to Sweden to make contacts with Nordic parties in the early days of the SDE, and was a proponent of the Nordic model as a potential path for both the SDE and

Estonia as a whole. She and Edgar Savisaar are often viewed as the mother and father of the Popular Front, although they began to split in the early 1990's over differing views of policy and leadership style (Arter 1996 pg.170). Savisaar had become increasingly dominant figure within his party (Centre), and the party's actions conformed to his personal decisions with little discussion (Taagepera 2018, pg.114). She also disapproved of his increasingly close relationship with Russia, and lack of support for EU and NATO accession. She remained a member of the SDE for the rest of her public life, including several terms as an MEP in European Parliament.

Toomas Hendrik Ilves (b. 1953) is a significant figure in both the development of the SDE, as well as in Estonian politics more generally. He led the SDE from 2001-2002 and was president from 2006-2016. His career and rise to prominence coincided with Estonia's accession to the EU and NATO, and given that he had been a strong proponent of both, his tenure was especially impactful. Since exiting office, his internet presence also makes him a prominent figure internationally. He got a lot of attention online when he engaged in a Twitter argument with Noble Prize-winning American economist Paul Krugman over Krugman's comments about Estonia's handling of the 2008 economic crisis. Krugman was critical of Estonia's response to the crisis, in response to which Estonia had refused to devalue its currency as suggested by Krugman and others, and instead have 'internal devaluation' and austerity measures to drastically cut public spending (Auers 2015, pg.154, 177). As a political figure Ilves represents the international dimension of Estonian politics. He was born in Sweden before going to university in the US at Columbia and then U Penn. He also was the ambassador to the US, Canada, and Mexico from 1993-1996. Following this, he moved to Estonia, where he became the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1996. He was then elected to the Riigikogu in 2002, then to the European

Parliament in 2004. He was a leading voice in Estonia's accession to the EU and NATO, as both of these occurred during his time in public office. His final post began in 2006, when he was elected president, gave up his party affiliation, and remained in office until 2016. His connection to the US was likely helpful in time in office, as he strengthened Estonia's ties to the states while he was president. His time in office was one of outreach, in which Estonia made connections to many of their strongest allies. His role in developing these connections makes him an important figure to consider when discussing the SDE.

Marina Kaljurand (b. 1962) also has a long tenure in the party, having been involved in the establishment of the modern Estonia state in the 1990's. She was a negotiator of Russian troop withdrawal from Estonia, and was involved in border negotiations at this time. During her public life, she has been an MEP, an ambassador to the US, Russian Federation, Israel, Mexico, and Canada, as well as Minister of Foreign Affairs among numerous titles (Marina Kaljurand, HCSS). As a member of the SDE, she is very popular figure. She won 4145 personal votes in 2023, making her the most personally popular candidate in the SDE that year. She has been one of the elected Riigikogu members in both 2019 and 2023, and currently holds office as an MEP in European Parliament. She identifies herself as ethnically Russian, and has ancestry in both Russia and Latvia.

Jevgeni Ossinovski (b. 1986) was the leader of the SDE from 2015-2019. He is the youngest of these figures, and has been popular with the electorate during his time in public life. He was among the candidates who received large shares of personal votes during the 2023 Riigikogu elections, and has won a place in the Riigikogu in every election since 2011. He, like Kaljurand, is Russian speaking. He also held the mandate for a working class Russian-speaking

district in the Tallinn region called Lasnamäe. His father came to Estonia in the 1980's from Kazakstan, and Jevgeni was born in Estonia in 1986 (Members, riigikogu.ee). He makes numerous appearances on Estonian TV, both in Russian and Estonian language segments, and is a prominent face within the party. He previously served as Minister of Education and Research, and the Minister of Health and Labour where he assembled the first ever meeting of all the health ministers of the PES member parties to advocate for the improvement of children's nutrition (PES. 2017). He is currently a member of the SDE representation in the Riigikogu, and serves on the Finance Committee ('Riigikogu fraktsioon').

## SDE Manifesto & 14 Points in the Government Agreement

At the beginning of the SDE's manifesto, they point out that Social Democracy has shaped European politics, and that this is especially true in the Nordic countries. It goes on to say that the Estonian nation is culturally similar to the Nordic region (SDE. 2016. 'Erakond'.) The manifesto speaks in generalities, but pledges to protect democracy, tolerant society, social justice, and promote the removal of certain spheres from the market. The three mentioned here are social, regional, and educational policy. The policies outlined in the "14 Points in the Government Agreement" are in keeping with policies common to Nordic SD parties. Better public funding for education, support for poor regions, and the improvement of universal benefits are all contained within their goals in government.

Many of the points within the party's "14 Points in the Government Agreement" section are aimed at improving the lives of those in rural areas, and keeping well paid jobs in areas outside the big cities. They include policies like raising the minimum wage to €1165 per month. This is likely a huge reason for their good election result in 2023 in areas which are very rural,

and whose median income tends to be on the middle to low end of the Estonian spectrum (Statistics Estonia. 2023. 'Palgad'). This policy was recently enacted by the government, which is an SDE victory, and is estimated to improve the income of every fourth worker in Estonia (SNS 2023). In keeping with the SDE's support for public education, their 14 points also include improving the funding and quality of rural schools in order to keep people in rural areas, and ensure quality of education there. They also advocate for improved state funding for higher education. The SDE has also long sought to end the era of flat income tax, and on numerous occasions, they have attempted to implement a more progressive system (Sulbi 2011). The party also supports improving defense, and ensuring the country's security in the face of danger from Russia.

## Ministerial Appointments

The ministerial appointments which the SDE occupies often correspond to their stated policy goals. The current coalition elected in 2023 consists of three ministers who belong to the SDE. Lauri Läänemets is Minister of the Interior, Riina Sikkut is the current Minister of Health, and Madis Kallas is the Minister of Regional and Rural Affairs. In the previous coalition, lasting from July 2022-March 2023, Läänemets held the same position, Piret Hartman was the Minister of Culture, Peep Peterson was the Minister of Health and Labour, Riina Sikkut was the Minister of Economic Affairs and Infrastructure, and Madis Kallas was Minister of the Environment (ERR News 2022).

The Ministry of the Interior is responsible for ensuring internal security, supporting civil society, protecting the state border, and citizenship and migration issues ('Introduction of the Ministry | Siseministeerium'). It has been led by a member of SDE four time since 2005.

The appointment to the Health Ministry is one commonly held by an SDE member when in coalition. The position is housed in the Ministry of Social Affairs, and is closely related to the Minister of Social Affairs, which were only separated in 2014 ('Introduction to the Ministry and Our Structure | Sotsiaalministeerium'). This ministry is responsible for social welfare, public health, and children's welfare. The position of Health Minister has been held by SDE five times since 2005, and the Minister of Social Affairs/Protection once in the same period ('Introduction to the Ministry and Our Structure | Sotsiaalministeerium').

The Minister of Agriculture/Rural/Regional Affairs has been held by SDE three times since 2005 (Ministry of Rural Affairs). This ministry holds responsibility for rural development, and SDE's 2023 '14 points', on which they entered government, speak to the concerns of regional and rural development. In coalition the SDE are advocating for increased investment in regional areas to improve education and reduce inequality, and the development of paying jobs outside of major cities (Säde, 2023). Given this program, it is logical that they would be tasked with the Rural Affairs Ministry.

Additionally, the SDE has held Minister of Education once, Minister of Defence twice, Minister of the Environment once, and Minister of Foreign Affairs thrice with two of those being held by Ilves ('Minister of Foreign Affairs | Välisministeerium').

## Competitor Parties: Reform & Centre

Given that there are many parties in the Estonian parliament, and governments are always formed in coalitions, there can frequently be voters who switch votes between parties. This piece

will not cover all of the other parties who might compete with SDE for seats, only the two which are most likely to do so.

## Reform: Frequent Coalition Partner Despite Ideological Differences

The Reform Party, led by Kaja Kallas, is currently the largest party in parliament and is leader of the governing coalition. The party holds 37 seats, and Kaja Kallas was personally ranked first in the 2023 election candidate list (Valimised 2023). The Reform party emerged in 1995, and at the time was the dominant party representing a Western version the economic right. The Reform party in the 1990's was primarily a party of the already economically well-off, and was "initially pretty pitiless toward the less fortunate" (Taagepera 2018, pg.111). This strategy lost them electoral support, and after shifting towards the center on economic policy the party has become the main party of the economic right (Taagepera 2018, pg.111).

The party's platform has commonalities with SDE, on subjects like funding of training for the unemployed and defense, but disagree on taxation and the best way to implement public services. The Reform party's program for 2023 contains many more points which emphasize maintaining the economy and creating conditions for thriving businesses than does SDE's similar document. Reform's also discusses welfare programs, but they figure significantly less prominently than in SDE's. In the social policy section of Reform's program as of May 2023, there is language about how, "*An effective economic policy is the main alleviator of social problems and allows for greater care towards those who are in difficulties independently of their will. The purpose of social benefits is to support those who really need help.*" This rhetoric is still in support of the existence of social welfare, but takes the view that the market is the best

alleviator of issues rather than direct state support. The last line means that social benefits should be administered in a more selective way, and not necessarily on a universal basis.

In contrast, the SDE has the following in their manifesto, *“The government cannot and must not base its policies on the obsession that the market regulates everything and that economic growth becomes a self-functioning social, regional and educational policy. Economic sustainability requires that the state, together with civil associations, takes responsibility for directing social processes, preventing and mitigating crises. State policy must direct people and companies to responsible and resource-saving management and be able to prevent and smooth out social shocks caused by economic cycles.”* This clearly demonstrates an ideological rift between the two coalition partners. SDE differentiates itself from Reform by advocating for non-market based solutions to address the social problems and needs of the country.

According to Esping-Andersen’s categorization, the social services approach promoted by the Reform party is closer to the liberal method popular in the UK than the Nordic model favored by the SDE. So although Reform does support social welfare as a goal, it advocates for different methods than the SDE, promoting market based solutions over state support and higher taxation. The SDE has been trying to change the flat income tax rate for some time, but Reform historically has been opposed to this change (Ratt 2011). As previously discussed, the SDE says in their manifesto that the party believes that *“the state should take responsibility for society’s security, education, the stability and sustainability of the social sphere, economy, and environment.”* The Reform Party and SDE often are in national governing coalitions together, as they are in 2023. This too is in the spirit of Nordic social democracy, where consensus and cooperation are valued and important parts of a functioning government.

## Centre Party / Keskerakond: Splitting the Left Leaning Vote

This thesis would be remiss if it did not discuss that there is more than one party in Estonia which calls itself social democratic. The Centre party has historically had more seats than SDE, and also places emphasis on publicly funded social services. In a 2011 Praxis study, SDE and Centre were the strongest parties in Estonia in terms of social protection and active labor policy, all financed through higher taxes (Ratt 2011).

Centre gained traction in the early years of independence, when there was a gap in the political spectrum, ready for a left-leaning party to fill. The Moderates (SDE) were so moderate at the time that many poor people did not see them as defenders of their interests, especially when they went into government with parties of an economically right wing nature like Pro Patria (Taagepera 2018, pg.113). During this time, Centre filled the vacuum and became established as the party which appealed to the poor. It became the largest party in 1999, but had not yet gained its association with Russophones (Taagepera 2018, Pg.113).

The Centre Party (Keskerakond) is also a social-democratic party based on their self-identification on their website, and majority of the policies listed in their program are aimed at social welfare. They both address issues aimed at working people, and advocate for public investment in their manifestos. Given that the Estonian political spectrum tilts centre-right, there is room on the left for a party like Centre. However, the party is not in the Party of European Socialists, nor is it part of the Socialists & Democrats group within European Parliament. It is instead grouped with Renew Europe, a liberal and pro-European grouping (MEPs - Estonia). The modern Centre Party is much more Russian-speaker oriented than SDE is, despite SDE's inclusion of many Russophone voters and politicians. The vast majority of Centre's base has

been from the Russian speaking community, with eighty to ninety percent of Estonian Russian speakers voting for Centre (Saarts 2015). The party was the only one of the three studied here which explicitly addresses citizenship law in its manifesto, stating that any child born in Estonia with at least one Estonian citizens parent should have rights to citizenship (Programm keskerakond.ee). This has already been the law in Estonia since 1995, but remains in the party's positions. The party's program also advocates that grey passports, which are Estonian-issued travel documents intended for permanent residents who do not have citizenship of either Estonia nor Russia, need to be done away with. These travel documents are one of the few ways that a resident can have both free travel to Russia and easy access to Europe. In contrast to Centre, the Reform Party has the importance of integration of linguistic minorities in its manifesto, which some (but not all) Russophone may object to. SDE doesn't mention integration policy or language explicitly, except to say that all members of society should respect one another regardless of mother tongue or other characteristics.

Centre is powerful on the national stage, and dominates politics in Estonia's capital city of Tallinn, where the current mayor (Kõlvart) is a member. This is partly because non-citizens are allowed to vote in local elections, but not national ones. This means that grey-passport and citizens of Russia who have residency, can vote in these elections. For this reason, local elections tend to express the views of the Russophone vote more than national ones in those areas with high Russian populations like Tallinn or Ida-Viru. Additionally the party platform says that local election should be given as much competence as possible, which is likely popular with those who primarily vote in local elections.

However, because of their Russian orientation and several past scandals, some left-leaning voters will not support them, and therefore may choose alternatives like SDE. Centre party has been at the center of numerous scandals since the 1990's. The Centre Party was created in 1991, and Edgar Savisaar rose to lead it. He had been a Communist Party member in the government of Soviet Estonia in minor roles before he began advocating for increased domestic control for the country in the late 1980's. He became head of the Estonian Popular Front when it was created, which was the most powerful domestic political organization at the time (Tambur 2022). He was one of the key members of the move towards independence, became PM in 1991. He remained a force within Estonian politics for many years until his death in 2022.

However, his career was not without blemishes. In 1995, he was involved in a scandal where he was caught taping the conversations with other politicians (Tambur 2022). He was Interior Minister at the time, and illegally recorded conversations of other parties' leaders, including then Prime Minister Vahi (Kinzer 1995). In 2004, his party, Keskerakond (Centre), entered into a cooperation agreement with United Russia, Putin's party in Russia. This was opposed by every other party in parliament, including SDE, and the meaning and scope of this agreement has been a point of contention ever since (Tambur 2022). Additionally, Savisaar and Boroditš, who were Mayor and deputy mayor of Tallinn were caught taking money for Centre Party from Russian Railways president Vladimir Yakunin in 2010. All of these issues have made many voters skeptical of Centre party's allegiances, and corrupted their image as a party. Corruption is not an accepted part of daily life in Estonia to the degree that it can be in other CEE countries. When asked if one is personally affected by corruption in one's daily life, the EU average was 71% no, Estonia was 77%, Finland 87%, Sweden 90%, and Denmark 93%

(Eurobarometer 2022). Additionally, Transparency International ranks Estonia 14th, tied with Canada and Iceland, in their corruption perceptions index (2022 CPI). Although Estonia is lower than the Nordic countries in both of these measures, it is still markedly less corrupt than most countries globally. Corruption scandals like those in the Centre Party's past, are not normal throughout Estonian politics, and the existence of such scandals damage the party's reputation in the eyes of many voters. For this reason, SDE has often avoided collaborating with Centre despite their ideological overlap, and chose to go into coalition with other parties in the Riigikogu instead. However, SDE may draw some of the Russophone vote, as the party was among the only ones to embrace non-Estonians in the early 1990's and roughly 20% of the SDE members in 1993 were Russian-speaking (Arter 1996 pg. 209). In the early days of party politics, young people and Russian speakers were notably less active. The social democratic sphere was the only political area in which it was common for Russian speakers to participate (Arter 1996 pg.189). This likely led to social-democratic parties like SDE & Centre continuing to dominate the Russophone vote even as the country developed further.

Centre Party did not perform well in the 2023 national elections, where they lost 10 of their seats. This likely was caused in part by Centre's association with Russia, which following the war in Ukraine, was not a pleasant association for many voters. While SDE maintained its usual level of support and formed the governing coalition. The two parties' combined vote share is much closer to the level of support for social-democratic bloc in the Nordic countries. Centre's vote share percentage has hovered around 25% in most national elections, so combined with SDE's usual 12%, the vote share for centre left parties is equal to or higher than it is in most Nordic countries. However, with the left-oriented vote being split between two parties who are

unlikely to govern together, the left wing vote is split and does not form a bloc like it does in Denmark and Sweden. Additionally, since Centre is not in PES, it closes another avenue for cooperation between SDE and Centre.

## Conclusion

Despite the many cultural and historical ties to the Nordic region, Estonia's political landscape does differ from their Northern neighbors. Center-right parties tend to dominate the political spectrum, and the Social Democrats are not the primary opposition to centre-right blocs, rather the coalition partner within them. Much of this can be attributed to the difference in recent history, as well as the lingering associations of leftism with a painful Soviet past. The legacy of the Soviet era remains salient enough for left-wing rhetoric and positions not to be viewed as favorably in public opinion as similar positions do in the Nordic region. Estonia's political landscape remains generally center-right, and voters left of center are split between two parties which often fall along ethnic lines, and one of which is plagued by corruption. In the Nordic countries, trade unions were powerful forces in society and politics for the majority of the 20th century. Given that Estonia spent much of the 20th century under Russian and Soviet rule, the political influence of these trade unions was not nearly as active as it was elsewhere in the region. The continued weakness of civil society has perpetuated this, and meant that the SDE was coming from a weaker position without having this backing from trade unions to lend electoral and financial support to the party.

Additionally, Estonia is a member of the European Union, and across to EU many traditionally strong social-democratic parties are struggling. The SD's relative lack of seats may also be a product of the general shift away from the left which has occurred across Europe. The

connection between trade unions and social democratic parties has loosened somewhat in some countries like Denmark, and to a lesser extent, Norway (Allern 2010). We see the historic alliance between the two parties weaken as their traditional base of the industrial urban working class becomes a smaller portion of society, and more of the membership begins to come from more white-collar sections of society due to shift away from an industrial economy is this region of the world. The shift in the 1990's away from labor movement era policies, and towards the more centrist version we see of today has caused SD parties to pursue other sections of the electorate and therefore weaken the ideological agreement between themselves and the trade unions with which they were once very close. This trend is exaggerated in Estonia, due to the older generation's lack of involvement in labor movement adjacent civil society groups and politics, due to the domination of both civil society and party politics by the Communist Party of Estonia. Social democratic parties in Scandinavia become symbols of status quo, and their traditional constituency has been partially consumed by right wing parties like Sweden Democrats, or the Danish People's Party (Redvaldson 2019). A similar phenomena seems to have occurred in Estonia, where EKRE has significant sway with voters who fit the traditional SD base.

A final factor which likely impacts SDE's election performance is the need to collaborate with parties which do not share their general ideological orientation. There is not a clear left and right wing bloc system in Estonia as exists in Denmark and Sweden. This means that SDE is likely never in a coalition only comprised of other SD parties. Also, like other SD parties, the SDE has had to pursue voters outside of the traditional leftist working class, due to broader economic shifts in the economic conditions of European countries.

In the early 20th century this kind of flexibility gave the social democratic parties of Scandinavia access to political power, with long lasting results (Redvaldson 2019). Collaboration and cooperation were important factors in the establishment of the Nordic model. Although, as in the 20th century, this flexibility may cause some to doubt a party's commitment to social democratic principles. However, in the case of Estonia it also has allowed the party to remain in the public eye, and continue to hold a significant place in national and regional politics. It is able to provide a voice for increased welfare, public mechanisms for delivering that welfare, and equitable tax structure in the Riigikogu, but does so without attachment to Russian state power or internal corruption. Its commitment to democracy and ability to work with those who may disagree on welfare or tax policy, but agree on other major issues like defense spending and energy transition makes it a reliable and influential coalition partner which has influence above its size.

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