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Estonia, Anti-Liberal Populism, and Trump

VB verfassungsblog.de/how-to-self-castrate/

November 11, 2020

Maria Mälksoo

11 November 2020

How to Self-Castrate

Donald Trump's defeat at the US presidential election has wrong-footed some of his staunchest loyalists in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The authoritarian populism that won the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum has taken a blow which is painfully personally felt by the 'brothers in faith' in the region, many of whom had sailed to power in the tailwind of the broader wave of illiberal resentment. Curiously, Hungary's and Poland's leaders have extended their guarded congratulations to Joe Biden 'for a successful presidential campaign', in spite of their earlier investments into the special relationship with President Trump and the 'Plan A' for him getting re-elected.

Meanwhile in Estonia, the former master pupil in the CEE 'class of democracy', the Trumpist part of the government has suffered a kind of public nervous breakdown with a set of unrestrained remarks aired on a radio talk show on 8 November about the allegedly 'rigged elections' in the US and the 'corrupt character' of the US President-Elect Joe Biden – a man who had been bestowed with the highest national order in 2004 for his support in the NATO accession process. This crassly undiplomatic spell of verbal incontinence by the prominent representatives of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), including two members of the government, culminated in the resignation of one, the Minister of the Interior, Mart Helme, on the eve of Martinmas (in Estonian *mardipäev*). The Vice Chairman of EKRE, an indefatigable mimicker of "Trump-speak", has a long track record of hurling insults to foreign leaders, so the fact that he once again broke the implicit rule of state representatives refrain from commenting on the domestic politics of their foreign counterparts, was a surprise to no-one. Just a few weeks before, Helme had offhandedly suggested in an interview to the Russian version of the Deutsche Welle that the Estonian homosexuals 'run to Sweden' when discussing the EKRE-peddled plebiscite on the definition of marriage as an exclusive union between a man and a woman.

Helme's resignation came on the heels of a strong statement from the President of Republic, Kersti Kaljulaid (previously dubbed as an 'emotionally heated woman' by Mart Helme), calling '[t]he verbal assault on the newly elected President of the USA committed by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Interior of Estonia...an attack against Estonian democracy and security'. The Minister of Defence, Jüri Luik deemed the statements by Mart Helme and his son Martin Helme, the Chairman of EKRE, Estonia's Minister of Finance, to 'undermine Estonian security and threaten to

deteriorate US-Estonian relations’, mindful of the fact that Estonia is ‘a country of one million people on the border of Russia’. In the meantime, Estonia’s incumbent Prime Minister Jüri Ratas, leading the three-party coalition government where EKRE has 5 out of 15 ministerial positions, addressed his characteristically half-hearted disciplining remarks to the Helmes via a Facebook post. The call to accept full governmental responsibility, issued by five former prime ministers and the former president Toomas Hendrik Ilves, has remained unanswered. Helme the Elder relinquished his ministerial duties with the posture of a proud martyr who ‘cannot be muzzled’, nevertheless keeping his seat in the Estonian parliament Riigikogu, while Helme the Younger survived a vote of no confidence on the same day – a spectacle which disproves once again the idea of Estonia’s imperviousness to the oft-essentialised democratic growing pains in the region.

Some try to display Helme’s resignation as a case of self-sacrifice for the sake of sustaining the three-party coalition in power and pressing forward with the marriage referendum, and of defiant defence of the right to freedom of speech. Others wonder if we are witnessing the first domino falling in the region where the populists with intuitive affinities towards Trump’s policies and rhetoric are now allowing their frustration to run amuck to the point of political self-harm.

The emotionally charged domestic political drama in a tiny CEE republic would hardly be of interest for the readers of *Verfassungsblog* if it was not symptomatic of the paroxysms of illiberal populism in the region, wrapped in an intricate web of nativism, paranoid conspiracy theories, blatant racism and misogyny, in tune with the self-appointed spokesperson of the contemporary global Right.

Three emotionally heated Estonian men walked into the zoo / A big bear hugged one and then there were two

So, what exactly happened? In a Tre radio talk show “Räägime asjast” (Let’s talk shop) (8 Nov 2020), three EKRE politicians (including the two aforementioned members of Estonia’s government; the third, Jaak Madison is EKRE’s MEP) hurled accusations on the alleged large-scale electoral fraud in the US via mail ballots, comparing them to the suspected flaws in the Estonian e-voting system.

‘I believe there can be no question in that these elections were falsified’, Minister of Finance Martin Helme said. *‘There is no sense in talking about democracy or rule of law in a situation where elections can be faked so plainly, boldly and on a massive scale. /–/ If this works, if Trump is taken down, the U.S. Constitution will no longer be in effect,’* he maintained.

Mart Helme, in his turn, insinuated a ‘deep state logic of action’ behind the US presidential election, ‘which operates to smuggle in dirtbags, corrupt dirtbags that can be blackmailed’. The juiciest bit of the conversation included Mart Helme’s sharing of a pre-election dream of his, featuring Trump walking across a field, ‘covered in guts and

entrails'. *'Trump passed through it. Trump will win eventually. This will be achieved with an immense struggle, possible even a bloodshed. But the victory is ultimately his. The justice will win in the end.'*

The rich imagery of Helme's dream calls for the expertise of a psychoanalyst to untangle the complex overidentification mechanisms at play, along with the performative power apparently allocated to the ritualized chanting of the desired end result here. The content or the style of the most recent EKRE messaging is hardly surprising, of course. The masks of the party have been down since day one of their entering into high politics through gaining 19 out of 101 seats in the parliament in the 2019 elections. As Helme Senior boasted on his way to the EKRE election celebration back in March 2019, *'We shall do Trump, you shall cry yet!'* If anything, EKRE's rhetoric has grown more reckless over time – in defiance of the 'civilizing' hopes put on their governmental inclusion experience, again quite alike to the ones entertained about taming Trump by some circles in the US in the early days of his presidential tenure. Whatever efforts Estonia's Prime Minister Ratas of Centre Party may have undertaken to appease the proud boys of EKRE have failed.

In his remarks that led to his resignation, Mart Helme characterized both the European Union and the post-Biden/Harris United States as „self-castrating“ – a fair description of what is currently happening to Estonia's international reputation. Estonia, once the darling of the liberal 'order of things' and much admired for its cherished e-government and e-elections, has lost much of its progressive sheen. Both the government and the opposition failed to constructively save the country's face this time. Helmes' lack of consideration towards Estonia's key international ally, their own coalition partners, and a civil political discourse has been concluded with but a cosmetic change in the government. The missed opportunity to take a principled collective stance in the latest critical situation in Estonia sends an internationally unfavourable signal about the country's political leadership's overall 'feel for the game' of international relations (or what Bourdieu called *sens pratique*).

As in any heavily asymmetrical relationship, *quod licet iovi, non licet bovi*. Unchecked actionism, even if mostly delimited to rhetorical fireworks, is not a feasible option of international self-conduct for the lightweights of world politics. Tempting as dreaming oneself into an omnipotent Jupiter on the example of Trump might have been for these CEE politicians riding the broader wave of populist politics, his political fanbase in CEE is now pressed to reassess their style of engagement with the demise of their cheerleader from the front stage of the US politics. Self-restraint, as [Brent J. Steele argues in his recent award-winning book](#), has powerful ethical and practical rewards. Estonia is too small and globally too insignificant to sustain a credible claim to a 'special relationship' with the US even under the best of circumstances. The latest domestic episode has an unfortunate ripple effect of undoing a host of Estonia's achievements in successful diplomatic impression management of past three decades vis-à-vis the established powers of the world.

The Big Bear who caught up with Mart Helme is a creature of his own doing, but so is

the knot the government of Estonia has tied itself into – quite alike the enigmatic character Hinkus in the 1979 cinematic version of Boris and Arkady Strugatsky's *The Dead Mountaineer's Inn* (1970). The film does not have a happy end.

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