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**Impact of being in the government for populist parties: the comparison of EKRE and  
the Finns Party**

MA Thesis

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**Author's declaration**

I have written this master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of the other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I use comparative process-tracing to compare how two far-right populist parties EKRE and the Finns Party behaved in their respective two years in the government, if and how their strategies differed from being in the opposition and what was the aftermath for both those parties. Using categorization from Katsanidou and Reinl (2020, 353), I compared parties on the axis of responsiveness and responsibility: which strategy the party chose while being in the government.

I concluded that EKRE opted for more responsive strategy by continuing in its rhetoric and actions in the similar mood as they behaved in the opposition. The Finns Party, on the other hand, was much more modest in its positions, in rhetoric and actual policy but it ignited internal contradictions in the party, caused its split in 2017 and dropped back to the opposition. In the end, their fate was similar to EKRE, as more radical wing seized the domination in party and turned the Finns Party much more radical. In addition, neither EKRE's nor the Finns Party's ratings experienced significant decrease in the long run and thus the mainstream parties' hope, that including populist parties in the government coalition can restrain them (Kuisma and Nygard 2017, ERR 2019) was short-sighted.

I stated that the main reason why parties opted for different strategies lies in parties' different history: the Finns Party as an older party had to solve differences between more traditional party elite and the radical wing of the party, which particularly on the grassroots level was influenced by some newer populism trends. This was not the case in EKRE, which has through years enjoyed relatively homogeneous internal life and whose agenda has been dominated by small circle of politicians.

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## Introduction

Both Finland and Estonia have in the last years experienced populist or far-right party being included in the coalition governments. Their reigns in the government lasted about two years – the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset - PS) was in the Finnish government from May 2015 to June 2017 and the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE) in the Estonian government from April 2019 to January 2021.

In this thesis I use comparative process-tracing to juxtapose those two cases of populist parties in the government: how did differ EKRE's and PS' strategies in government? What EKRE could have learned from the experiences of the Finns Party when they were in the coalition couple of years later? Has EKRE perhaps modified their behaviour relying on the example of the Finns Party? And most important, what impact had those strategies on their post-government political life?

Those questions have so far remained understudied in Estonia and Finland. In addition, this research provides continuation to the field of new-wave populism studies. I mean events of 2015-2016 when in the backlash of migrant crisis and Islam terrorism attacks several success stories occurred for populism across the globe. Prime examples here are Brexit and Donald Trump's and Jair Bolsonaro's electoral victories (Ugorji 2018). Now, 4-6 years later we have arrived at the next stage of this new wave of populism success, when their government terms are arriving or have already arrived to an end and we can see whether populists have maintained their success or what has influenced their success or lack of it. This is especially important when we consider Taggart's (2004) observation that populism movements throughout history have arrived abruptly and vigorously to political landscape but faded away quickly soon after.

Responsiveness and responsibility represent the most thought-provoking quandary for populists how to use their strategy in the government (Katsanidou and Reinl 2020, 353). For example, what is their attitude towards the European Union: if a populist party is eager to act in responsive way, it adopts party's declared policies in the government, which means breaking ties with the EU. On the other hand, choosing responsibility means that populists must trade-off and then they might fail to be responsive enough to the electorate and as a result undermine their potential for the next elections. High popularity of populists inevitably signals high level of polarisation in society (Schulze, Mauk, Linde 2020) and mainstream parties have repeatedly explained including populist party in government coalition with hope that this step would help

to tame populists' radical agenda rhetoric, and perhaps even their support (Schwörer 2021). Quandary between responsiveness and responsibility should in that case be the main indicator that gives an answer to what end will this presumption work in practice.

The main research problem in short is how EKRE and the Finns Party solved the quandary problem between responsiveness and responsibility. And based on the experience of EKRE and the Finns Party we can conclude that this quandary is the very reason why some populist parties take advantage of being in the government and some do not. The research question is how did responsiveness vs responsibility dimension between EKRE and the Finns Party compare in: 1) foreign policy decisions which are often considered to be sacred homogeneous policy-issue for small countries (Thorhallson and Steinsson 2017) and often even part of so-called consensual package of policy issues. This has been case in Finland and Estonia (Poyet and Raunio (2021); 2) in domestic policy decisions. To measure the success of strategy selection I have compared poll ratings and developments inside the party before, during and after being in the government.

I set the following hypothesis: above all EKRE chose more responsive way of behaviour in the government and decided to remain more loyal to their ideological "roots" and style than the Finns Party. This is the reason why being in the government and leaving the coalition was smoother for EKRE than for the Finns Party and why the Finns Party made through an inner split in 2017 (Ylä-Antila) and their poll rating was much more volatile than it was for their Estonian counterparts (Politico's Poll of Polls). Analysis confirmed that EKRE indeed chose for more responsive way of behaviour, but this mainly derived from the historical context: EKRE as a relatively new party found it much easier to set new and modern trends to follow, in addition they did not have to deal with internal differences between old-timers and modern populists as happened in the Finns Party.

# 1. Theoretical background

## 1.1. Populism

Mudde (2004, 543) defines populism being ideology of having two opposites - elitism and pluralism - and that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite". Populism in his view argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.

Populism as a term is historically inseparable with democracy because in modern times it has emerged in parallel with process of democratization in the nineteenth century. Originally it emerged in Russia, followed by People's Party movement in the United States representing "an intellectual vision and an ethical political movement that idealized an agrarian society of communitarian villages and individual producers against industrialization and corporate capitalism" (Urbinati 2019, 114-115) and being the first case, where populists described themselves as the true representative of the people in political sphere. This party united many radically minded political movements, but particularly farmers in the Midwest and in the South. As Poulsen (1986, 27) pointed out, The People's Party was "first of all a response to the severe social and economic problems that many farmers faced, especially after the Civil War". Movement itself was short-lived but it still had long-lasting impact on American politics as several political issues introduced by movement were at the beginning of 20th century adopted by Progressives.

Being as ancient as democracy, its roots can be traced back to the ancient Greece. But, on the other hand, as noted by Molyneux and Osborne (2017), neither ancient Greek provides prototypes and common political core for populism, nor does so modern populism. If 19<sup>th</sup> century cases of American populists were generally equated with agrarians, then, for instance Latin American populists in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century appealed mostly on urban electors by demonstrating populism as flexible phenomenon.

Margaret Canovan suggested two categories of populism, which in turn can be subdivided into seven further categories (Canovan 1981, Poulsen 1986). First, agrarian populism, which is divided into farmer's radicalism (for example, the U.S. People's Party), peasant movements (East European Green Rising) and intellectual agrarian socialism (e.g., Narodniki in Russia). Second large category is group of political populisms including populist dictatorship (Peron in Argentina), populist democracy (widespread support for referendums and participation),

reactionary populism (George Wallace and his followers) and politician's populism (nonideological coalition-building drawing on the unificatory appeal of the people) (ibid).

Poulsen (1986) stated that those categories are above all analytical constructs, they will not probably cover actual political phenomena entirely and in most cases populist parties may overlap several above-mentioned categories. Nevertheless, I argue, that if Canovan's categorization was made in the early 1980s, then nowadays one category can be specifically drawn out as the dominant form of populism: that is politician's populism emphasising on the unification appeal of the people. Although even here one can see several overlapping aspects with other populism sub-categories. Mudde (2004, 544) also claims that although populism is a distinct ideology, it does not possess the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency such as socialism or liberalism. As a thin-centred ideology it exhibits "a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts".

Menu and Surel (2002) pointed out three essential aspects of populism: first, again is "the people" and putting emphasise on people's privileges (and on the other hand excluding those who they seem to do not belong to "the people") and feeling of community. Second, populists legitimate themselves by claiming that people have been betrayed by the elites through corruption and abusing power. Third, primacy of the people must be restored. In recent times scholars have in addition to left/right-wing comparison drawn distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary populism, based on material, political and symbolic dimension which in turn emphasise political mobilisation way beyond representative democratic field. As Caiani and Graziano (2019, 1144) outlined, "inclusionary and exclusionary populist parties differ in the degree of 'inclusiveness' envisaged: e.g. favouring mass welfare programmes vs. defending forms of welfare chauvinism; aiming at giving a voice to disregarded groups vs. discriminating among various types of members of the political community; and finally highlighting, for instance, the 'dignity' of indigenous populations vs. emphasising symbolic exclusion".

The way how populism relates and interacts with governance is way deeper question than just set of practices. As Urbinati (2019, 113) puts it, populism "questions electoral or mandate representation" because it creates gap between legitimacy and actual social reality. Populism transforms representative democracy in a way that can describe populism in power as an "extreme majoritarianism" by exploiting "the perception that parliamentary and party politics fail to provide adequate representation for some key portions of the population" (ibid.).

Müller (2015) put it more robustly: populists are keen to challenge the actual empirical outcome of an election with the "morally correct" result of election, by bringing example Hungarian politician's Viktor Orban's reaction to election defeat in 2002 general elections, where Orban said: "The nation cannot be in opposition". Andrés Manuel López Obrador argued after unsuccessful Mexican presidential elections in 2006, that the "victory of the right is morally impossible" and he, rather than winners, is "the legitimate president of Mexico". Natural argument in cases as such is that election system does not represent the general political will of the people. One of the latest and perhaps more radical example followed to 2020 presidential elections when incumbent president Donald Trump persistently refused to accept election results as legitimate (Enders, Uscinski and others 2021).

Müller (2016) refutes several wide-spread traits contributed to populism: for instance, he disagrees with the idea, that populism stems from grassroots level, from ordinary people. In addition, he disagrees with the habit in political science field of connecting populism to specific demographic or socioeconomic groups, although there have been several cases where base election group of populism party has been demographically quite homogeneous. Even though populists are often critical towards elites, then just criticizing elites is never enough to be declared populist. According to Müller, the central characteristic of populist is that politicians described populists have declare themselves as the one and only representative of the people. That is the essence behind their anti-pluralism stance and as well the key reason, why there cannot be morally legitimate opposition - in their view they are anti-people. For example, Nigel Farage claimed Brexit referendum results to be a "victory for real nation", hinting that rest of 48 percent who voted to remain in the European Union, are rather worthless as members of political community. Or as Donald Trump claimed in 2016 presidential campaign: "The single important thing is to unite people: because those other people mean nothing" (ibid.). Going even deeper with this reasoning we can relate this strict definition of "the people" as the trigger behind anti-immigration view although appealing for internal security in country has also been one of the populists' issue of argumentation against refugees.

Scepticism towards traditional election system (or putting into a doubt that particular election system actually is representative of the electorate and the people) results in using referendums and tightening political arena into package of issue-based associations. But populism may also stretch constitutional democracy up to its limits by having "a disfiguring impact on the institutions, rule of law, and division of powers that comprise constitutional democracy"

(Urbinati 112-113, 2019). Jespersen (2017) have claimed, relying on discussion over the distrust against institutions and narrow view on the concept of “the people”, that populism is democracy's evil twin brother presenting itself making good of democracy's highest ideals by proclaiming "let the people rule" and even standing for holding referendums for various policy issues. But these positions are in Jesperesen's view just hiding demagoguery and "degraded form of democracy".

One illustration of this phenomenon is how populists advocate for topics such as same-sex marriage. For example, Jaak Madison, EKRE's politician, who later became member of the European Parliament, opposed Civil Partnership Act by claiming: "The big difference between us and the Socialists (Social Democratic Party in Estonia) is that they did not say a word in the 2011 election campaign that if they formed a government, they would implement a law that would divide society. We came to the Riigikogu in 2015 with a very strong promise that if we have this opportunity, we will eliminate this mistake and restore a situation where the will of the majority of society is satisfied. [...] A law that divides society - Estonia would not be the first or last country to put this issue to a referendum. [...] I still agree - we will put it to a referendum. If 51 percent say we are going that way, I will raise my hands. Parliamentarism and democracy give us the right to do so. We have the right to protect a large group of voters, a large part of the population who do not support a law that very clearly redefines the concept of the family." (ERR 2017).

Therefore, Madison emphasised that law is undemocratic by referring to opinion polls according to which the parliament's majority decision would go against the opinion of apparent majority in Estonian society. If Civil Partnership Act did get majority in parliament vote, it would have been morally illegitimate, because Social Democrats and Reform Party, who supported the law, did not promise to do it before the elections. In this view one could interpret populists' view as such that mainstream parties supporting Civil Partnership Act betrayed their voters who before the elections did not support Civil Partnership Act.

## 1.2. New-wave populism

Defining populism should therefore not focus on the idea and ideology but rather on practices and habits of policymaking. In some countries political forces defined as "populists" use populist practices for the good of religion traits, in others it might be motivated by nationalist-globalist cleavage, in some city-countryside's. In Urbinati (114, 2019) words, populism "is a

movement that escapes generalizations and yet is tangible and capable of transforming the lives and the thoughts of the people and society embracing it".

Those contour lines have shaped the trends in so-called new-wave populism. Although the root cause of new-wave populism has at least in the European Union been immigration, wider monitoring of modern populism movements indicates that common points between various populist parties across the European Union are quite rare. Norris (2019) asked whether parties such as the Swedish Democrats, the Jobbik Movement for a Better Hungary, the UK Independence Party and the Italian Lega Nord can be classified as the members of same family. As a result of his empirical analysis, he concluded that populism in the EU context should be confined to a pervasive discourse or style and to a specific party type. Parties high in populism were located across the left-right economic spectrum. In addition, as was illustrated by Chiru and Wunsch (2021), there is no evidence of emerging populist far right coalitions or cooperation in the European Parliament in pursuing common agenda of specific policy issues. Quite the opposite, their formal collaboration is hampered by ideological divergence.

Populist parties' political manifestations are both collectively and individually ideologically heterogeneous and that is why Taggart (2004) sees populism's potential limited. According to Taggart, populism has three manifestations in contemporary Europe: 1) populism in social movements and in anti-globalisation movements; 2) populism in Euroscepticism expressed by parties either in the European Union member or candidate states; 3) rise of populist parties of the right in many European states.

Opposition to widespread immigration flows and far-right ideology has been linked with populism in Europe during the whole 21st century so far, although several varieties have been mapped. For example, Deiwiiks wrote in 2009 (years before refugee crisis) that in Switzerland the nationalism has always been important populism theme, in Italy the cleavage between South and North has been igniter for all kind of populist movements. In Austria populism has targeted clientism as a method used by the old political elite in doing political business, and in Germany, at least before the Alternative Für Deutschland emergence, the populists "were able to drum up resentiments associated with confronting the (Nazi) past" (Deiwiiks 2009, 7).

Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) was somewhat of precedent for modern populist success. From 1986 till 1999 party under Jörg Haider's leadership increased its share of the votes in parliament

from 5 percent to 26.9 percent. At the turn of the century FPÖ was finally stopped and perceived by its political competitors as a pariah because of its anti-elite, xenophobic and Eurosceptic positions in addition to their controversial views about the Nazi era. In 2000 party was included into the coalition government with centre-right parties. Though two years later coalition cracked under disagreements and party itself split as it was ragged by quarrels between modest (mostly those in government) and radical wing of the party (Fallend and Heinisch 2016). Another case of the populist emergence was in summer 2002. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen, at the time far-right nationalist leader of the National Front, reached into the second round of presidential elections. Dutch populist leader Pim Fortuyn was assassinated in May 2002, but his party list became in following elections second most supported political group in elections, even though, by that time, it had existed only couple of months.

New surge of populism parties in Europe began at the beginning of 2010s and was mostly explained as a consequence of globalisation, international integration and increasing feeling of separation between governments and governed (Surel 2011). Front National managed to rise its support in 2011 local elections to 15 percent, populists in Finland became third party in Finland, Geert Wilder's Freedom Party was included in Dutch governing coalition and Viktor Orban's Fidesz started concentrating his power in Hungary (ibid). This trend paled with the one emerged with deepening refugee crisis during escalation of conflicts in Middle East some years later.

Manifestations of recent years populism revival has been Donald Trump's victory in 2016 US presidential elections (those elections also experienced wide popularity of Bernie Sanders, representative of leftist populism). Trump stood out by knitting together unlikely electorate alliance of those who earn more than 50,000 dollars a year and those with no college education, further giving evidence assessment of populism being loosely defined heterogeneous and flexible concept (Gusterson 2017). In addition, United Kingdom chose to leave the European Union in 2016 Brexit referendum and Italian referendum was held in December 2016, where constitutional reform was rejected and in turn pro-EU government was ousted. Also in 2016, Northern League placed third in the Italian parliament election resulting in populist government with the Five Star Movement (Lonsky 2018). National Front's leader Marine Le Pen got to the final round of French presidential elections in 2017 (ibid.). The Finns Party (Finland) and EKRE (Estonia), respectively in 2015 and 2019 rose their support to such a height, that they were ultimately included in government coalitions. It was followed by strengthened position in

parliaments for populists in Netherlands (Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom), in Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) and in Sweden, where Democrats placed third in general elections (Brubaker 2017). 2015 election brought far-right conservative government to Poland. New government began attacking the courts and press and undermine climate science and LGBT rights. Similar trend continued in Hungary where Orban had cemented his power and gradually began sliding away from democratic values – process still underway to this day. Populism threat for democracy has been further proved by Recep Erdogan's authoritarian leadership in Turkey (Sözen 2019).

As Brubaker (2017) noted the most direct political effects of the refugee crisis were felt in Germany, Sweden and Hungary. Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany opened German borders to asylum-seekers arriving via Hungary and Austria in September 2015 and it produced harsh reaction and strong opposition to openness in German society. That was the trigger, why "neoliberal party of professors" Alternative für Deutschland transformed into an anti-immigration, anti-Muslim populist party and experienced series of breakthroughs during 2016 Landtag and 2017 federal elections. Sweden received even more refugees per capita than Germany and with support of nearly quarter of the population they were at times on par in polling ratings with long-dominant Social Democrats. Far-right Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban took most of refugee crisis for the benefit of his popularity and by constructing razor-wire border fence, he led an example for others and "struck the posture of a lonely leader with the mission of saving Europe from itself, and notably from what he called Europe's "suicidal liberalism" (Brubaker 2017, 375).

As Brubaker emphasised, the refugee crisis proved to have long-lasting shadow and impact on European political landscape. Those impact were also taken advantage of by EKRE and the Finns Party. Brubaker said:

*"Following Orban, leading political figures in Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic took up a virulent anti-muslim, anti-migrant rhetoric. The nominally Social Democratic Prime Minister of Slovakia, for example, vowed that the country would not accept " a single Muslim." In Austria, another key waystation en route to Germany and points north, support for the far right, anti-immigrant Austrian Freedom Party surged, leaving the party consistently ahead in the polls between summer 2015 and spring 2017. So did support for Geert Wilder's Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, which stands out even on the populist right in the vehemence of its anti-Muslim rhetoric. Wilders also led in*

*polls for nearly two years until a few weeks before parliamentary elections of March 2017. Fears of borders being out of control were central to the constellation of moods that made Brexit possible: a much-discussed UK Independence Party poster during the campaign featured a photograph of refugees massed at the Croatian-Slovenian border with the slogan "Breaking Point: the EU has failed us all." And the crisis resonated across the Atlantic as well: Trump characterized Merkel's decision to welcome refugees as "insane" since Syrian refugees might be a "Trojan horse" for ISIS." (Brubaker 2017, 376).*

In addition to changes in countries, refugee crisis had broader impact on European institutions, as it overwhelmed the Dublin system regulating applications for asylum and it brought the "Schengen system of internal free movement to the point of perhaps irreversible collapse" (ibid.). The latter fear was later surpassed. It had also deeper effect on the European integration as it escalated Eurosceptic sentiments across the continent (ibid.).

Refugee crisis for Brubaker (2017, 378) is just one element in "perfect storm" for populism revival as one of the leading arguments in Brexit, Trump and Le Pen campaigns had been pledge to stand for protectionist economy politics and more specifically defend and revive national economy from the "savage globalization" and seamless cross-border movement of goods, labour and capital. Another postulate slogan of populists has been public order and security against threats from both outside and inside, especially against "an elite portrayed as soft on crime and terrorism, in thrall to political correctness, deluded by the myth of multiculturalism, and insufficiently cognizant of the threat from radical Islam" (ibid.). This argument is inevitably connected to refugee crisis followed by the wave of terror attacks in Europe in 2015-2016. Important aspect of this "perfect storm" has been emergence of so-called "post-truth era" and Russia's strategy to support Eurosceptic and populist parties in Europe but also in the United States. Social media and wave of fake news in a hyper-connected digital ecosystem has weakened the authority of the mediating institutions that produce and disseminate knowledge (universities, science and the press). As Brubaker (2017, 378) put it: "a cloud of suspicion shadows all claims to knowledge". Hameleers's (2019) analysis indicated that right-wing populist discourse may appeal exclusively to a certain group of citizens, which "is empowered to communicate their hostile discourse via social network sites", where is no room for democratic fact-based deliberation, but where discussion is based on an emotional, conflict-centred discourse".

### 1.3. Populism parties in government

Common opinion is that although populists are natural part of representative politics, they nevertheless find it difficult to sustain their momentum: they emerge, grow and gain attention quickly, but usually fade fast, too, and therefore remain at the end episodic movements (Taggart 2004). This has changed with new populism wave, where populism parties across the Europe have demonstrated their ability to overcome different challenges or new circumstances. Such a new circumstance is also including populist parties in government, which can either turn out to be the fatal development or on the other hand new opportunity for populist parties.

As modern-time populism surge in Europe is a new phenomenon and even newer is the frequency of them being in government, there has been little research on how different strategies impact their success after being in the government. For example, in 1989 only one of 28 countries had a government with a populist party, in 2019 populist party was a part of the government in 12 countries (PopuList and ParlGov). Although in most cases those populist parties were in coalition government with non-populist parties, there was 13 governments in which involved only populist parties (ibid.).

Austria's case, briefly described before, is a pioneer example. Far-right party FPÖ escaped from status of political pariah thanks to Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP) in 2000. ÖVP hoped that including them in coalition government would at the end "tame down" far-right populists. In addition, it was argued with conviction that excluding them with such a large support in electorship is not justified anymore. Coalition with far-right party met with criticism and even sanctions abroad, but Fallend and Heinisch (2016, 339) argue that this backlash did not weaken, but strengthened the coalition - many Austrians of whom a lot were even supporters of opposition parties did not approve foreign interference into democratically and constitutionally formed government. Electoral failure in 2002 ended up for FPÖ as an implosion and split by 2005, but for authors, it was not so much because of pressure from abroad, but the result of incompetence and inexperience of populist party politicians unfamiliar with public office. But structural problems of Austrian politics - the unpopularity of "grand coalitions", the widespread impression of political gridlock, and the high degree of political disaffection in the general public - remained unsolved and FPÖ resurged soon after it had split 2005 (ibid.). Therefore at least in Austrian example neither excluding right-wing populists from government or collaborating and taming them would not guarantee that populists' popularity in society declines.

Fallend and Heinisch (ibid.) concluded that following factors should be taken into consideration when predicting how populist party can manage in coalition government:

*“Party’s internal capacity (e.g. its organizational dimension, new leadership) and the overall political opportunity structures. Moreover, a successful strategy to counteract right-wing populism must go beyond taking a negative stance against such a party and its political representatives but also has to take seriously the concerns of its supporters and devise appropriate policy responses. In a country like Austria where the media market is dominated by tabloids with “populist” positions, such a nuanced approach is of course an exceedingly difficult task.”*

Aslanidis and Rovira Kaltwasser (2016) focused on example of Greek, another remarkable case demonstrating populists` behaviour in the government. When Syriza came into power they promised to make a break with politics of austerity and offered alternative scenarios for ending the crisis. But due to several constrains - domestically the scepticism of the mainstream opposition and majority of the private media, and internationally from EU level - did not make overhauling pillars of traditional Greek politics a wishful perspective. Opposition meanwhile portrayed themselves as the "sleepless guardian of liberal values against authoritarian danger" (ibid., 1087). At the end, populists found themselves isolated and capitulated in front of their own promises. It had also supranational effect as conservative parties all over Europe gave their best to question the sustainability of emerging leftist radicalism and hoped to minimize electoral losses in fore coming elections. Nevertheless, as authors noticed, upward trend of populists did not stop here, as cases of Hungary, Austria et cetera illustrated. In conclusion, authors admitted that "the liberal credo of safeguarding institutional “checks and balances” and respecting the decisions of supranational bodies proves extremely inefficient when people perceive it as lip service to the self-serving needs of unaccountable elites". Populists can without problems merge anti-establishment discourse in the name of the people. When they really do win power, then there is enough ground to bend liberal institutions and procedures. Another important aspect, what Greece illustrated, was the ideological controversy: Syriza-ANEL coalition of extreme right and extreme left gave evidence, that not programmatic issues are relevant, but instead the common denominator making cooperation possible is populism and anti-establishment.

Important difference should be also made how mainstream parties interact with populism parties. For instance, mainstream parties in Denmark, Norway and Finland have historically

decided to co-operate with the populists without particular prejudices, meanwhile in Sweden mainstream parties have opted for a stricter distance to far-right Sweden Democrats (Poyet and Raunio 2021). Albartazzi and McDonnel (2015) demonstrated that populists in Italian and Swiss governments behaved "responsibly" and in similar fashion to their coalition partners but were meanwhile able to push through their priority issues regarding mainly legislation pieces over immigration.

Perhaps most thorough study about populists in government has been done by Kaltwasser and Taggart (2015) who conducted a framework of how to deal with populists in government. They did this by analysing experiences of populists in government in Austria, Ecuador, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Venezuela. Although the end point of analysis was assessing the effectiveness of opposition, the framework included six comparative aspects of how to assess populists in governments across different countries. They were: 1) The structure of government; 2) The limited range of strategies for opposition available to international actors; 3) Factors affecting the room of manoeuvre of domestic actors; 4) Timing of reactions; 5) Dealing with the populist demand; 6) The toolkit of populist forces to fight back.

As explained by Katsanidou and Reinl (2020, 353), the most difficult quandary for populists in government is between using strategy based on responsiveness or responsibility. One example is attitude towards the European Union: behaving in a responsive way is adopting party's declared policies in government which means breaking ties with EU, because most of the populist parties in Europe are Eurosceptics. If populists do not want to do it and choose responsibility, then it means, that they must make compromises. But in that occasion, they might fail to be responsive to the electorate and this may negatively affect their party's electoral success.

But Katsanidou and Reinl (*ibid.*), again using Greece's example, evaluated voter defection from a populist party in government. Even in case of reality check and inability to make their proposed policies into policy, populists still show remarkable resilience and failures to not harm them electorally. In Greece example they concluded that voter defection from populist parties happens mostly in cases when voters believe that their party did not fight for them in government. Quite logically it happens more rarely when voters' positions are less discordant with the implemented policies. Others have pointed out that populists do not need to be trapped in this dichotomy. On the one hand they can act responsively by continuing with radical discourse and rhetoric, but in the meanwhile they can do it by acting responsibility if there is

strategic reason to do so. Therefore, challenge between responsive and responsible is by some scholars called as too simplistic view (ibid.). But as responsiveness vs responsibility dimension causes dilemma from election perspective, another aspect is important here: if populist party opts for overly responsive way of behaviour in government and causes too much domestic political tensions and quarrels, then it might make it more difficult for mainstream parties to include them again in coalition government in the future because of this negative experiences from the past.

#### 1.4. Estonia's and Finland's experience with populism

##### 1.4.1. Estonia and EKRE

Contemporary right-wing populism is a rather new phenomenon in the Estonian political landscape, although for example Saarts (2015) has contributed populist tag to Res Publica, prime minister party in 2003 to 2005, and also to Peoples' Union (Rahvaliid), traditional agrarian party focusing mainly on voters from rural areas. People's Union was founded in 2000 because of merger of two smaller agrarian parties and retirees' party, which was quite diverse, but consolidated itself "under the broad umbrella of an agrarian-conservative" (Saarts 2021, 355).

People's Union by spring 2012 was already defunct when it officially merged with a minor, 300-membered radical right, nationalist and Eurosceptic activist group Eesti Rahvuslik Liikumine (Estonian Nationalist Movement, ENM): this resulted in creation of a new party: Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (EKRE, Estonian Conservative People's Party). After People's Union suffered spiral of decline and corruption charges in 2006-2007, party unsuccessfully tried to merge with Social Democratic Party, further illustrating how ideologically diverse group of people came upon in foundation of EKRE (ibid.).

In legal terms, as Saarts (2021) noted, joining with ENM was simply name change and not a merger, because one of two participants was just a small movement. But new party's leading activists and ideological architects came from the ENM. Therefore, the impact of former People's Union was merely to provide an organisational structure and mass membership, which was inherited by EKRE. Rare exception was Arnold Rüütel, former president of Estonia and long-time leading figure in People's Union, who maintained important role in EKRE and has served as party's honorary chairman. Thanks to his popularity in rural population, he helped along to legitimise EKRE as a successor party of ERL (Saarts 2021). One of side-effects of this

merger was that many active or inactive members of People's Union - whose membership peaked at its heights around 10,000 - discovered suddenly many years later that they are against their own knowledge members of EKRE (ibid.)

As former People's Union's leadership influence in EKRE was modest, all the EKRE's leaders so far are with ENM's background. This inevitably shaped the future of EKRE. If People's Union for Saarts (2021) was more or less a pragmatic and technocratic party, then EKRE has described itself as the most ideological party in Estonia. In addition, People's Union was never supported by a wider social movement. EKRE on the other hand and similarly to Donald Trump's electorate in the United States, does have supporters across the different demographic groups and their electorate has been associated with a "wider nativist conservative movement, which has been on the rise both internationally as well as in Estonian society since the mid-2010s" (Saarts 2021, 357). As pointed out by Kasekamp, Madisson and Wierenga (2019), EKRE - unlike many other populist right-wing parties in Europe - do not look to Russia as an ideological alternative, but rather sees an alternative in the alliance of like-minded populist parties from other European countries.

Margo Miljand's reign as EKRE's first chairman was short-lived but under leadership of Mart Helme - historian, well-known Eurosceptic and former ambassador in Russia - party obtained 8% of the seats in 2015 parliament elections and established themselves strongly in political landscape. For the larger public it was rather surprising because many parties had already at that time adopted an ethnonationalist agenda and 5% threshold in parliament elections is considered quite a challenge for new coming parties. Already some years before refugee crisis, in Saarts' (2021) words, "the window of opportunity opened for EKRE" with Civil Partnership Act in 2014 that legalised gender neutral partnerships and mobilized socially conservative electors, for who other alternatives were more or less unsatisfied choices. Even though mainstream parties in the Estonian parliament kept conservative attitude in relation with the European refugee crisis and refugee quota proposal put on the table by the European Commission, EKRE still managed to amplify its position and ratings by being most vocally anti-immigration and spreading conspiracies about imminent overflow of refugees.

In 2013, when EKRE was not yet major player in Estonian politics, Martin Helme's recommendation for immigration policy was "if its black, then show the door" (Teder 2013). Kasekamp, Madisson and Wierenga (2019) analysed discursive opportunities, narratives, and dominant themes to achieve increasing visibility and they identified four pillars of EKRE's

political communication, which are widely disseminated in social media: an anti-Russian stance, Euroscepticism, promotion of family values, and an anti-refugee discourse.

Between 2015-2019 EKRE continued its loud dislike and often politically incorrect criticism towards mainstream political powers. Raik and Rikmann (2021) noted that EKRE's stances have elements of all three dimensions of de-Europeanization, as they have placed strong focus on national interests and constructing zero-sum logic between the nation state and the EU which is described threat to national sovereignty. Second, EKRE has resisted EU's normative basis and more specifically liberal values like human rights and minority rights. Thirdly, EKRE has insisted on structural disintegration and returning sovereignty to the member states. For that purpose, EKRE has called for changing the Lisbon Treaty as the root cause of federalization.

#### 1.4.2. Finland and the Finns Party

As in Estonia the predecessor to populist party in Finland was originally agrarian leaned in its ideological stances. Finnish Agrarian Party was active from 1959 to 1995 and after the financial difficulties it was transformed into the Finns Party. Agrarian Party was characterized by being anti-elitist and agrarian-populist (Norocel 2016). Its initial popularity relied on addressing an increasing bulk group of voters who had struggled to follow the quite successful path of the country's rapid social, financial and political transformation in the years following to the Second World War. Its best election results were achieved in the end of 1970s and early 1980s, when it gained around 10% of the votes in the parliament elections and was even included in the coalition government in 1983.

Finland's single far-right party, the Finns Party, has filled populist niche for over 25 years, but according to Lensky (2018) Finland as a country was long considered immune to the surge of far-right movements experienced by other European countries. Over years the Finns Party moved away from agrarian populism and started gradually concentrating its populist agenda on cultural and ethnical cleavages. Unlike in EKRE, where after merger with People's Union the new party's leading figures came almost exclusively from former marginal Estonian National Movement, the hierarchy of the Agrarian Party continued actively in the Finns Party thereafter. The Finns Party's long-time chairman Timo Soini was formerly the Agrarian Party's secretary and led the party from 1997 until it split into two in mid-2017.

According to Poyet and Raunio (2021) Nordic countries are typically characterized as consensual regimes, although in Finland's case consensus receded a bit after a new constitution entered into force in 2000. This completed a long-lasting transition that curbed presidential powers and changed Finnish political system to an almost complete parliamentary democracy, where power is held by the majority governments of coalition. To Poyet's and Raunio's (ibid.) understanding those reforms increased the gap between the government and the opposition. Nevertheless, some consensual features in Finnish politics remained intact in fragmented party system and multi-party cabinet's era. In Poyet's and Raunio's words these are broad partisan consensus in foreign and security policy (similar case as in Estonia), corporatism, close ties between various elite groups, the universal welfare state regime – and, most importantly, oversized coalition cabinets and party-political cooperation across the ideological spectrum. This boosted the chances that ideologically extreme parties may at some point be included into government.

Ethno-nationalist and nativist aspect became stronger programmatically after the 2003 elections but did not become the defining issue for the party. Already in the early 2010s, when the Finns Party was not yet government party, it had to battle with more radical voices inside the party. For instance, in winter 2010, Timo Soini asked party's local branches not to nominate candidates who had been somehow associated with a nascent hard-line party Muutos 2011, as he viewed it as racist. In Arter's (2010, 485) words, the Finns Party was "indeed a populist radical right party . . . albeit one (thus far) lacking the xenophobic extremism of the likes of the Austrian Freedom Party or the Danish People's Party." With the growing of party's popularity, it started attracting different types of people from old school populists to anti-immigration hard-lines, proprietors of small businesses and working-class voters defected from the Social Democrats and the Centre (Poyet and Raunio 2021).

The Finns Party had to wait their breakthrough all the way to the year 2009, when they obtained 9.79% of votes in the European Parliament elections. By that time, it had established strongholds in areas whose electorate had previously been occupied by leftist parties but had experienced de-industrialization and rising unemployment (Lensky 2018). Surge in popularity culminated two years later when they gained 19% of the votes in the parliament elections and became the third-largest party in the country. Breakthrough came years before emergence of refugee crisis, so it forestalled the populism revival in rest of Europe. Poyet and Raunio (2021) noted that the Finns Party benefitted from Finnish campaign finance scandal and the euro crisis.

2011 elections were followed by good results in the 2014 European Parliament elections. After that it became the founding member of a new radical right populist party group in the European Parliament (Norocel 2016).

As mentioned previously, populists in the past have experienced quick subsidence after initial success. This trend has been overturned by contemporary populist movements and was further cemented by the Finns Party. Although many had predicted (Poyet and Raunio 2021) that the Finns Party would fade away quickly, they instead placed second in the 2015 parliament elections with 17.7% of the votes.

Relying on foregoing review I would set following hypothesis: EKRE as a relatively new party which built on its reputation from early days on various modern issues defining contemporary populism across the Europe, did manage to keep inner coherence and its ideological consistency in the government. Opposite happened with the Finns Party, who struggled between discrepancies of old-school and modern populist politicians.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Introduction to the comparative process-tracing

In my analysis I use comparative process-tracing method which is suitable to follow the dynamics and consequences of two units (EKRE and the Finns Party) through long period of time and compare how the varying circumstances and strategies affected the final outcome. To the Bengtsson and Ruonovaara (2014) knowledge, comparative process-tracing (CPT) is relatively new concept in social-science field. There are mixed opinions regarding using CPT in detecting causal mechanism between conditions and outcome. For instance, Beach and Pedersen (2013, 28) noted that evidence from single case process-taking studies cannot be compared with another case and this makes cross-case comparison almost impossible. The fact is that both process tracing and comparative analysis need to consider social and political contextual specificities, which might make arriving to wider conclusions more complex.

Bengtsson and Ruonovaara (2014) challenge this claim. They emphasise that CPT needs relative open-endedness and pointed out methodological instruments for achieving the theoretical focus. In addition to that they put focus on value of a theoretically informed narrative approach, when complex and diverse historical processes and patterns are compared and analysed. CPT as a two-step methodological approach combines theory, chronology, and comparison. As Bengtsson and Ruonovaara pointed out, the central elements of CPT are path dependence, critical junctures and focal points, social mechanisms, context, periodization, and counterfactual analysis.

They claim that CPT is useful for several political processes such as democratization, modernization, globalization, conflict and war, peace building, and revolutions that can be often understood in terms of institutionalization and path dependence (ibid, 47.). Although process-tracing will not have to rely on theories of path dependence, Bengtsson and Ruonovaara (ibid., 48) argue that CPT is strongly linked to this kind of institutional theory, because the comparison between processes demands an analysis in terms of continuity and change, as „the point about path dependence is that some outcomes are such that they cannot be explained by general causes but only by the sequence of events in their specific history".

### 2.2. Research design

Comparative process-tracing in my paper involves three stages or focal points: 1) Time before becoming a member of the government. What were party's political practices and reputation?

2) What rhetoric and actions did populist party choose while being in government? 3) What implications all that had on the party in post-government time period?

The reason I chose these cases lies in the fact that both of these countries are part of wider populist emergence in the European Union. But in the meanwhile, the Finns Party and EKRE have been set in constant counter-perspective positions for several times in media, particularly in Estonia (Trumm 2018). When EKRE made its way into the government, one question was often asked: if the Finns Party chose to follow pragmatic, modest, often soft and even mainstream path of policy-making style and rhetoric while being in the government (Herkman 2017), then how would EKRE behave in similar circumstances? The Finns Party's fate in government was set as an example by EKRE itself. For instance, in December 2020 they claimed via their party website that their political opponents are trying to put EKRE through same process done by the Finns Party and its chairman Timo Soini (they used term EKREt soinistuma, which can be translated as Soinify the EKRE) (Uued Uudised 2020). Some have concluded that EKRE chose to keep similar populist and harsh rhetoric style as in opposition (Ideon 2020) and by that they were more different than the Finns Party. Similar tone and hope that EKRE will become more softer in the government was chosen by parties who took EKRE into coalition, by believing that mainstream parties can tame EKRE in coalition and in the end, it is useful for the health of democracy in Estonia (Salumäe 2019).

So, as already emphasised, EKRE has managed to maintain constantly stable polling ratings and keep party inside united and undivided. Thus, it makes great difference against the Finns Party. Although for now the Finns Party has managed to become again one of the most popular parties in Finland (Politico Polls), this fact remains irrelevant for this research purposes because I focus on years during and around the time in perspective government periods in both cases.

So, my focus is on rhetoric and actions of populist parties (this can be taken as independent variable) and on the average poll ratings and developments inside the parties (dependent variable).

Table 1: Theoretical argument:

Populist parties' actions and rhetoric in government > party's support and unity
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To measure changes in poll ratings, I use Politico’s Polls of Europe ratings. Analysing party inner-coherence, I look at the party’s internal elections as it is logical to presume, that if the party is unstable then it affects how many candidates run for party leader position. Policy promises and declarations are concentrated on domestic and foreign policy which are the most general and possibly polarizing categorization, as it has been seen in several other cases in Europe where populists have fared well (Poland, France). This part of analysis is based on party’s own election programmes for 2015 and 2019 general and European election campaigns and in Estonia’s case also on EKRE’s party media (Uued Uudised and radio show “Räägime asjast”). Their communication and style are done by media content analysis – here I also use previously conducted analyses and assessments. To keep media analyses enough concentrated, I mainly focus on public media (Yle and ERR) outlet in both countries. Time period for both parties in the government was two years, and for tracing their activities before and after election I use interval of one parliamentary term.

In short, my comparative process tracing looks, both for EKRE and the Finns Party, as follows:

Table 2: Research design. Process-tracing of EKRE and the Finns Party:

Time period/acting dimensions	Foreign Policy: rhetoric actions	Domestic policy: rhetoric and actions	Average poll rating	Developments inside the parties
In opposition before being in government				
In government				
In opposition after being in government				

I admit it is possible that several disadvantages might occur in my research design. First of all, at some point, while I make implications based on media content analysis, conclusions can remain too subjective and perhaps even arbitrary, but I find, that relying mostly on public broadcast company is most realistic way to mitigate this fear. Secondly, although I find this research design most optimal for my real purpose of study – to find connection between populists' behaviour in government and their ability to maintain support from electors and keep party together – then preliminary analyses, where I compare the Finns Party and EKRE ideological stances would be very relevant. Are they indeed similar ideologically? Or may some unnoticed specific contextual factors, difficult to fix in general process-tracing, be the real reasons behind some differences in outcomes? Here my attitude originates from the presumption that there is enough ground to define EKRE and the Finns Party as populists. I also presume that for EKRE and the Finns Party belonging to the similar geopolitical and historical position (new-wave populism after migrant crisis) may guarantee similar contextual conditions.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. EKRE before the government, in the government and after the government

##### 3.1.1. EKRE's foreign policy rhetoric and actions: in opposition

EKRE's election platform in 2015 - at least from foreign and security politics point of view - was relatively modest and vague when we compare it with their upcoming rhetoric. Neither NATO, the European Union nor any other specific international organization was mentioned in the programme. Instead, they promised "not to accept international agreements which do not consider the interests of our people and country". In addition, under the same bullet, EKRE promised to withdraw Estonia's signatures from "abandoning" border agreement with Russia (EKRE).

Further evidence of EKRE's modest stance on foreign policy in 2015 Riigikogu elections appears from security and foreign policy brief material composed for the same elections by the Estonian International Centre for Defence and Security and Estonian Foreign Policy Institute. EKRE is in that paper mentioned only once regarding party's intention to recreate militarized border guard (Hurt 2015). This appeal was a result of incident in September 2014, when Estonian intelligence officer Eston Kohver was kidnapped and arrested near Estonian-Russian border by Russian authorities. Hurt (ibid.) noted that among EKRE's founding members there are several former border guard officers which explains their attitude.

In 2014-2015 EKRE published two additional documents where (with some exceptions) quite moderate and mainstream view for foreign policy was outlined. In "programme of the conservatives", EKRE agitated for increasing use of the European Union's funds, which enables development economic activity in regional areas taking in meanwhile into account local specifics. On the other hand, EKRE proclaimed its intention to keep supremacy of the Estonian constitution, as Estonia should not fulfil either the EU's or other acts putting into danger the sustainability of the Estonian nation state or acts that are in contrary to the sense of justice, morality and practices of the Estonians. Membership of the European Union and the single currency the euro must not, according to EKRE, restrict Estonia's sovereignty or slow down Estonia's development. In addition, EKRE vows to guarantee the diversity of Europa and strengthen ethnic nation states. EKRE also promised to apply shortening the time fixed in NATO accession contract of how long Estonia should independently fight with the invader before allies can intervene into conflict. EKRE also emphasised the importance of additional cooperation agreements with Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Norway and preferably also with

Finland and Sweden. Emphasis of focusing on bilateral relations has in EKRE's rhetoric increased over time (Raik and Rikmann 2021). Meanwhile as an indication of foreign political protectionism, EKRE would not support Estonian Defence Forces' participation in European Rapid Operational Forces "due to the scarcity and fragmentation of military resources" (ibid.).

In "conservative vision" party stated that Estonia's "security relies on the presence of primary defence capabilities, mandatory military service, total defence, NATO membership and international cooperation". What is more, Estonia should participate in the development of Europa among equals with other countries. Europa should in EKRE's vision function as a union of nation states. During EKRE's first parliamentary term, their Eurosceptic positions deepened.

Although in 2019 parliament elections programme NATO as a separate entity was mentioned once and quite vaguely ("to do everything possible from us to promote Estonia's national interests in NATO), the most radical shift in EKRE's positions did come regarding international organizations. EKRE promised to review Estonia's membership in international organizations, continuing its membership only in those that promote Estonia's interests. As a constitutional guarantee, EKRE vowed to exclude Estonia's accession to international organizations, from which there is no procedure or possibility of withdrawal. What is more, EKRE expressed desire to put under referendum "Estonia's next step and if necessary, the EU membership" if concentration of power into the hands of the European Commission would continue. EKRE re-emphasised their earlier stance to stand against federalization, united army, and united budget of the EU, and pledged to make cooperation with similarly thinking countries.

Another spectacular promise in foreign and security policy field was to ask from our closest ally the United States military aid in the amount of one billion US dollars. EKRE also vowed to ask financial aid from the European allies. EKRE also underlined even more unequivocally its desire to develop alternative networks of international relations, as EKRE set us a strategic goal to advance the creation of a strategic alliance of independent nation states in the Central and Eastern European region alongside transatlantic relations.

### 3.1.2. EKRE's foreign policy rhetoric and actions: in government

Rise of an Eurosceptic right-wing party to the government in 2019 created questions whether Estonia's foreign policy consensus is under transformation and whether Estonia is facing a process of "de-Europeanization" (Raik and Rikmann 2021). Vivid example of this fear happened just after coalition negotiations had begun when Jüri Ratas, Prime Minister of the

new coalition considered necessary to affirm that government-in-creation would support belonging to the EU and NATO (Raal 2019).

In 2019 European Parliament election's programme EKRE's main statements were similar to those already existing in their earlier campaigns. They promised to seek adjusting 2007 Lisbon agreement. In addition, they expressed their desire that every EU member state must have opportunity to leave the Union. As a relatively new promise, EKRE pledged to stand for equal representation in the European Parliament so that every member state would have equal number of representatives in the European Parliament. EKRE also promised to stand for the fact that the EU would not weaken or undermine NATO as a defence alliance as the EU should not compete with NATO (EKRE 2019).

While in government EKRE's continued its public rejection of the Estonian-Russian border treaty objecting to legitimising territorial concessions, even though the contestation of borders contradicts Estonia's commitments in the EU and NATO (Põlluaas 2020). EKRE also brought over its support for importance of bilateral relations and seeking alternatives to the EU, but as well to NATO. On the other hand, though EKRE expressed Eurosceptic views, they did not straightforwardly support leaving the EU. One of the largest political scandals from international relations point of view erupted in November 2019. Minister of Interior affairs and former EKRE's chairman Mart Helme expressed its scepticism in NATO's ability to defend Estonia in case of invasion and emphasised the importance of "plan B". More specifically he talked about "individual partnership with certain countries" (Tooming 2019).

Nevertheless, EKRE's actual influence on foreign policy in the government was selective and limited, and its rhetoric and practice of foreign policy did not have wider effect, and "EKRE's main contribution was to generate and participate in vigorous discursive disputes surrounding broader foreign policy goals" (Raik and Rikmann 2021, 608). EKRE's impact on the government, at least in foreign political field was "limited" for three reasons: first, EKRE's support did not exceeded 25 percent, but meanwhile majority of the Estonians hold a generally positive attitude towards the European Union. Secondly, EKRE was one of the three coalition partners and mainly on the initiative of the rest of the parties, coalition highlighted the continuity of the foreign, security and the EU policies. Thirdly, EKRE did not have previous practical experience in foreign policy field, and they often failed to develop more detailed and sophisticated positions in various issues, in addition to the earlier said, foreign policy was not

the primary question for its electorate. Degree of charged appeared radical at the level of rhetoric but were nevertheless limited in actual policies and actions.

Some policy-changes did occur, of which the most visible was government's firm position that Estonia would not receive any asylum-seekers that are redistributed within the European Union. Attempts to amend the Aliens Act proposed by EKRE in 2020 targeted to restrict the access to Estonia for labour and foreign students from third countries. However, goals were not fully achieved because of pressure from employers and farmers. Two out of three government parties had identified themselves as defenders of conservative family values (EKRE and also Isamaa) and this reflected in the government's human rights policy as Estonian diplomats were instructed not to join with declarations in support for LGBT rights (Ots 2020). In climate policy, Estonia at first positioned itself with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, although later it joined the EU's goal to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 (ERR 2020).

EKRE's politicians often made critical and even insulting remarks towards various Estonia's allies. For instance, Mart Helme called Joe Biden along with the latter's son as "corrupted guys" (korrumpeerunud tüübid) and claimed the US presidential elections to be fraud (Hussar 2020). Mart Helme was later forced to resign from his office as minister of interior affairs. In addition, Mart and Martin Helme cast a doubt over legitimacy of Lithuanian and Romanian election results (Pölluste 2021), which happened couple of weeks before the coalition collapse.

Many diplomats have in anonymous interviews admitted that EKRE's rhetoric and behaviour put them personally in uncomfortable situation and weakened Estonia's position in the international relations having damaged foreign policy continuity and reputation (Epner 2020). Harri Tiido, ambassador to Finland even cited to his disagreements with government before leaving the job and said that EKRE's remarks had affected Estonia's and Finland's relations (Vare, Ots 2020).

### 3.1.3. EKRE's foreign policy: rhetoric and actions: back in opposition

EKRE had to leave the government in January 2021, after several geopolitical crises – Belarus hybrid attacks on Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, events in Afghanistan and escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war. After that their main focus has been on domestic political issues, they have been relatively quiet in foreign political agenda.

Shortly after the government change, EKRE criticized harshly Minister of Foreign Affairs Eva-Maria Liimets when she declared that Estonia might express its readiness to ratify Estonian-Russian border agreement. "There are no substantive reasons for separating 5.2 percent of the Estonia's land, territorial waters and airspace to transfer it to a foreign country. Approving the agreement in the hope that it will improve Estonian-Russian relations is wishful thinking and shows how badly our foreign policy makers feel about Russia," explained Mart Helme why they are against this development (Mäekivi 2021). When Marko Mihkelson, chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee in Riigikogu, visited his Russian counterparts, and Russians allegedly confirmed on their own initiative that they would be ready to move on with border agreement, EKRE's politician Henn Põlluaas put Mihkelson's claims under shadow of doubt as he believed that Mihkelson himself tried to rise border agreement topic in discussions. Põlluaas said that Mihkelson betrayed the Estonian state in Moscow (Uued Uudised 2022).

In their rhetoric EKRE has focused on immigration, they have constantly warned about immigration intensification. EKRE was at first sceptical in giving to Ukraine too much military aid. Former military man and a member of EKRE's fraction in Riigikogu Leo Kunnas questioned Kaja Kallas, Prime Minister, regarding transferring howitzers and Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine. He pointed out that Ukraine is a regional power, one of the five countries in the world that can produce arms, military equipment and ammunition in all its categories today, except nuclear weapons, and said that Estonia's military ability must not suffer because of this decision (Uued Uudised 2022). Couple of months later, in the vortex of Ukrainian war, Martin Helme claimed that Estonia has transferred all its anti-tank missiles to Ukraine. Chief of Defence Forces Martin Herem (Lind 2022) later admonishingly overturned this statement.

Martin Helme wrote a column regarding their concern at the end of March 2022 (Uued Uudised 2022):

*"In summer when the Belarusian hybrid war against Lithuania and Poland was launched using migrants, we demanded answers how the government was ready to receive a large number of people to arrive in Estonia. The Prime Minister as well as all the other government politicians explained that there is no such risk for Estonia and nothing needs to be done. In autumn and winter, as Russia's activities towards Ukraine became increasingly aggressive, we again demanded answers from the government. We wanted to know what our preparations for the refugee crisis were. Even then, it was explained to us that there was no need to be afraid and that everything is being prepared. Indeed, on 13 February, the government, through Minister*

*Signe Riisalo, claimed that we could take in 2,000 refugees. Three weeks later, it was announced that we would be able to handle 10,000. However, we now know that the government's internal documents contain figures of 100,000 or even 150,000."*

In April 2022, EKRE's former chairman Mart Helme (2022) claimed that their popularity in Russian population has increased because they have taken relatively modest positions in Russian-Ukrainian war (Kullerkupp 2022).

In Summer 2021 EKRE expressed its opposition in taking 30 refugees from Afghanistan. Mart Helme asked, inspired by abrupt departure of US forces from Afghanistan, can we rely on the United States if it is leaded by President Joe Biden. He said that Biden's administration is responsible for failure in Afghanistan and Estonia do not have any moral obligation to accept refugees (Helme 2021).

One specific case of inconvenience for EKRE was caused by Marine Le Pen, leader of French National Front, former presidential candidate and a long-time ally of EKRE and other far-right populists in Europe. In December 2021, Le Pen claimed that Ukraine belongs to the Russian sphere of influence. This happened shortly after far-right leaders from all over Europe had gathered in Warsaw regarding new potential union of sovereign nation states. "I am not responsible for Marine Le Pen, and what was said in Warsaw was precisely that different countries have a lot of different attitudes, and it is necessary to reach an agreement on which issues are unanimous and which are not," responded Mart Helme, Vice-Chairman of EKRE (Lindam 2021). On 1 May 2022, in their regular radio show, Mart and Martin Helme claimed that Finland's accession to NATO would not be anymore good for Estonia, because Estonia "would be suitable opponent in demonstrating to Finland that NATO would not defend them". In addition, they said USA is trying to provoke Russia to have a military conflict with Estonia with the aim to weaken Russia. They also criticized Estonia for being largest military donator to Ukraine (Räägime asjast 2022).

#### 3.1.4. EKRE's domestic policy rhetoric and actions: in opposition

In the first parliamentary term, under the influence of refugee crisis, EKRE continued combining opposition to radical Islam with white identity politics (Raik and Rikmann 2021), but official party discourse became more carefully worded and is instead focusing on promoting the narrative that it is difficult to assimilate Islam into society. EKRE's coming to the political sphere legitimised "cruder public discourse" and ignited a fight against "political

correctness". 2015 refugee crisis and debate on recognition of same-sex unions inspired the emergence of network of various radical social media groups. For instance, two anti-immigration Facebook groups gathered over 20,000 people. Although EKRE publicly did not acknowledge its ties with radical-right networks and along with its youth wing Blue Awakening (Sinine Äratus) maintained a relatively (politically) correct style" by avoiding explicitly racist and xenophobic messages (Kasekamp, Madisson and Wierenga 2019, 48), their own news portal Uued Uudised (New News) has developed into one of the most significant centres of the Estonian radical-right web and valuable key in advertising EKRE's anti-immigration events and petitions, especially among the audience whose attitude towards mainstream media is sceptical.

As mentioned before, one of the issues creating cleavage between far-right parties in Europe is attitude towards Russia. EKRE's attitude towards Russians was rather hostile. For example, when Marina Kaljurand, who has ethnical Russians in her family, ran as a candidate for presidency in 2016, Martin Helme from EKRE claimed that a Russian should not be the president of Estonia. In addition, EKRE demanded from Kaljurand to prove that she is a citizen by birth right, which she eventually did (Raba 2016). Another illustrative case was tweet by a member of the Riigikogu Jaak Madison. EKRE MP Jaak Madison: "I was watching a [basketball] game between Kalev and Rock and the cheerleaders' last song was in Russian. I left. #absurd" (Twitter). Mart Helme, later ministry of interior, claimed that in Estonia there is a fifth column consisting of 5,000 Russian-speaking young men who train together in paintball clubs, gun clubs, and hunting societies. According to him, they can be easily mobilized do destabilize Estonia (Velsker 2016). Urmas Reitelmann, back then public relation specialists of Estonian Defence League, who in 2019 was voted to parliament as EKRE's candidate, claimed in 2015 that alleged refugees coming to Estonia are "just usual human trash (tavaline inimrämps), who must be repelled at any cost. In addition, he said: "Over 300,000 tibia's (insulting term for Russians in Estonian) are parasiting in Estonia and has not adapted here" (Õhtuleht 2015).

EKRE's concerns in various socio-political issues in first parliamentary term was summed up by Helme in his essay, where he celebrated Donald Trump's victory in presidential election as a "triumph of common sense". Which in his view meant being against "gay propaganda, emasculating feminism, absurd gender neutrality, criminal euthanasia, pseudo-scientific climate change, encouragement of mass immigration, demonization of the nation-state,

demolition of the traditional family, ridiculing religious beliefs (with the exception of Islam), and censuring views not conforming to "European values" (Helme 2016). In various forms EKRE stood against those trends throughout their parliamentary term. In other policy fields, EKRE's rhetoric was rather juicy and full of metamorphoses, often bringing along criticism. Martin Helme as a leader of EKRE's fraction in parliament spoke in the parliament's speakerphone about his desire that the heads of Estonian leading judges "would start rolling" (Velsker 2017). President Kersti Kaljulaid publicly denounced this remark and former chairman of Estonian Supreme Court called this "threat as a dangerous precedent" (ibid.).

EKRE's media content focused on painting an explicit picture of systematic and malicious subordination of traditional family values and gender roles carried out by minority groups. Martin Helme claimed, "that a 27- year-old unmarried and childless female journalist writing about the Istanbul Convention was a part of the Estonian problem of declining population and thus she was a socially harmful element" (Delfi Naistekas 2016). EKRE's opposition to the 2011 Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention was widespread and they stood against it because of "abnormalities hidden inside it" which are ignoring traditional gender roles, although EKRE supported statements against women violence. "However, if we start looking more closely at the declaration, a number of very absurd things will come out of it. The declaration denies the biological inevitability of human being born men and women and allows a person to decide who he wants to be. Person may have the characteristics of a man, but if person feels being a woman, then the convention should recognize person as a woman. According to national conservatives, such an artificial construction of life is a very slippery slope in people's minds, and here it is only a step towards denying the objective truth," explained Martin Helme (EKRE 2017).

### 3.1.5. EKRE's domestic policy rhetoric and actions: in government

Systematic anti-establishment rhetoric, strong campaign and organisation-building efforts culminated with successful parliament elections in March 2019 where EKRE obtained 18% of votes (Saarts 2021). Former incumbent power the Centre Party became second in elections and to keep its chairman's Jüri Ratas' prime minister position it formed a coalition with EKRE and another conservative party Isamaa. Before the elections such a partnership was seen highly unlikely, and Jüri Ratas had considered it even impossible (Koppel 2018). As in Austria, the far-right populist party in Estonia was also included in the coalition with the hope by its partners that holding government responsibility would civilize them at the end and therefore would

erase the growth potential of extremist views in Estonian political landscape. On March 12, 2019, when coalition negotiations had just begun, Helir-Valdor Seeder, chairman of Isamaa was interviewed in the Estonian Public Broadcast Esimene Stuudio (The First Studio). Host Andres Kuusk quoted MP Raimond Kaljulaid who had just left the Centre Party in protest against a new coalition. Kaljulaid had said: "EKRE politicians have several times minified the atrocities of Hitler. One of their politicians has named childless women as socially useless elements, and other one has said to allied forces to wear a uniform if they do not want to get beaten up."

Asked, whether for Isamaa this kind of rhetoric is acceptable, Seeder answered: "No, certainly not. And I am completely sure that if we make this coalition then this rhetoric will stop. First because this is demanded by the coalition partners and our culture has been and will be completely different. Second, EKRE's position in the Estonian society should change when it becomes a coalition party. In opposition it has consciously chosen other tactics, where it has orientated on protest votes and confrontation. [...] If you start exercising power, then you cannot neither in rhetoric nor in the actual political practice use it. Therefore, I am certain that if EKRE becomes a coalition party then its rhetoric and actions are going to change." (ERR 2019).

Seeder even expressed its belief that the aim of the whole Estonia's political landscape and elite should be as few political extremes as possible in Estonia. Seeder agreed with host's question that including EKRE in coalition can be taken as "rescue operation". He added: "By pushing parties in right and left wing away, by explaining that they are not "suitable for parquet" (parketikõlblik in Estonian) - as a result they radicalize, collect additional protest votes and so both extremes rise. We see this trend across the Europe" (ibid.). So, in conclusion Seeder believed that other parties should give a chance to EKRE to gain experience, learn and civilize themselves. This hope and optimism were nonetheless short-lived. At the heat of coalition negotiations Mart and Martin Helme appeared to threaten with potential unrest if negotiations would collapse under external influence or pressure (TRE raadio 2019):

Mart Helme: "If our thing is wasted and if we throw a fire match in a barrel of gunpowder ..."

Martin Helme: (at the same time) "We do not need to throw anything, this gun barrel blows on its own ..."

Mart Helme: "... then there is an explosion. And this is not being prevented by any deep state, it is not being prevented by any European Commission. This explosion is coming."

Martin Helme: "I do not know what will happen next. I am not even going to figure out these

scenarios here right now. But the social tension that is there now, compared to that when we are being pushed aside, is childish babble” (ibid.).

Week before, Union of Doctors demanded public apologize from EKRE’s vice-chairman Martin Helme because of his accusations regarding discussion about abortions. In Helme's words 4,500 children are killed every year in Estonia before they are even born and he criticized gynaecologists, who "defend their moral face by systematically participating in these abortions, thereby violating Hippocrates' oath. I do not agree that they should tell us anything about human rights" (Kuus 2019). Already during the coalition negotiations and also several times in next two years, Martin and Mart Helme cast a shadow of doubt over legitimacy of Estonian e-voting system. For instance, in March 2020 Martin Helme claimed that e-voting is complete shame for Estonia and their reliability are non-existent, because this election system cannot be followed nor controlled (Pau 2019).

Another source for tensions was Marti Kuusik`s case. He was EKRE politician who lasted as Minister of Foreign Trade and Information Technology only one day because media published complaints about his domestic violence. When members of the government, including Kuusik, had sworn in, President Kersti Kaljulaid left the parliament hall to demonstrate her attitude towards Kuusik. Mart Helme in his turn accused Kaljulaid of being too emotional women. "An emotionally aroused woman can afford it. But Kersti Kaljulaid was not just a woman, she was the President of the Republic at that time. (Krjukov 2019).

When swearing an oath, EKRE's minister showed an "OK-gesture", which in global discourse is generally connected to various far-right movements. Indrek Ibrus, Professor of Media and Innovation in Tallinn University expressed his belief that they are provoking consciously. He explained: "Why did Mart and Martin Helme show these signs in the Riigikogu when they became ministers - then this is another layer of meaning: that yes, we know that such a code exists, but we seem to be communicating that it is a sign of good mood, knowing that we can play with meanings - that we are communicating with our people - see what we can do, we are empowered, we know what it means, but we still do it! Innocent, it's a sign of OK (good mood) and there are no problems!" (Ots 2019). EKRE's strategy was summed up by Ministry of Finances Martin Helme who in October 2019 said in London that in Estonia they control the agenda by "provoking, escalating and improvising" (Delfi 2019).

In 2020 Martin Helme declared boycott to the questions from journalists of Delfi. "This is the portal that produces fake news, where Paris, Kiisler, Koorits and Roonemaa work. I have to say, I do not read Delfi, I do not get anything from fake news. I recommend others not to read it either," Helme said at a government press conference (ERR 2020). In 2020, after Mart Helme had resigned and Martin Helme faced vote of confidence, Martin Helme called a parliamentary opposition as a "Mordor" and used a word "põmmpead", belittling their intellectual capacity (Palgi 2020). Few weeks before resigning because of remarks about US president-elect Joe Biden, Mart Helme gave an interview to Deutsche Welle, where he recommended homosexuals to be in Sweden rather than in Estonia (Nael 2020). Prime Minister Jüri Ratas reacted to interview by admitting that such remarks weaken remarkably the health of coalition (Kiisler 2020).

If at the early days of coalition Helir-Valdor Seeder, chairman of Isamaa, hoped that being in the government would tame and civilize EKRE, then by the last months of this coalition the tone had changed, and he accused media in giving them the platform. "So far, it has succeeded to a very large extent, as the Estonian press has proved to be a tool in this strategy. If the media does not take the initiative, then what are you provoking and escalating? If the aim is primarily to attract attention and make noise, it should not be amplified," said Seeder said and added: "The amplification of such good taste and borderline statements in one Sunday's radio broadcast is too much where media people line up to listen to the front line and shoot immediately on Sunday and this will become the main topic of the Estonian politics in the coming days." (Pulk 2020). Seeder referred to the radio broadcast "Räägime asjast", which is on the air on every Sunday in TRE Raadio where Mart and Martin Helme discuss politics, and often cause some political scandal with their remarks.

EKRE was an uncomfortable partner for the other coalition parties not only in rhetoric but also in actual political practices. The first serious government crisis was caused by the problems in which EKRE blamed Elmar Vaher, Director General of Police and Border Guard Board. Mart Helme, Minister of Interior Affairs at that time first announced disciplinary proceedings against Vaher. Then Martin Helme, Minister of Finances and a substitute of Mart Helme's duties at the time asked for Vaher's resignation, though Jüri Ratas, Prime Minister did not support this decision. After all the conflict was solved a few days later (Kuus 2019). The similar episodes where the coalition parties were not at the same wavelength, were quite recurring. Martin Helme as a Minister of Finance stood alone in favour of establishing unanimity requirement

for the recapitalization of banks when reforms of the Europe Stabilization Mechanism were under discussions at the EU Council. Jüri Ratas as Prime Minister withdraw the Estonian reservation later at the meeting of the European Council. Several politicians expressed the opinion that in doing so Helme exceeded the mandate received from the Riigikogu and the government. The Riigikogu Committee on the European Union Affairs called on him to report on his activities (Aaspõllu, Sildam 2019).

Defining phenomenon of Ratas' second government was Covid-19 crisis. On February 27, 2020 Mart Helme called coronavirus just a normal cold and said that in his childhood, such colds were treated with goose fat and woollen socks. Two months later he admitted that he did not take the problem seriously enough and EKRE became vocal defender of strict Covid-19 restriction rules (Pärli 2020). It was at the government press conference when Mart Helme said: “We do not hesitate to use force in the sense that we are then using coercive methods and fines and everything else that is necessary when it comes to people who are clearly ignoring their responsibilities and abusing their rights,” (Transcript of the government press conference). In April, the government approved amendments to the law aimed at the people from foreign countries who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic to leave Estonia as soon as possible. Moreover, EKRE also wanted to keep seasonal workers away from Estonia. EKRE attempted also to change the rules for students coming to Estonia from the third countries: the aim was to make the conditions and requirements for a long-term stay in Estonia so difficult that it would take away any desire for foreign students to apply to Estonian universities. During coordination with other ministries the bill lost significantly its initial sharpness and was completely cancelled with change of the government. (Saarts, Schulz 2021). It ignited a quarrel between the private sector and the government regarding labour force from the third countries. Quarrel emerged in 2020, when due to Covid-19 restrictions labour movement to Estonia was limited and it created dismay especially among strawberry farmers (Raamets, Lättemäe and Raudvere 2020). Nevertheless, reaction to Covid-19 can be seen as one of few times where EKRE opted for responsible way of doing politics.

A showdown of the Centre Party, EKRE and Isamaa's coalition was a marriage referendum, which was planned by Spring 2021, and which should have asked from citizens a question whether marriage should remain a privilege between a man and a woman. Its second reading in the parliament was planned on the day of the government collapse and therefore it was voted out of the agenda. Nevertheless, it was preceded by months of full political quarrels between

the opposition and the coalition. Opposition tried to block the procedure with thousands amendment proposals, which brought along hostile reaction from EKRE's politicians. For example, Anti Poolamets named Lauri Läänemets, a Social Democrats MP as a "revolutionary mariner" (Hussar, Volmar 2021).

EKRE's too extreme rhetoric had its impact on the wellbeing of the government and according to Mailis Reps, who in 2021 January was among leading figures in the Centre Party and stressed that EKRE's rhetoric turned out to be fatal for the coalition. Although the trigger for imminent collapse of the coalition was a corruption scandal hit by the Centre Party, then many people started soon speculating that the real reason was a marriage referendum, which was a top priority for EKRE. But the other coalition members did not take enthusiastically the idea of holding this referendum. Reps claimed that during discussions with the Centre Party parliament fraction several party members expressed fatigue of constant scandals caused by EKRE within 20 months. They had become a burden for the whole government. For that reason, Reps described the cooperation with EKRE as a "bumpy", where there was not "too much will" to continue with the same coalition (Ploompuu 2021). Reps also confirmed that there was a strong opposition to holding marriage referendum as its impact for the society would be extremely polarizing (ibid.)

Martin Helme, EKRE's chairman and Minister of Finance claimed that the plan for a new coalition had been in the air for a long time and the other coalition parties had constantly been looking for explanations, why it was difficult with EKRE and the coalition parties did not behave honestly and sincerely with EKRE. His explanations: "Because things were being postponed all the time for some stupid reasons, with some stupid excuses, scandals were taken from nowhere just because we should not have been dealing with the certain issues." (BNS 2021).

#### 3.1.6. EKRE's Domestic policy rhetoric and actions: back in opposition

When EKRE's tenure in the government ended and they became again an opposition party in the parliament, they turned the screws even more in their rhetoric and behaviour. In January 2021 Mart Helme promised to make coalition's work as difficult as possible with thorough and massive obstruction on various bills that are unsuitable for EKRE. He claimed that if coalition should bring forward hate speech bill, Civil Partnership Law's implementation act or enhance further immigration, then they would obstruct the parliament's work with thousands proposal

of amendments. "We are going to completely clog it up here. You are running out of here. You want to leave the government one day because you are so sick of it. But you have shown us that this is all right. That is the right way. That is the only weapon of the opposition. We will then use this opposition weapon, but we will make it very sharp," said Mart Helme (Vasli 2021).

In April 2021 EKRE expressed its reluctance towards the European Union's recovery fund when EKRE submitted almost 700 proposals for amendments. Aaspõllu (ERR) emphasised that while in the government, EKRE and EKRE's chairman, Minister of Finances Martin Helme was himself in the process and did not appeal to any problems. Similar pattern of behaviour has been used since that time. In the same month, in April 2021 EKRE promised to block Media Services Act and the Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Act (Puhm 2021). In January 2022, EKRE submitted 359 amendments to the government's draft Public Health Act in order to prevent the adoption of a bill facilitating gender reassignment (EKRE 2022).

Resistance for the Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Act performed as introduction act to the trend that defined EKRE in the second half of 2021 – it was their Covid-19 politics. At the first months of being in the opposition EKRE was critical of government's too soft and slow reaction to increasing number hospital patients and deaths caused by Covid-19 (ERR 2021). On 11 March 2021, EKRE demanded that the government must close the border for at least four weeks, buy more vaccines outside the European Union and allow rapid tests for coronavirus to be controlled in order to control the Covid-19 virus (EKRE 2021). At the same time EKRE steadily became more sceptical regarding various Covid-19 restrictions as well vaccinations. Kalle Grünthal, a member of the Parliament from EKRE was throughout 2021 vocal sceptic of Covid-19 vaccinations and restrictions. This stance was overtaken by the rest of the party members. In September 2021, Õhtuleht (2021) declared in their editorial that EKRE's actions were "dangerous game with our health". In October 2021 a large demonstration was held at Vabaduse Väljak where thousands of people protested against Covid-19 vaccination pass and restrictions. A lot of EKRE politicians participated in this protest and Martin Helme as the party's leader delivered a speech (Krjukov 2021). In the autumn, EKRE supported its member Elvis Brauser who had previously gained fame with anti-vaccination speeches and who ignored Covid-19 restrictions in his cafe. As a result, his cafe was closed at the request of the Health Board (Pullerits 2021).

It was previously described how EKRE has over years been strongly anti-Russian in their rhetoric. Now the anti-vaccination movement united "pro-Kremlin activists, nationalists, healers, conspiracy theorists, anxious citizens and just curious people" (Kuznetsov, Šmutov 2021). For example, radically pro-Russian non-profitable organization Eesti Vanemad (Estonian Parents) participated in the demonstration at Vabaduse Väljak on the 23 October and they held a meeting with EKRE's politicians on 8 September, where they mutually suggested making cooperation between themselves (ibid.).

The most significant shift in EKRE's rhetoric in 2021 was actually their attempt to start flattering ethnic Russians to vote for EKRE. Kuzitškin (2021) said that EKRE's popularity in Russian electorate started increasing already back in 2019. He explained, that "Russian mentality assumes paternalism, leader cult and social equality". EKRE had promised to strengthen cooperation with NATO, establish transition education from system completely to Estonian language, banning anti-Estonia propaganda and continue with territorial demands towards Russia, but according to Kuzitškin (ibid.) local Russians were ready to "forgive EKRE" because of the anti-EU stance which enables further integration with Russia and freeing Estonia from labour migrants, which would leave different jobs for local Russians. Discussion of shift of rhetoric regarding Russian votes had actually begun even when EKRE was in the government and Mart Helme had seemingly praised Vladimir Putin's foreign policy. Tõnis Saarts (Tiks 2020) believed that the reason why EKRE had started targeting Russian electorate, is because they have reached the natural limit of their support. He explained that the more conservative Russian core voters are probably closer to EKRE in terms of the values today than they are to the Centre Party. And that is going to help EKRE to cross the threshold of 25 or 30 percent of votes, so they had to start fighting for Russian votes.

Wide-ranging resentment followed to Mart Helme's warning over the arrival of the Ukrainain refugees. "I communicated with doctors. Doctors say this health picture is terrible. HIV is coming back. Infection diseases are brought to us from Ukraine, which we have thought we will never see in Estonia again. No, they will come back to us because tens of thousands of people will come and bring those diseases here. But they communicate with us. These women, young women, we do not know what they are going to do here. Maybe hundreds, thousands of women will be involved in prostitution. Who takes the poison and says it will not work?" (Transcript of the Riigikogu).

On the other hand, according to Jaak Valge, MP of EKRE, attracting Russians was not the case, and they totally targeted another demographic group - women. "We have a large reserve of women's support that we can grow. And it can be grown better than the support of non-Estonians - it is possible that we are already close to the maximum. If we want to grow it further, we should start abandoning our nationalist principles. We will not do that. We need to like women more," Valge explained (Saarniit, Pulk 2021). Some have noticed that EKRE has softened in comparison with their earlier approach. For instance, Vootele Päi said that in campaign of 2021 local elections EKRE's campaign slogan was "We Love Estonia", which in tone is completely different to the one in 2019 elections, where their slogan was "Let's fire" ("anname tuld") (Pulk 2021).

### 3.1.7. Developments inside the party (EKRE)

Ever since EKRE broke into parliament in 2015, it has demonstrated internal coherence which especially stand out in comparison with other parties. Its annual chairman's and vice-chairman's elections have taken place in last decade always uncontested, which can mostly be explained by its strong ideological core and the ability to inspire ideological devotion among its members. If at the top of the party hierarchy EKRE seems to be extremely centralized (as power seems firmly in the hands of Helme's family), then local level elections and candidate selection procedures indicate internal democracy and vibrant and geographically extensive network of activists and local elites (Saarts, Jakobson and Kalev 2021).

And over years there have been handful number of cases where rare conflicts have echoed from EKRE. The most famous of them was the incident of Indrek Särg, former leader of EKRE's unit in Tartu. He was expelled from the party in 2019 as he had apparently violated the party's foundational articles and obstructed party's work and election campaign. Several members of EKRE's board (Jaak Madison, Helle Kullerkupp) expressed their incomprehension why Särg was expelled and praised his work in Tartu (Adamson 2019). Särg sued EKRE and accused the party being undemocratic and bullying (Palgi 2019). Similar incident occurred with Maria Kaljuste, who in 2015 was named the best female entrepreneur in Estonia. And only two years later she was expelled from the party for violating party's reputation and good practices (Nael 2017). Questions' of EKRE's inner atmosphere arose when Member of the European Parliament Jaak Madison was not re-elected as EKRE's vice-chairman in Summer 2020 (Krjukov 2020). Previously he had several times lightly criticized former chairman's Mart Helme's activities or positions (Kann 2019).

While EKRE was in government, some criticism from the party came as a result of EKRE's environment policy. The most widespread backlash to EKRE's inner wellbeing happened in Autumn 2021 after it had publicly supported anti-vaccine movement and participated in large demonstrations at Vabaduse Väljak. As a result, EKRE's support rating decreased from 24-25 percent to 21 percent (even party's chairman Martin Helme explained downtrend with actively participating in anti-vaccination events) and more significantly dozens of EKRE's members left party. Most well-known of those were attorney Urmas Simon, member of Tallinn's City Council Kaiet Remmak-Grassmann, and Siim Umerov who was at local elections EKRE's most popular candidate in Kadrina municipality (Pullerits 2022, Einman 2021).

EKRE's attempts to sympathise more with the Russian electorate culminated with disagreements regarding aftermath of the Ukraine war as five board members of EKRE's department in Narva left the party. They explained it with not accepting EKRE's position regarding celebration of May the 9<sup>th</sup> anniversary and bill presented by EKRE in the Riigikogu which is seen as "polarizing society" in Narva (Krjukov 2022).

#### 3.1.8. EKRE's popularity in society

After EKRE made it into parliament in March 2015 (with 8,1 percent of votes), its polling ratings experienced sharp and imminent increase, as it almost doubled in a year. With some exceptions, trend was continuous and culminated with breakthrough in 2019 elections. Although they remained slightly in short of their highest moments in ratings (in 2018 their popularity rose to the 20 percent), they still collected 17,8 percent of votes at the elections.

Mainstream parties' hope that government's responsibility would curb EKRE's wings, worked only to a moderate extent. EKRE's ratings was in steady, but not too serious decline, and by the early 2020 it had fell to 15 percent. Nevertheless, they kept their base electorate. Drop into opposition in 2021 took EKRE's popularity to its all-time heights and during 2021 it was at times even most popular party in Estonia, being just short of the 25 percent line. Some controversial issues, such as anti-vaccination campaign and Ukrainian war had limited negative effect on their support, but they still have relatively stable position in polling ratings.

### 3.2. The Finns Party before the government, in the government and after the government

#### 3.2.1. The Finns Party's foreign policy rhetoric and actions: in opposition

Before joining with the government the recurring theme in the Finns Party's foreign policy platforms was its critical stance towards the EU (Elections 2015). They claimed that when after the Cold War many Finns believed that the main pretext to join the EU was security then this thinking has waned over years, and Finland has instead "been a part of the great power politics with no security guarantees". They argued that if in theory the EU's goal is common security and defence policy, then in practice there is no tangible development in that direction because most of the EU members already belong to NATO and there is no point to build overlapping systems (ibid.). In the Finns Party's vision, they see the EU security framework as a method to guarantee material supply, because Finland has its own military industries, and the Finns Party wants to enhance export licensing policy for Finland's defence industry. In addition to that the Finns Party asks for the EU battle groups program to be examined, as there is no point of having them if they are not able to be used (Elections 2015).

Although the Finns Party was in opposition in 2011-2015 parliamentary term, Timo Soini Chaired the Foreign Committee in parliament. He promised that if he would become Prime Minister of Finland then he would hold a referendum over EU membership (Yle 2013). Visiting Moscow in March 2013, he said that Russia does not currently pose a military threat to Finland but added that Russia's military potential must not be underestimated. According to Soini, Russia is a nuclear-weapon country that wants to influence world politics (Randlaid 2013). A year later, after Russia had attacked Ukraine, he said that sanctions against Russia must also be negotiated bilaterally and go past EU's authority (Yle 2014).

The Finns Party remained sceptical of the EU's security policies and viewed NATO-led operations "even more critically", because, as they put, it "military operations, where peace is being forced at the point of a gun, is not, in the opinion of the Finns Party, a place for the use of resources of small countries". The Finns Party believed decision-making power should stay in the hands of Finland, and if a decision to use Finnish military is made in a democratic manner, then that decision must be respected. Instead of NATO and the EU, as The Finns Party believes, the United Nations should have the major role in the international crises (ibid.).

Just as EKRE in Estonia, the Finns Party sympathy relied on more specific geopolitical networks, rather than large organizations such as NATO. For instance, The Finns Party

favoured "very realistic and pragmatic" concept of Nordic security and defence co-operation. They emphasised that as other Nordic countries has their own interests - Sweden sees Finland more as a geographic buffer, rather than someone with whom military alliance can be made. As Denmark, Norway and Iceland have chosen NATO, then for these countries Nordic alliance seems to be something "like a tasty "side dish". Therefore, the Finns Party called not to get carried away by naive hope of others taking responsibility of Finland's own security. The Finns Party saw definite benefits of Nordic co-operation expressed in a joint procurements, joint training and exercises and in experience with international crisis management. They argued that Nordeco would be an effective and versatile structure for co-operation, because each country "can decide on its participation on a case-by-case basis and a smaller group of countries can go ahead on its own" (ibid.).

Another common ground with EKRE (Pölluaas 2022) was opposition to the Ottawa Land Mine Treaty of 2012, which the Finns Party saw as a strategic error without military or economic justification, because large countries such as Russia, the US and China can still use land mines as they did not sign the treaty. They pointed to Finland's 1300 kilometres long border with Russia and to Finland's topography to claim that mines are an extremely effective means of defence for Finland. The same as EKRE the Finns Party also focused on warning for Russian-danger and in the Finnish case they especially stressed the importance of the border control. They believed that the EU-Russia visa-free program "must be given careful consideration before any approval", and as it could triple the number of people crossing the land border, then it can increase the danger of cross-border crime and infectious disease transmission. In this case, the EU should contribute significantly to the costs of improving the physical and administrative means to handle the traffic (Finns Party 2015).

As other right-wing and populist parties in Europe, the Finns Party was also against the EU's burden sharing mechanism in common asylum policy, as it would affect Finland with large numbers of people who are difficult to successfully integrate into Finnish society. In addition, they believed that labour migration from outside the EU area should be kept closed for the most part because labour mobility and availability in the EU is sufficient to handle needs and demand in the Finnish labour market. They argued against mass immigration not only from perspective of Finland's well-being, but they presented arguments what and how it would work as a benefit for Africa:

*"The population of Africa is predicted to be some 4 billion by the end of this century. Supporting this population explosion and the consequent exacerbation of poverty will mean the EU intervening on the behalf of good government, promotion of economic activity and efficiency and encouraging an increasing role of women in Africa. The key is 'result-responsibility' and strict condition-based aid. Refugees resulting from war and other crises should be set up in places that are relatively near to the disturbed areas and the intention and plan should be that these people return home as soon as circumstances permit." (The Finns Party 2015).*

In the campaign of 2015 parliamentary election, the party expressed the readiness to compile objective study of NATO membership with pros and cons. The truth is that with this stance they did not differ from the Finnish mainstream parties and from the general position the Finnish society was against NATO membership until 2022, intensification of Ukraine-Russia war (Järvenpää 2019).

### 3.2.2. The Finns Party's foreign policy rhetoric and actions: in government

Although having repeatedly expressed criticism towards the Euro currency and the EU itself, Timo Soini, the Finns Party's chairman claimed in 2015, while already in government, that departure from the common currency cannot happen without a majority of the Finnish people and Parliament agreeing, and there is no such thing. "Europe is fine, but the European Union should come back to its roots which were a free commercial alliance and a commercial agreement and much cooperation among European countries, but now it is trying to be an European superpower at every level," said Soini. Then he vowed to block new possible Greece's bailouts (Yle 2015). In 2017 April, Sampo Terho from the Finns Party and new Minister for the European Affairs, Culture and Sports, weighed on leaving the EU's common currency, saying that it is likely that Finland leaves eurozone in the next few years, and his party would push for a future referendum on exiting the EU. He was criticized by Minister of Finances Petteri Orpo who claimed that a member of the Finnish government cannot be saying anything like this (Yle 2017).

In October 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs chaired by Timo Soini launched a "Do not come" Facebook campaign in Iraq and Turkey. Campaign was rolled out in Arabic and was directed at young men planning to travel to Finland and seek asylum status (Yle 2015). At the heat of refugee crisis, Finnish prime minister Juha Sipilä was forced to declare to Nordic media that

"Finland is not a racist country". This functioned as a damage control mode the international coverage of anti-refugee demonstrations in Finland which for example by Swedish press was particularly closely reported and connected in most cases to the Finns Party politicians (Yle 2015). During the first years when the Finns Party was a part of the government coalition, Finland had introduced tighter border controls, more restrictive rules for family reunification, and committed itself to calculating the costs of immigration to the country, with Kuisma and Nygard (2017) calling it remarkable that many of the previous contention election promises did become government policy and changed the direction of the Finnish immigration policy.

In September 2016 Timo Soini met Sergei Lavrov, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and meeting was challenged by tensions caused by NATO-led BALTOPS 16 exercises in Finland. Lavrov praised cooperation with Russia and Finland and brought out as an example Rosatom nuclear plant project in Finland projects by Finland's Fortum energy group in Siberia. Nevertheless, he criticized NATO operations, by calling it "the movement of NATO's military infrastructure towards our borders, to dragging new states into the military activity of the bloc". Soini repelled those remarks by saying Finland is independently passing such kind of decisions and their aim is solely Finland's own security (Yle 2016).

Half a year earlier Ministers of Interior of both countries were forced to meet and discuss rising border worries, as the main influx of migrants into Finland switched from its western to eastern border. Officials were concerned that Russia is orchestrating the flow of asylum seekers into Finland. Soini had previously said that organised crime is behind Russian border crossings and wanted stricter measures to reduce the number of asylum seekers crossing the border into Lapland from Russia. "There are human traffickers and people smugglers, organised activities. The President even spoke of escorts and queues. Everything suggests that it is illegal organised immigration, and it should be stopped," he said (Yle 2016).

In June 2016 Foreign Ministry published its new foreign and security policy report. Document was born by Soini's initiative and it expressed plans to increase bilateral cooperation with Sweden in the near future. Experts' eye was caught by careful wording and emphasise on maintaining a dialogue with Russia. Political scientist Pekka Visuri agreed that the "report clearly breaks with the earlier Finnish security assessments, in what it implicates Russia as a major cause of the increased tension on the Baltic Sea" (Yle 2016). Some opposition politicians wondered why Soini wanted to speed things up and did not wait for imminent Brexit referendum as if Britain would - as they by the end did - leave the European Union, its security

implications for the rest of Europe would be significant. Report stressed that Finland's policy of military non-alignment would continue but kept the possibility to apply for full NATO membership open as an option, and presented NATO as a positive, stabilizing force in Europe and the areas near Finland (ibid.).

Just before the party split up Finnish MPs voted by a wide margin to empower the Finnish Defence Forces to order professional service members to take part in overseas operations under the aegis of the EU security guarantee system. This enabled the provision and receipt of military assistance between Finland and another state, the EU or an international organisation. During the debate, the government was represented by Jussi Niinistö, Minister of Defence from the Finns Party who according to Yle (2017) countered that obligatory participation is the only credible way to ensure that enough troops can be found when they are needed for operations outside Finland's borders.

### 3.2.3. The Finns Party's foreign policy rhetoric and actions: back in opposition

In the Spring 2019, General and the European Parliament elections were held almost in sync as there was just five weeks between them. Therefore, large role in foreign policy of their campaigns were put on Europe. Their stance was, as inherent to them, strongly Eurosceptic, and they claimed that European bureaucracy does not represent nor advance the real value and virtues of European values as the EU has changed the true nature and meaning of what Europe really is. Euro currency crisis, the immigration issue and Brexit had taken the EU to the state of turbulence, and smaller member states had become fed up with dictation by the European Commission. They promised that even "before any final disintegration of the European Union, the Finns Party sees the longer-term strategic goal of Finland's withdrawal - either alone or as part of a wider group of the EU-critical nations" (the Finns Party platform). As usual, the Finns Party demanded stopping uncontrolled immigration which occurred because of insecure EU external borders, free movement within the Schengen area and the general chaos generated in the various member nations by the immigration crisis. All aid projects directed to the third world countries to be monitored and evaluated regarding desired goals, meanwhile cash flows to superficially good sounding projects must end.

They vowed to put an end to the federalisation of the EU and criticized that although Finland got praise as a model student in the European Commission, it had made bad compromises there and voted rarely against the Commission even on the issues of national importance to itself.

For example, they reprimand that Finland had favoured increasing the application of qualified majority voting even though it lessens even more the future influence of Finland in the EU. The Finns Party concluded that foreign, security and immigration policy should be left to the individual member states as they are more able to effectively manage those policies from the perspective of their own national interests and knowledge. The EU-internal labour mobility resulted in decline in wages and working conditions in the Western European countries, facilitated the movement of criminal groups and influences to Finland, developed unwelcome phenomenon of "begging" and most striking consequence of the EU-free movement was Brexit (ibid.).

Another eternal point of discontent for the Finns Party – the Euro currency - kept essential role in 2019 platform. They claimed that the importance of joining the Euro-area was primarily in security policy, but disadvantage of abandoning the national currency meant that Finland was without its own mechanism to adjust to country-specific adversities, and for that reason they believe that joining the Euro was a huge political and economic mistake. They emphasised that countries who kept national currency (Sweden, Denmark and UK) did fare better on average. The main problems for the Finns Party were that for all Euro-members there are the same monetary policy, financial responsibility and accountability, thus being subject to unacceptable economic fluctuations and destabilisation. This unstable environment led, as they claimed, to apparent peaceful growth, but created the huge southern European deficits and the Euro-crisis. Returning to independent national currency and monetary policy would mean retaking control over its own debt interest rates, setting exchange rates and using its own central bank's financial status for debt security program, and at the same time would avoid taking responsibility for other nations' economic policies (ibid.).

In addition to that the Finns Party called the EU upon to a financial diet. Fees of the EU membership should be continued calculated according to the gross national income of a member nation, Finland in meanwhile should oppose the European Commission's proposals for an increase in membership fees for the period 2021-2027. Creation of any new EU agencies should be also stopped, as well monthly movement of the entire EU parliamentary machine from Brussels to Strasbourg, which costs 114 million Euros annually, but does not provide any valuable effect (ibid.).

In defence and security policy the Finns Party believed that Finland should cooperate on an international basis only when it serves Finnish interests. Finland should keep away from

participating in the European Army or being part of its troops. They re-emphasised their previous belief that Finland should withdraw from Ottawa convention prohibiting anti-personnel land mines. Meanwhile, they criticized the hypocrisy of Germany's foreign policy, who by 2019 tried to get closer to Russia in the wider scene and get its own economic advantage, but at the same time talked about the European unity.

Although previously sceptical, the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 changed the Finns Party's stance on NATO's membership and at the end of March 2022, their parliamentary group declared that they back NATO membership. Parliament group leader Ville Tavio said that though he had not heard any anti-NATO comments in the group meetings, some did call for more time to consider the issue. Pro-NATO position was in his words justified as Finland is already cooperating with the alliance on many matters, NATO membership would increase the threshold for using military force against Finland (Yle 2022).

### 3.2.4. The Finns Party's domestic policy rhetoric and actions: in opposition

The Finns Party has historically been nationalist-populist movement combining typical features of far-right parties in Europe from ethno-nationalism to anti-elitism. On the other hand, some Finnish scholars have argued that the Finns Party is not a clear-cut case of far-right as in the economic matters they prefer to present strong left-leaning political positions (Lensky 2018.). One common-ground with other populist movements was opposition to the EU and it also affected their domestic choices at political field. Opposition to the EU culminated with the euro crisis in the early 2010s. After the 2011 elections Timo Soini declared impossibility to join with the coalition that was keen to commit to further eurozone rescue measures. Soini's and the Finns Party's core issue was critical stance towards the EU, which for other parties proved to be non-negotiable (Yle 2011). Therefore, Soini as a leader who had staked his reputation on the particular policy agendas was less willing to sacrifice them, and the cost for compromise was too high from a political perspective (Arter 2016, 22). Soini calculated that the euro crisis would remain topical issue throughout 2011-15 parliament term, and if the Finns Party entered into coalition, then it would hand the largest opposition party Centre an ideal position to exploit. However, during the 2011-2015 parliament term Soini's stance shifted, and he began prioritizing the government participation and willingness to make compromises (Poyet and Raunio 2021).

Under leadership of Timo Soini, the Finns Party turned out as an "old school populist party", whose mission would be to defend the forgotten people and distance their party from old parties (Jungar 2016). For instance, he declared after 2011 elections that new government's program discriminates the poor people. In addition, Soini criticized the government for "forgetting the pensioners, cuts in defence spending and increases in excise duties and the price of petrol". He called government programme as herring salad and praised it only for improving basic security (Yle 2011). Although Soini personally did not accept abortion, he said that it is nevertheless personal matter for everyone and The Finns Party as a party accepts it (Yle 2011).

Before 2015 elections the Finns Party launched seven separate policy programmes. One of them was about immigrations and some legal experts claimed it being potentially racist and anti-constitutional (Kuisma and Nygard, 2017). Simon Elo, who was a member of the Finns Party from 2009 to 2017, a leader of the Finns Party Youth from 2010 to 2014 and was elected to the Parliament in 2015, revealed in his 2021 book, that his party colleagues tried to influence public discourse with fake news and even with threats (Yle 2021).

### 3.2.5. The Finns Party's domestic policy rhetoric and actions: in government

Kuisma and Nygard (2017) argued that the fact that The Finns Party's background is with Finnish Rural party did help along it becoming coalition party in 2015 as the general approach of other parties towards the Finns Party was less confrontational and more cooperative, and Finnish parties, particularly since the end of the Cold War, have not isolated or excluded opposition forces. As with EKRE in Estonia, some mainstream politicians had expressed hope that government responsibility would tame far-right populist party

Soini picked more senior and moderate persons to serve in the cabinet and this demonstrated his desire to prove party's credentials and trustworthiness as a coalition partner, thus clearly setting a opposite case to EKRE's behaviour in Estonia. There was no real behavioural difference between ministers of the Finns Party and ministers from the coalition partners, and the Finns Party's representatives in the government replied to questions and defended governmental policies in the usual fashion (Poyet and Raunio 2021).

In August 2016 Petteri Orpo, National Coalition Party chair and Minister of Finances criticized its coalition partner the Finns Party, whose members had written racist online statements against two Finns Party members. Police investigation was started because of ethnic agitation. One of those was again the Finns Party's youth wing chair Sebastian Tynkkynen who year

before had expressed his wish to leave the government coalition. "If we are in the government, then we are in the government. We cannot be in the government and in the opposition at the same time," Orpo told in response (Yle 2016). Although Timo Soini had distanced himself from immigration issues, he defended his party when Antti Rinne, head of the Social Democrats and prime minister in 2019, called the Finns Party as a "heaven for racists" in 2016. "What Rinne's saying, then, is that the 524,000 Finns who voted for the Finns Party at the last election were voting to protect racists. That claim is outrageous and unfounded," Soini wrote (Yle 2016). Not only immigrants, but also Finland's Swedish-speaking population started experiencing hostile attitude from some segments of the population, primarily from those who one or other way are connected to the Finns Party. Sipilä government was in their communication notably vague and often undecided, "reflecting tensions or even conflicts between the Finns Party and the other two government parties" (Anckar, Kuitto and others 2016). Soini was repeatedly forced to condemn acts of violence and talk with other leaders in his party about claims of links between some Finns Party members and right-wing extremist groups. "The Finns Party is honourable. It is Finland's second largest party and a government partner which has hundreds of thousands of members. They cannot be stigmatized. I object to this kind of general labelling. As chairman, I cannot accept it," stated Soini after some Finns Party members did have reportedly links to extremist movements and organizations (Yle 2016).

In the last months of Soini's leadership, the poll ratings of the Finns Party were in steady decrease, Soini himself downplayed the drop as support is important only at election times and low result is "inevitable result of the government pushing through important austerity measures" (Yle 2016)

During Sipilä's tenure, the stagnation of country's economy was such a dismal, that Alexander Stubb, Minister of Finances described country as "the sick man of Europe" in 2016. It had managed to avoid a fourth consecutive year of declining economic activity, but the growth was lacklustre and gross domestic product was 7 percent below what it had reached by the 2007 (Walker 2016). Source of controversy was also so-called security bill, opposed by several Finns Party MPs. It was first tabled in 2015 by Alexander Stubb then Minister of Finance. In 2015, but as well two years later it was scrapped because of opposition from the Finns Party. Among other things, bill would have made it possible for Finns to transfer ownership of securities to an overseas nominee register that does not show the names of actual share owners. As Yle (2017) wrote, the critics were concerned that it would increase the possibility of tax evasion

and facilitate insider trading. Sipilä's government with the Finns Party in coalition finalised legislation on gay marriage, signed off on the latest Greek bail-out and accepted refugees from Syria and Iraq - previously the Finns Party had been against all that (The Economist 2017). All those compromises in government paved the way for 2017 split of the Finns Party.

In March 2017 Timo Soini announced that they would step down as a party chairman in the next party congress, which was due to take place in June. Jussi Halla-Aho defeated Sampo Terho, who was preferred candidate for Soini, in the leadership election. But Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and Minister of Finances Petteri Orpo vowed not to continue in the coalition with the Finns Party if it was led by Halla-Aho. "We've already had to stretch our value base to its extreme, and now those value differences are even bigger," Sipilä explained. Minister of Finances Petteri Orpo emphasised the question of human rights and stressed that his party would only join in a coalition who stands by these values, as many Jussi Halla-Aho's positions and statements about immigration were difficult to accept or even understand (Yle 2017). Sipilä was already on his way to the president's summer residence in Naantali with paper of resignation in his hand, when he got the news about the defectors' group (The Economist 2017). Soini and all the other minister defected from the party and formed new group in the parliament, Blue Reform. That is why the government remained unchanged, and all the former Finns Party's ministers continued in the government.

### 3.2.6. The Finns Party's domestic policy rhetoric and actions: back in opposition

After split in 2017 the Finns Party under Halla-Aho became again subject in the centre of controversies. Halla-Aho ran in the elections "in the mode of Donald Trump" and did not distance himself from his inflammatory text, where he used racial slurs, called Islam a religion of paedophilia and was even convicted in hatred (The Economist 2017).

In 2019, a man wearing clothes with the logo of Soldiers of Odin, tried to attack former chairman Timo Soini as he campaigned in Vantaa, and after incident number of Finns Party members called the attack as staged and an election trick the Blue Reform had paid for. Elo wrote in his book that Halla-Aho has become too close with far-right movements and the extermination of white people - the concepts created by the far right - are popular topics of conversation for members of the Finns Party today (Yle 2021). In 2019, Juha Mäenpää likened asylum seekers to an invasive species and the Constitutional Law Committee had recommended removing Mäenpää's immunity. Nevertheless, Eduskunta decided that he

should not be prosecuted for inciting ethnic hatred in a speech (Hilloskorpi 2020). As Poyet and Raunio (2021) pointed out that the Finns Party has regularly tested the limits of acceptable language, mainly in their social media posts and blog texts, and defended it with freedom of expression. Unlike in Soini's times the Finns Party under Halla-Aho has almost exclusively focused on immigration. In addition, shift has occurred in economic questions: in Soini's era they were more known for socio-economically centrist or centre-left stance, but Halla-Aho has chosen more market-oriented direction. His behaviour and public posturing between 2017 and 2019 were such dividing, that according to Poyet and Raunio (2021) he minified party's chances to be again included in the future coalition government.

According to Jessikka Aro (2019) a Finnish journalist who has gained acclaim for investigation of Russian information and media attacks, the Finns Party had by late-2010s developed close relationship with pro-Russian movements based in Finland. Particularly close was their relationship with publicly pro-Russian website MV-Lehti, run by Johan Bäckman, among the other things he has claimed to represent Donetsk People's Republic in Finland, and has earned persona non-grata status in Estonia (ibid.). Aro wrote (2019, 255) that MV-Lehti provided anonymous platform for Eurosceptics extremists who demanded Finland to close its borders. They kept warm relationship with Laura Huhtasaari who was the Finns Party's candidate in 2018 presidential elections. Aro herself was constantly attacked and mocked in the social media by leading figures from the Finns Party. In addition, Aro claimed that the Finns Party's newspaper Suomen Uutiset tried to influence court process involving MV-Lehti and its founder Ilja Janitskin. In one article published in Suomen Uutiset it was claimed that "in Janitskin's words there was not found any evidence of their connections with Russia". Aro argued that thanks to the communicative support of the Finns Party and therefore with taxpayers money financed website, readers regarded Janitskin innocent and declared condemnation to anarchists in government, police and media, and declared police political, demanding Janitskin to be freed. Janitskin was in October 2018 sentenced for 22 months to imprisonment for crimes related to MV-Lehti. During 2019 parliament elections' campaign Bäckman as well several candidates of the Finns Party accusations that the EU and social media networks are interfering into Finnish elections as Bäckman attempted to spread Facebook advertisement for the Finns Party's election promises but failed to do so (Aro 2019).

After Riikka Purra was elected new leader of the Finns Party in August 2021, Palonen (2021) concluded that the party previously proud of being populist and claiming to represent the

diverse demands of the ordinary people has now "deeply preoccupied with migration and appears to be stirring up a cultural war with opposition parties of the Green-Left". Purra supports robust economic policies moving the party further to the political right but puts even stronger emphasis on patriotism and ethno-nationalism. Limiting welfare benefits only to Finnish nationals and native speakers indicated that the Finns Party is no longer populist, but illiberal (ibid.).

### 3.2.7. Developments inside the Finns Party

The Finns Party's breakthrough in terms of the parliamentary seats coincided with wider expansion of the party's organization itself, which was enabled by the coordinated horizontal expansion, started in 2008 and peaked in 2012-2013. During that period, the Finns Party founded 148 new associations (Hatakka 2021).

The same as with EKRE fundament on election success of the Finns Party was laid by strong leadership. Timo Soini as a chairman was called as charismatic, but as well organizationally strong and organization-building in the Finns Party followed the classical mass membership party model. His background - being a former SMP party secretary and therefore having first-hand knowledge of the "SMP field" - did help a lot (Arter 2016). According to Arter (2016, 23), the Finns Party developed a "curious hybrid" model of a traditional mass membership party incorporating strong elements of democratic centralism with the concern in mind to defend the party from possible "colonization of the party's grassroots by extremist elements". Individual membership is contingent on national executive and not local branch approval, so in practice, candidate recruitment is vetted by the centre. As in EKRE's case, the ideology has in the Finns Party provided to be the core, uniting various sides inside party.

Popularity of controversial anti-Islam figure Jussi Halla-Aho presented Soini and the Finns Party with an opportunity for additional support in developing group of anti-immigrants (Kuisma and Nygard 2017). But in 2009, group of xenophobes had become disaffected by Soini's "foot-dragging on the immigration question" and collected signatures in support of the Halla-Aho's nomination for the 2009 European Parliament election. It was feared that the party would not name him as a candidate, and as such it finally happened. As Arter (2016, 21) noted, "the challenge came from racist elements close to Halla-Aho's web-based discussion forum Hommaforum who wanted the PS to be – and to be seen to be – a more openly immigrant-critical party". Soini called Halla-Aho to become a serious and responsible politician, not to

run as an independent candidate and threatened him with blocking his candidacy in the 2011 general election as well. Halla-Aho did indeed decide not to run as an independent and was thus elected in 2011 to Eduskunta (Kuisma and Nygard 2017).

As previously described, immigration cleavage became a concern for the party as a whole. Although Soini was seen as the one and the only face of the party, Kuisma and Nygard (2017, 15) argued that it could not have been considered as a personal party such as the ones Silvio Berlusconi has created in Italy, as Soini himself actively tried to change this outlook through years to ensure continuity for the party. Soini is not an immigration critic and has not considered it to be of particular importance to him, but, as Kuisma and Nygard (2017) again argue, he has allowed a radical anti-immigration wing into the party, "thus meant that he has instead created his own accommodation strategy towards significant opposition within the party", which on the other hand made him more reasonable and mainstream (ibid.).

That created tensions for the party in the government from the very beginning. In October 2015, the Finns Party Vice Chair Sebastian Tynkkynen, along with board members Aleksi Hernesniemi and Terhi Kiemunki, demanded to withdraw from the cabinet over the issue of the government's immigration policy (Yle 2015). They issued a statement calling for Finland to reintroduce temporary controls at the border with Sweden, require that all persons coming to Finland from Sweden and apply for asylum should be sent back to Sweden, because according to the Dublin agreement this is a safe country. Otherwise, the Finns Party cannot continue participating in the government. It was followed by criticism by Vice-Chair of the party Vesa-Matti Saarakkala who voted for a call to leave the government, saying that the government programme to which his party originally agreed had not been followed, and cutting benefits to Finns cannot be justified on economic grounds, "if at the same time the tab is wide open for immigration" (Yle 2015).

By the early 2017, the Finns Party experienced a culmination of polarization years in development - more specifically, division among the traditional mass party and immigration-focused right-wing sector of the party (The Economist). Gay marriage becoming law in March 2017 caused also tensions inside party as the Finns Party instructed lawmakers to support a citizens' initiative to prevent legalising gay marriage, but three legislators rebelled against the party line. Party responded by warning them. "When you are part of a party, you abide by the party's group decisions. If you do not then you are punished," said Soini, social conservative, converted to Roman Catholicism in the 1980s (Yle 2017).

Soini's decision to "nudge" party from socially conservative, Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant line towards the mainstream seemed to give evidence for belief that best method for taming populist parties would be by including them into the government and burdening them with the need to accept a responsibility. In addition to that the Finns Party belonged to the government taking austerity measures in contrast with its own anti-elitist agendas, which were not well reflected. This was difficult to accept for supporters and local elections in April 2017 showed clear example of this (Palonen 2018).

Overall, 22 members of the parliament (nearly half) left the party as a result of split. Of those, 19 formed a new group the Blue Reform chaired by Sampo Terho (opponent of Halla-Aho), one joined the KOK and two returned to the Finns Party in June. Although defected, the Finns Party's politicians remained in the government under the name of Blue Reform, its support remained marginal (polled at 1-2 percent) and stayed in the shadow of the Finns Party. As Palonen (2017) noted, most of the Finns Party's local councillors stayed in the party. The support-basis for Halla-Aho's fraction came mostly from particular social media circles. Nevertheless, the general feelings in regard of the Finns Party's future were sceptical. "Joining the government has led to the splitting of the party and almost their destruction. It shows the danger of joining the government for a populist party," concluded Erkka Railo, a Finnish political scientist (Milne 2017).

As a result of the parliamentary group splitting, party lost about 400 members. But on the other hand, the increased interest in party membership enabled party soon to recover and even exceed the numbers it had before the splitting. In addition, the split allegedly affected only the functioning of some individual associations that had lost defected local leaders, but all in all, party organisation remained intact. Largely because of extensive and territorially comprehensive network of local associations (Hatakka 2021). Blue Reform's candidates did not get a single seat in 2019 parliamentary elections. Halla-Aho led the Finns Party until June 2021, when he was replaced by Riikka Purra.

#### 3.1.8. The Finns Party's popularity in society

Unlike EKRE, The Finns Party's time in opposition before entering government was quite difficult. In 2011 parliamentary elections, The Finns Party increased their results by 15 percent point and gained 19,1 percent of votes. Although they at times crossed the 20 percent line in polling ratings, The Finns Party's popularity soon took a downturn, and they lost some seats in

2015 elections. Nevertheless, 19,1 percent as a result was still enough to for the first time be included in government.

Various internal cleavages and for some supporters too soft agenda and policy cost highly for The Finns Party. By 2016, when they had been in government for half a year, their support decreased under 10 percent and remained there even after split in 2017. Their support recovered before 2019 elections, where more radical and extreme rhetoric gave them 17,7 percent of votes.

## 4. Discussion

There has been a constant hope among the mainstream parties that by involving populist parties in the government, they could be tamed and civilized in the long run. In the case of EKRE, this is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, contrary to for example Isamaa's chairman's Helir-Valdor Seeder's (ERR 2019) wish, EKRE did not change its rhetoric which was by 2019 walking on the limits of political correctness.

But on the other hand, as emphasised by Saarts and Schulz in April 2021, the Estonians were lucky that EKRE in Covid-19 was in the government and not in the opposition. They compared how far-right populist party behaved in Covid-19 while being in the government (EKRE in Estonia) and in the opposition (FPÖ in Austria). According to their, analysis confirmed that the best way to "tame and normalize" right-wing populists is to involve them in the coalition government, as EKRE being one of the three government parties did have to consider the will of their partners and there were no room for "conspirative improvisation": in the government they demonstrated strict responsibility and tough positions. Authors also claimed that if usually far-right populists find it easy to make a 180-degree rotation in their positions, then EKRE appeared to continue their tough stance in Covid-19 questions even after falling to the opposition. As they (ibid.) put it: "However, EKRE has not really changed its corona policy since the fall back to the opposition: just like at the time behind the government table, they still blame others for their slow response and excessive leniency." But EKRE's stance shifted radically: Saarts and Schulz acknowledged at the time of writing (April 2021), that EKRE has shown signals of expressing concerns regarding civil liberties when government's measures are becoming too restricting. This concern escalated radically in the second half of 2021 and at least in public discourse allied them with vaccine sceptics. As illustrated previously, this – and not so much politics in government – created most difficult cleavage for EKRE inside their party in their whole history.

Belief expressed by Katsanidou and Reinl (2020) was that if populist party opts for responsive, rather than responsible, strategy in the government, then this might harm their chances to return into the government in the nearest future as this tactics may ruin relations with its coalition partners. Although right after collapse of Ratas' second government (which included EKRE) in January 2021 several high-rank members of the Centre Party expressed their disdain in being in coalition with EKRE, and hinted that cooperation with them in the future is rather unlikely (Pöld 2021), EKRE's rather responsive way of behaviour in the government seems to have no

particular effect on their chances in the future to be included in the government. That is because in March 2022 several media outlets wrote that the leading Centre Party members had a clear wish and plan to re-make old coalition with Isamaa and EKRE. According to senior Reform Party member Siim Kallas, this plan was indeed true. Therefore, all the controversies and difficulties regarding EKRE were forgotten by that time forgotten (Krjukov 2022).

What is more, one could say that EKRE has radicalized even more in the course of time passed by and one can say that at the time of their emergence, electorate was not just ready for too extreme views. This enhanced radicalization includes mostly their rhetoric, but also different foreign political beliefs (further scepticism in the EU, which was present in EKRE's early days, but increased over time), and conspirative theories by believing in election fraud in Estonia and in democratic Western countries. As mentioned, most recent shifts in radicalism wing are allying with vaccination-sceptics, and controversial positions regarding Russia. Another curious shift has been its sceptical stances on various green policies (not only in reducing CO2 emissions but also setting limits forest hewing), which created various opinions even inside the party. This trend is somewhat similar to the Finns Party' whose economic policy has through years become more right leaned.

When the Finns Party made its breakthrough in a Finnish political landscape, it was a much older and developed party than EKRE at that time. Its populism mainly existed in traditional agrarian and socially conservative issues, where immigration was secondary issue. But as in the rest of the Europe populists' upheaval happened in the times of immigration crisis, which in turn caused a demand at political level for strict anti-immigration stances. Timo Soini's the Finns Party attempted to satisfy these demands, but it turned out to be too big challenge for him. Voices from extreme wing of the party started increasing already in the end of 2000s and in early 2010s, when the Finns Party was still in opposition. Nevertheless, Soini with his authority and charisma managed to keep party united. In 2015, at the heat of the European refugee crisis, the Finns Party was included to the government, and this made it inevitable that contradictions and polarization between leaders and grass-root level of the party (which had drawn out already before) became even more apparent. First signals of disagreement echoed already in the Finns Party's first months in the government, by 2017 they became unsolvable and the party split.

Thus, people who voted for populists in Finland expected two things: 1) clear stance anti-immigration; 2) challenging the main-stream politics. Soini struggled with both those

expectations and did not satisfy electorate demands and this was illustrated by developments after 2017 split: the Finns Party, now more homogeneous and extremist than before, became again one of the most popular parties in Finland. Meanwhile, Soini's new political group Blue Reform did not get even to the parliament in 2019. One major difference with EKRE was the relationship of the Finns Party's ministers and other coalition partners: after the Finns Party split, its ministers still remained into government although in other political group (Blue Reform). In Estonia, one of the reasons why government collapsed, was difficult relations among coalition members.

After split in the Finns Party, various opinions circulated that predicted further deterioration of the Finns Party. In addition to that fate of the Finns Party was seen as evidence why populists do not fare well in government, and why choosing in government strategy of responsibility becomes often fateful for them. But as we have seen with EKRE in Estonia, modern-time populists tend to be skilful in adjusting with changing circumstances and therefore how they behave in the government - whether they chose responsive (as did EKRE) or responsible strategy (as did the Finns Party) in the government - do not have in a long run much importance, because both those parties have retained strong fundament, which forms about 1/5 of electorate.

Main difference between EKRE and the Finns Party is actually the starting point. EKRE as an ideologically and also organizationally new party (although de jure its successor to the People's Union) built its support in electorate on modern populist values. For the Finns Party, the transformation from agrarian populist party to modern populist party took more time and period in the government outlined the internal cleavages. Difference between the starting points lies on the main trigger behind strategies used by the Finns Party and EKRE in the government. Even though the Finns Party in Finland's standards behaved quite radically in the government, Timo Soini as a chairman appeared still too soft and old-school for those who can be called as defenders of modern populist values. EKRE, on the other hand, really did not have that quandary, as their whole identity of the party relied on same tactics and strategies that they took along into the government.

All in all, conclusions of this process-tracing of EKRE and the Finns Party in the government and its influence are shown in the tables below.

Table 3: EKRE before, during and after being in the government:

Time period/acting dimensions	Foreign Policy: rhetoric actions	Domestic policy: rhetoric and actions	Average poll rating	Developments inside the parties
In opposition before being in the government	Rather positive attitude towards NATO. Mild EU-scepticism, mostly from refugee crisis	Strong local anti-Russian sentiment. Anti-LGBT. Tough and politically non-correct rhetoric.	Steady and stable increase while being in opposition.	Mart and Martin Helme consolidate their power. Few opposing voices are pressured to leave from the party.
In the government	Various statements caused several diplomatically complex situations. Actual impact on foreign policy was rather mild. Enhanced scepticism in the EU and NATO	Did not become softer in rhetoric nor in their actions. Constantly challenged and irritated their coalition partners on various topics.	Being in the government slightly and insignificant decrease. Reliable base electorate (around 20 percent) retained	EKRE remain internally united. Modest public disagreements with a Member of the European Parliament Jaak Madison and between party's leaders. Disagreements in environment policy
In the opposition after being in the government	Controversial stance on accepting the Ukrainian refugees and assessment on Russia and on NATO's enlargement to Finland and Sweden. Criticism for Joe Biden's administration	Apparently (at least before municipal elections) did become softer in their rhetoric. Teamed up with anti-vaccination movement. Non-coherent stances in Covid-19 policy.	Ratings increased and EKRE at some point became even the most popular party in Estonia. Few setbacks caused by controversial actions in anti-vaccination campaign.	Issues regarding anti-vaccination demonstrations and vague positions in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Several defectors but not at the highest level of party nor among parliament members.

Table 4: The Finns Party before, during and after being in the government:

Time period/acting dimensions	Foreign Policy: rhetoric actions	Domestic policy: rhetoric and actions	Average poll rating	Developments inside the parties
In the opposition before being in the government	Focus on the Euro crisis and calls to leave the EU. Not supporting NATO membership	Modest anti-immigration stance dominated by action from regular members at grassroots level.	Slightly lost ground in comparison with the 2011 elections, rating swung between 15-20 percent	Rare dissident voices from extreme wing of the party. Clear contrast with hierarchy and grass-roots level of party.
In the government	Continuation of the Finnish historical foreign policy, mainly caused by consensuality of specific policy issues (security, foreign policy)	Conflicting views on various topics such as LGBT rights and well-fare system. Quarrels with the coalition partners regarding violent incidents where the Finns Party members participated.	Abrupt decrease under 10 percent; unable to overturn the trend before split in June 2017.	Intensification of anti-immigration voices inside the party, who more eagerly started challenging the leading stance and positions of the party. Culminated with split in June 2017.
In the opposition after being in the government	Supported NATO membership in February 2022. Continuous appeals to leave the Eurozone; general scepticism in the EU.	Political cooperation with pro-Russian and extreme actors in Finnish political landscape. Further radicalization in their rhetoric.	Recovered and even overcame their support in comparison with the time before being in the government. At times even the most popular party in Finland	Positions and rhetoric of hierarchy and grass-roots level of the party started merging under leadership of Jussi Halla-Aho. Leadership on stable ground.

## Summary

In this thesis I compared how different strategies – mainly chosen between responsive and responsible way of acting – in the government may affect the populists' wellbeing in the government and how it could impact their activities and behaviour after falling back to the opposition.

I did this by using comparative process-tracing in siding the Estonia Conservative People's Party (EKRE) with the Finns Party in Finland. Both parties are on the one hand results of modern populism surge, as they made their breakthrough to the respective political systems in the early of 2010s. The Finns Party was somewhat of a leading example for EKRE in the government. EKRE, on the other hand, repeatedly vowed to take the Finns Party's case as a warning and not to follow their path by not being too soft and abandoning the principles.

Tracing each party from the opposition to the government and back to the opposition indicated that the Finns Party indeed opted for more responsible, rather than responsive way in the government in comparison with EKRE that even intensified their controversial rhetoric and proved to be an uncomfortable partner with whom to govern the country. My hypothesis for this paper was therefore true: EKRE chose for more responsive way of behaviour in the government and decided to remain more loyal to their ideological "roots" and style, unlike the Finns Party who in disdain of dissidents in party became more and more "mainstream", and their behaviour, with some exceptions could have been described as "responsible". That is why being in the government and leaving the coalition was smoother for EKRE than for the Finns Party and why the Finns Party made through an inner split in 2017. In addition, EKRE's polling ratings turned out to be much less volatile than those of their Finnish counterpart.

Difference was apparent in foreign policy rhetoric and actions. In Finland and Estonia, foreign and security politics has always been part of so-called consensual package, where there are no major differences between parties. This principle was also followed in Finland with the Finns Party, but not in Estonia, where EKRE repeatedly challenged Estonia's foreign political pillars - from NATO and the EU's membership to controversial statements regarding elections and politicians in Estonia's allies. In domestic policy, EKRE stood out in comparison to the Finns Party by its tendency to pick a fight with its coalition partners.

Nevertheless, as my analysis conducted, the main reason why EKRE and the Finns Party chose for different strategies and why it affected aftermath, lies in the history of these parties. EKRE

as a newcomer to the Estonia's political landscape had the privilege to set new norms and standards just like they pleased. Therefore, they did not have any reason to hold back when they were included in the government and continued in similar fashion as before. EKRE saw themselves as a norm-setter, illustrated by its chairman's Martin Helme's speech after 2019 general elections when he promised, that in the coming parliamentary term, the way how politics in Estonia is made, will be made in EKRE's style (Mellik 2019). Although some have claimed that EKRE's actual influence on the Estonian law-making and policy was low, its real impact did have at rhetorical level, where they applied previously proclaimed tactic to set an agenda by "provoking, escalating, improvising".

EKRE has also been free of internal quarrels, although it changed with emergence of new topics where there were no pre-defined views for EKRE, particularly in Covid-19 politics. When EKRE's main focus was on LGBT rights and immigration – topics which triggered their rise years earlier, it was easier to mobilize and unite their electors. Further research should give more solid answer how emergence of new and potentially difficult policy issues (such as Covid-19) is solved by populist parties, especially if there are conflicting views among its electorate.

The Finns Party, on the other hand, as an older party battled with internal contradictions between so-called old-school populists (chaired by its long-time leader Timo Soini) and modern populists like Jussi Halla-Aho who challenged Soini for years before replacing him as a party leader, causing party to split in 2017 June and drop out from coalition. The Finns Party in the government was still salient according to the Finnish standards by their harsh rhetoric, anti-immigration positions and actions (especially on grassroots level), but this was not enough for more radical wing of the party. And as it turned later, radical wing of the party had greater support in the Finnish society. Therefore, if Soini and other old-school modest populists defected from the Finns Party, their new party Blue Reform did not manage to put one's foot down in 2019 elections.

When Taggart (2004) said that populists find it difficult to sustain their movement and usually fade fast, then several examples of populists being in the government in 21st century has overturned this presumption. Even though the Finns Party and even FPÖ experienced split and internal crisis at the end of their government term, they nevertheless restored their previous strength and position in the society. Hope that populist parties can be tamed at least in the Finns Party's example is short-sighted, as at the end they turned out to be even more radical. This

appeared even more illustratively in Estonia, where EKRE did not soften their rhetoric after being included in the government coalition and even increased their extremity after dropping out from the government. Question for the nearest future remains, how did EKRE's behaviour in the government, and the Finns Party's behaviour after being in the government under Jussi Halla-Aho affected their chances in future to be again included in the government.

This paper failed to give a precise explanation, how should taming the far-right populist parties work, as neither in Estonia, nor in Finland or Austria including them to the government coalition did not actually work. Neither did help pressuring populist parties to opt for responsible strategy: The Finns Party was widely perceived as responsible actor in the government, but it furthered the alienation and frustration inside the party and in its electorate, and as a result it changed party even more extreme as it was before. In Estonia's case, EKRE has also shown signals of radicalizing even more as before. As Saarts and Schulz (2022) noted, EKRE was relatively responsible in dealing with Covid-19 but changed its attitude completely to the pandemic policy when they dropped into the opposition. Similar shift in rhetoric occurred in positions regarding Russia.

Therefore, further research should focus on widening this topic: has there actually been any long-lasting examples where populist parties have been brought into mainstream and changed them less radical in their rhetoric and actions?

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## Appendices

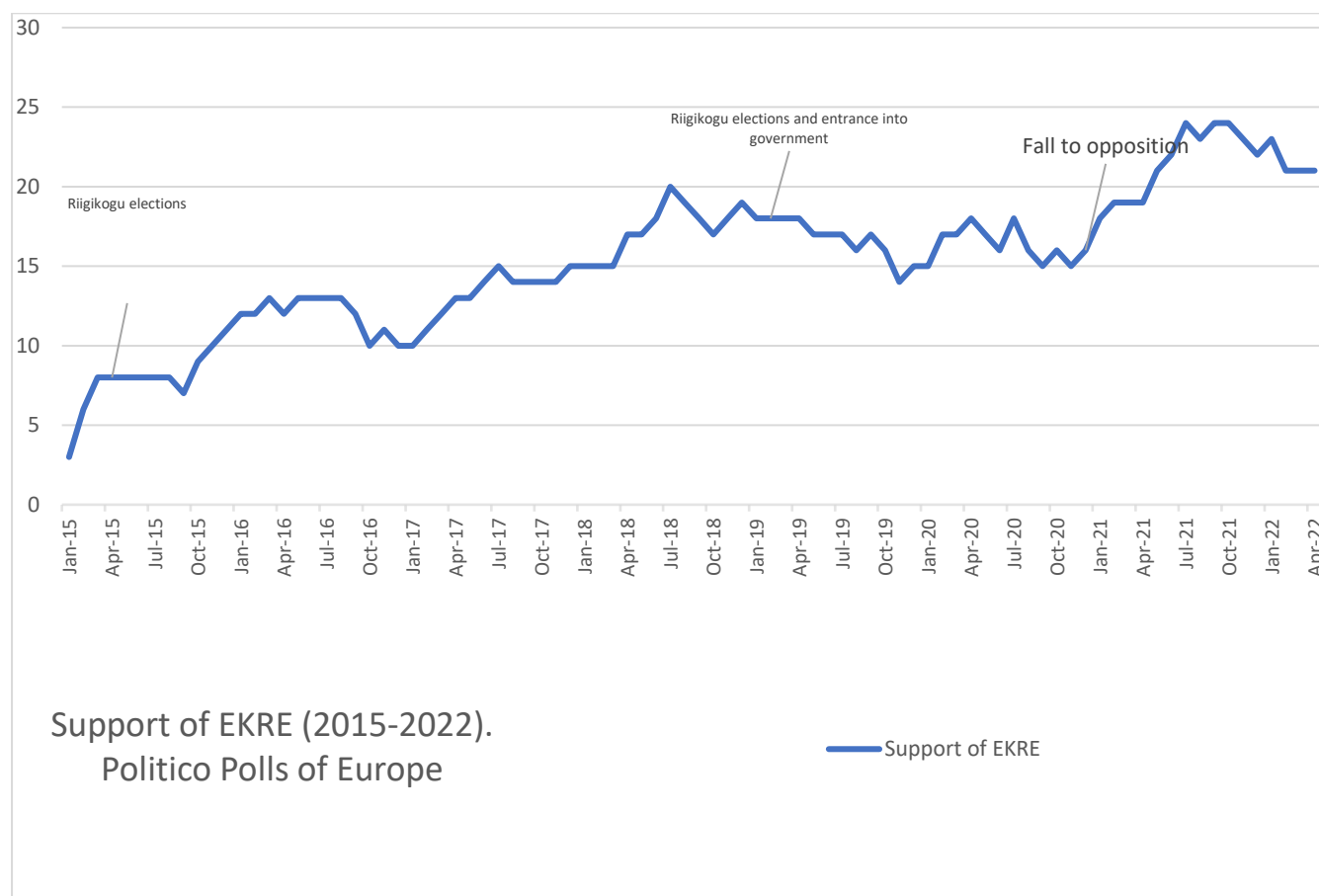


Figure 1: Support of EKRE from 2015 to 2022 (Politico Polls of Europe)

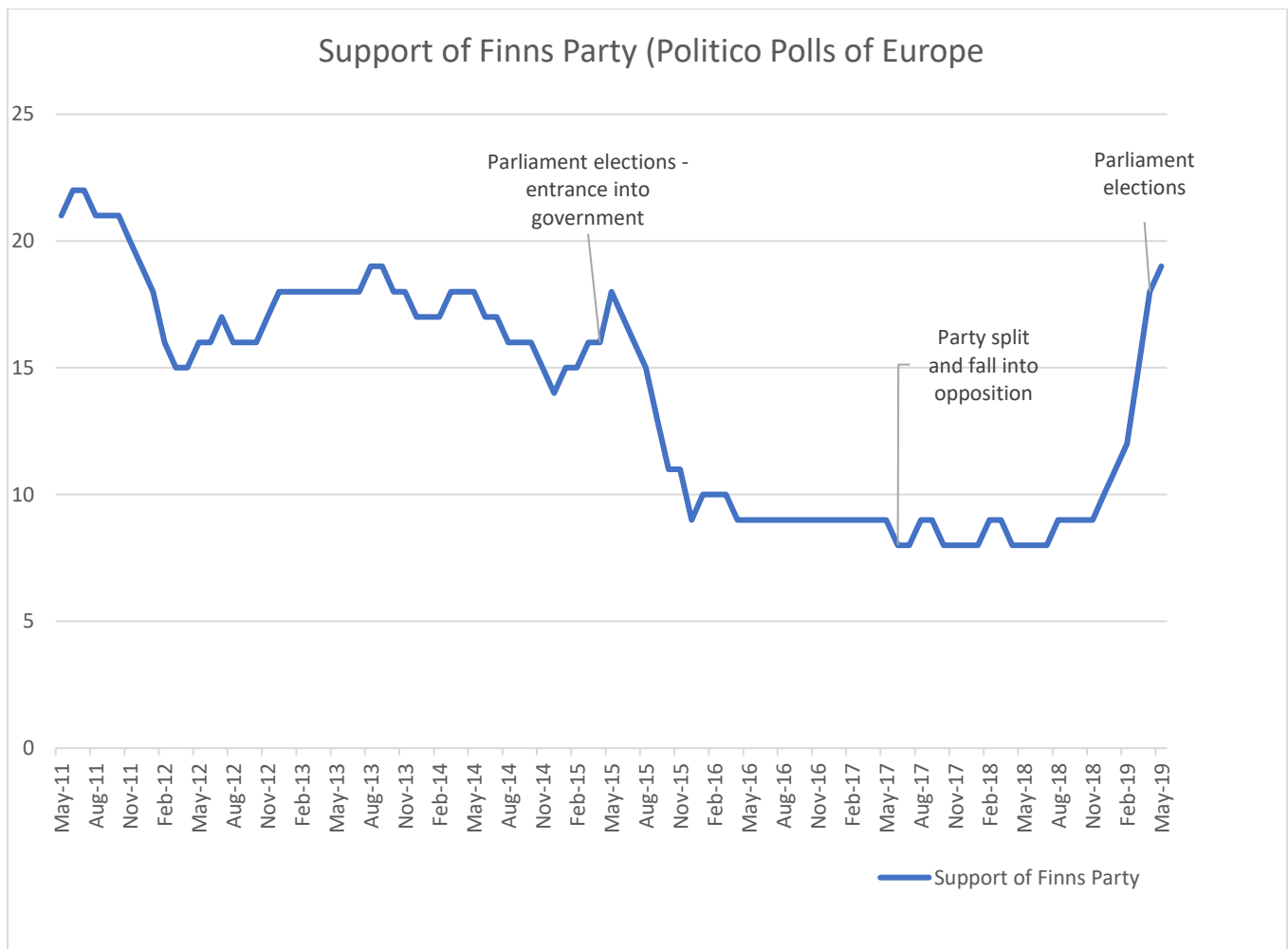


Figure 2: Support of The Finns Party from 2011 to 2019 (Politico Polls of Europe)

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