This article approaches the electoral success of Estonia’s Conservative People’s Party (EKRE) from a Critical Political Economy perspective. It explores immediate and longer-term factors conducive to the surge in the support of this far-right party. After situating the radical rightist reaction in Estonia within the wider continuum of far-right morphologies across Europe, the article attributes the immediate factors explaining EKRE’s ascendance to the conjuncture of the 2008 economic crisis and its resolution. It is contended that the authoritarian neoliberal (post-)crisis environments engendered a surveillance-based imposition of fiscal restraint at the European level and recalibrated the repertoires of state interventionism at the national spatial scale. In Estonia, this served to (re-)produce the vocabularies of crisis in line with the far-right’s sensibilities and eroded the public’s trust in the parties of the political mainstream. The analysis of immediate factors behind the rise of the far-right is then supplemented with a forensic examination of popular disenfranchisement with the outcomes of post-communist transformation, the party’s ambiguous relationship with neoliberalism and EKRE’s class-constituted support base. As will be demonstrated, the far-right has attracted the votes of working-class segments residing in the peripheries of the country as well as poverty-stricken pensioners, youths and the disenchanted sections of the middle class. The article concludes by evaluating the claim that EKRE’s inclusion in the coalition government from April 2020 to January 2021 amounted to a break from neoliberalism.

**Key words** far-right • Estonia • authoritarian neoliberalism • political economy • class

**Key messages**
- An innovative Critical Political Economy account of the rise of the far-right in Estonia.
- A novel deployment of authoritarian neoliberalism concept in the north-eastern periphery of the EU.
- A class-based explanation of far-right reaction in Estonia.

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Introduction

Obtaining 17.8 per cent of the vote, increasing its vote share three-fold and joining the coalition government – the Conservative People’s Party (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) sent shockwaves throughout Estonia’s political scene in the spring of 2019. To the bemusement of political scientists, the electoral formation fledged from a peripheral People’s Party (Rahvalliit) and a small Estonian Nationalist Movement (Eesti Rahvuslik Liikumine) gained five out of 15 ministerial portfolios and significant policy concessions. Almost overnight, a country of post-Soviet neoliberal reform Musterland and more recently the world-renowned laboratory of digital innovations has transmogrified into a cradle of right-wing populism. If public discourse has become inundated with references to a shadowy ‘deep state’, the considerations of immigration policy now invoked openly racist slogans – ‘if they’re black, send them back’. The displays of white-power symbols at a swearing-in parliamentary ceremony by EKRE MPs went hand in glove with loudly proclaimed sympathies for Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán and Matteo Salvini. In January 2021, the investigation into an alleged corruption scandal involving Estonia’s former Prime Minister Jüri Ratas’ Centre Party brought down the coalition government of which EKRE was part, thereby marking an end to an intermezzo characterised by the far-right’s ingression into the domain of governmental politics. Following the president’s nomination of a new prime minister, EKRE moved into the opposition. At the time of writing, however, the far-right party 1 leads the national opinion polls. It is likely that in the next parliamentary elections EKRE may well replicate, if not exceed, the fortunes registered in 2019.

Although populism is not a recent phenomenon in the Baltic states (Učeň, 2007; Jakobson et al, 2012; Stanley, 2017), commentators struggled to explain the electoral appeal of its novel far-right variety in Estonia. Alongside the pointers highlighting the financial difficulties encountered by established parties, their incapacity to ‘own’ the issues of migration, sovereignty and economics, the references to Eurosceptic attitudes across East-Central Europe (ECE), distrust towards ‘ruling elites’, structural changes in Estonia’s party system and EKRE’s effective campaigning strategies have been mentioned (Braghiroli, 2019; Pettai, 2019; Veebel, 2019). Nonetheless, most observers concurred that EKRE’s political inexperience, Estonia’s multi-party system and geopolitical nuances rendered the replication of illiberal pathways observed in Poland and Hungary unlikely. In part, this proclivity for underestimation reproduced the state of sporadic academic interest in Estonia’s far-right (Mudde, 2018: 260). Thus, while an analytical gaze has been cast upon the failure of the movement (Auers and Kasekamp, 2009), its nature and evolution (Petsinis, 2019) and discursive inventories (Kasekamp et al, 2019), the electoral successes of EKRE have been explored in-depth only in exceptional cases (Trumm, 2018).

One may regard this silence as disorienting given an extensive scholarly interest in the dynamics of support for the far-right in Western Europe and ECE. Students of political science have identified often-compatible demand- and supply-side factors. The demand-side explanations emphasise that decisions to cast a vote for far-right parties are motivated by ideological and pragmatic considerations. These stimuli are typically associated with a perceived loss of culture and economic deprivation (Golder, 2016). The support is said to be higher among voters who express pessimistic attitudes about the state of the economy, find themselves in casualised employment environments and resent ‘cosmopolitan liberal values’ and ‘elites’. The supply-side
Factors, meanwhile, focus on political opportunity structures by studying the openness or closure of a given system from the perspective of a potential entry from the far-right. The success of parties such as EKRE is closely associated with proportional electoral systems (Norris, 2005), attention from the media (Ellinas, 2010) or available political space curved by political competitors (Meguid, 2005). Apart from the demand-and supply-side explanations, the practice of surveying the panoramas of far-right reaction across Europe produced a scholarly consensus about divergent practices of ‘othering’ in Eastern and Western parts of the continent. While migrants historically constituted the object of othering practices in Western Europe, the national minorities and neighbouring countries have taken on the equivalent role in ECE until recently (Pytlas, 2018). Finally, the literature on the so-called ‘democratic backsliding’ has attributed the ‘illiberal turns’ of ECE to the rise of populist political actors. This ascendance has been shown to stem from the transition-era neglect of memory politics and collective identities (Rupnik, 2018), the institutionalisation of ‘elite hegemony’ over democratic process at national and European levels (Krastev, 2016) and liberal reformers’ apathy to multiple European-wide crises and the democratic deficits of non-majoritarian institutions (Zielonka, 2018).

While extant literature offers a valuable entry point to the investigation of far-right reaction in Estonia, it remains enveloped in three conceptual limitations. Virtually all interventions surveyed earlier recognise international factors such as migration, international institutions and neoliberal globalisation – insofar as employment relations are concerned. Yet, the same interventions exhibit the tunnel visions of ‘methodological nationalism’ (van der Linden, 2008: 7) because they conceptualise ‘the international’ as an ad-hoc theoretical addendum to a set of nationally constituted comparative cases. What follows is a failure to acknowledge conceptually how the incorporation of ‘the international’ into the study of the far-right is significant since the latter spatial scale constitutes an essential nodal point around which suchlike parties and movements fixate to identify the ‘pathologies’ inimical to the interests of ‘the people’ (Saull et al., 2015: 13). As a result, insufficient attention is ascribed to the modalities through which ‘the international’ functions as a source of fear, hostility and opportunity for the far-right. Besides, ‘the international’ can be regarded as constitutive of nativist, xenophobic and racist politics in the methodological sense. The study of a far-right movement located within a particular national setting requires recognition and explanation of – undetected in the aforementioned literature – how ‘domestic’ political spaces provide both opportunities and openings based on the intricacies in which ‘the international’ comes to constitute the material and ideological fabric of domestic political life (Saull et al., 2015: 14).

Today the lion’s share of writing on the far-right in ECE shies away from a comprehensive analysis of its class-constituted support base. In part, this is predicated on the assumption that historical communism in ECE amounted to a ‘classless society’ and related treatment of ‘class’ as a relatively immaterial or at best secondary factor in explaining voting behaviour (Kitschelt et al., 1999). In ECE, this is attributed to the fluidity of the party systems (Lewis, 2002) and broader legacies of Soviet-style regimes (weak party-voter loyalties and architectures of welfare with a universal, yet low level of social benefits). Therefore, the prisms of analysis privilege the ideological manifestations of social conservatism regarding ethnicity and nation (and less frequently gender and sexual orientation), which form only one of the two definitional characteristics of the far-right (Davidson and Saull, 2017: 709). Relatively
few studies so far investigated the second definitional characteristic – namely, the support of the far-right among sections of the middle (petty bourgeoisie, professionals and the technical-managerial elements) and (oftentimes) working classes (but see: Żuk and Toporowski, 2020).

Even if much can be learned from the scholarship on ‘democratic backsliding’, it must be accentuated that the authors advancing this thesis generally operate with a crude dichotomy of authoritarianism and liberal democracy. Here the presence of the far-right parties in government is a necessary ingredient for coercive and anti-democratic state actions. This ontological standpoint evokes a separation between ‘the economic’ and ‘the political’ spheres (Morton, 2013: 142–3). By presenting the former as something ‘natural’ and extra-political, this literature treats the instances of contestation and conflict as an exclusive domain of the state. Accordingly, the categories of ‘the market’ and ‘civil society’ are said to exist outside of political and economic logics – engendering the analysis of political developments as unencumbered by class-relevant antagonisms, the forms of coercion and the terrains of exploitation.

It is against these backdrops that the article aims to partially fill in thematic apertures and rectify prevailing conceptual limitations by developing the first (critical) political economy account of EKRE’s ascendance. This is accomplished by interrogating scalar interiorities between capitalist developmental trajectories and the repertoires of the far-right’s reaction. Our argument is divided into four parts. In the next section, the reactionary waves engulfing the region of ECE and Western Europe are briefly contextualised by challenging the contentions that view the geographies east of Elbe as ‘naturally prone’ to radical right-wing resistance against globalisation. Moreover, the case study of EKRE is located within the continuum of far-right reaction that has long been the point of focus of International Political Economy (IPE) literature. The rightist reaction has become a normalised, endemic and globally pronounced feature of contemporary world politics differentially articulated across an array of intertwined locales. The article then introduces the investigative prism of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’, which is instructive in unearthing the immediate factors conducive to EKRE’s ascendance. To this end, the notion of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ guides our engagement with post-2008 crisis restructuring in Estonia – demonstrating how a surveillance-led regularisation of fiscal restraint at the regional (European) spatial scale and attendant state interventionism to police public discontent created favourable conditions for the rise of the far-right. In the third section, the analysis is grounded in longer-term horizons of path-dependencies, by examining the vectors of popular disenfranchisement and EKRE’s class-constituted support base. This undertaking is juxtaposed with the intention to discern the ambiguous and contradictory character of the far-right vis-à-vis Estonia’s neoliberal regime. The final section critically evaluates the forecasts, which in the aftermath of EKRE’s electoral success pronounced Estonia’s break with neoliberalism and spoke about the imminent reputational damage in the eyes of foreign investors.

**Spectres of reactionism in Western and East-Central Europe**

Writing amid the so-called ‘migration crisis’, which unfolded on the borders of the European Union in 2015, Polish American sociologist Jan Gross (2015) castigated Eastern Europeans for displaying intolerant, illiberal and xenophobic sentiments towards those trying to escape the horrors of war in Africa and the Middle East. Having
forgotten the spirit of solidarity that carried them to freedom only a quarter of a century earlier, the inhabitants of this part of the European continent were expressing attitudes fundamentally opposed to those epitomised by Merkel’s Wir schaffen das. Deemed to be incapable of coming to terms with their murderous Holocaust past, Eastern Europeans were subsequently urged to recognise their obligation to save those fleeing in the face of evil. In 2017, the study published by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change have portrayed the ECE region as a bedrock of populism3 (Eiermann et al, 2017). It noted that populists do particularly well in the region, for in 15 of surveyed Eastern European countries populist parties held power in seven (Bosnia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Slovakia) and belonged to the ruling coalition in two others. In Western Europe, in comparison, populist parties held governmental responsibility in two countries: as a junior coalition partner in Austria and as part of the Swiss Federal Council in Switzerland. The reactionary wave, authors submit, has been virtually unparalleled. If until 2000 populist parties in ECE have captured 20 per cent or more of the vote only on two occasions, by 2018 they have done so in ten countries – with Law and Justice (PiS) and Fidesz qualifying as paramount but by no means isolated cases. According to Sierakowski (2018), those findings confirmed the hypotheses portending that authoritarianism is both stronger and different in ECE due to a lack of post-materialist values and a legacy carried from the Communist past – namely, the absence of a loyal opposition. Suchlike assertions ought to be scrutinised at least on two registers.

For one, it is misleading to attribute the strength of conservative and nationalist right in ECE exclusively and primarily to the institutional weakness of these countries’ democratic structures or the ‘underdevelopment’ of democratic values. Instead, Rae (2018) notes that the shift to the right in the region stems from the decisive defeats of the left during the period of post-communist transformation. Social democratic parties (many derived from former Communist parties) were the strongest political forces in many countries in the region well into the present century. However, in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia (Johansson, 2008), among others, new and reformed social democrats openly embraced Blairite and Schröderite ‘third way’ ideology. They introduced neoliberal economic programmes while in government, leading to their comprehensive collapse as serious political players by the early 2000s. Put differently, it is not the uniqueness of ECE countries as such that explains the right-ward shift. In the ECE region the left has been defeated and marginalised earlier and more decisively than in Western Europe. It is precisely these downfalls that have paved the way for the right-wing advance.

Relatedly, far-right reaction ought not to be treated as an external threat to the West. It is instructive to turn to the rich tradition in IPE literature that has long recognised and commented upon reactionary morphologies and contestations levied against the internationalisation of production, finance and trade. Apart from Castells’ (1997) recognition of diverse responses towards neoliberalism, which according to him stemmed from the capacity of mass communication technologies to disrupt and disintegrate existing mechanisms of social control and political representation, it was a trailblazing study by Rupert (2000) that systematically explored the radical right’s resistance to globalisation from a Gramscian perspective. In contrast to those critical scholars who were (justifiably) preoccupied with the democratic potentials of the Zapatista insurrection and anti-globalisation movements born in Seattle and Genoa – Rupert warned that the opposition to a corporate-dominated transnational political
The IPE literature has also explored the radical right’s opposition to globalisation in Western Europe. For instance, Zaslove (2008) has chronicled the evolution of Lega Nord (Italy), National Front (France) and Freedom Party (Austria) from the supporters of neoliberalism throughout the 1980s and early 1990s into the advocates of xenophobia, welfare chauvinism and lenient immigration laws in the subsequent years. Their opposition to globalisation has been predicated on the contentions that the latter amounts to an elite-driven project that limits state sovereignty, gives rise to unaccountable supranational bureaucracies and destroys the organic nature of civil society, threatening its ‘natural economic order’ and its traditional organising principles in turn (Zaslove, 2008: 174). Given that throughout the 1990s all three parties have registered considerable electoral gains with both Lega Nord and the Freedom Party entering the coalition governments after 1994 and 1999 parliamentary elections in Italy and Austria respectively; and National Front attracting over 12 per cent of the popular vote in 1993 and 1997 (Swank and Betz, 2003: 217) – the rise of the far-right in Estonia exhibits profound similarities with earlier and contemporary (insofar as the Lega Nord has become the main player under the wider right-wing coalitional umbrella in Italy) developments observed in Western Europe. In this connection, the electoral breakthrough of EKRE forms one part in the jigsaw on the continuum of far-right reaction that has become a globally pronounced feature of contemporary world politics with its variegated articulations across intertwined spatialities (Anievas and Saull, 2022). However, as far as the Baltic region is concerned, the electoral success of this magnitude by a far-right party lacks a precedent. The immediate factors conducive to its rise are to be found in different temporal environs – characteristic of the consummation of ‘post-communist’ transformation after the tumultuous decade of the 1990s, which was followed by the first major crisis of newly scaffolded regimes of accumulation and its resolution embroiled in the conducts of authoritarian neoliberalism.

Two monoliths of resurgent authoritarian neoliberalism

To decipher the immediate conditions configuring the far-right’s ascendance in Estonia it is first imperative to revisit the modalities and post-scripts of crisis management.
operations in the wake of the 2008 economic and financial crisis. The investigative prism of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ is instructive in this regard. In our reading, this prism eschews the externalisation of ‘political’ and ‘economic’ spheres by highlighting the potentialities of authoritarian state power to be enmeshed in the trajectories of capital accumulation. Foregoing a crude dichotomy between authoritarianism and liberal democracy – that bewilders the scholarship on ‘democratic backsliding’ – the notion can be used to disentomb the authoritarian bents in state practices that work in tandem with institutions and legal frameworks sustaining only ‘minimalist’ conception of democracy, reserved to the criterion of electoral competition (Tansel, 2017: 11). From this perspective, authoritarianism is not associated with the exercise of brute force as such but rather connotes the processes through which the moments of capitalist crisis engender configurations of statecraft concerned with insulating certain neoliberal policies from public control. This may be achieved through administrative, legal and coercive mechanisms and with recourse to coercion and legal intimidation geared at curtailing so-called ‘formal’ liberties (Poulantzas, 1978: 203–04; Bruff, 2014: 115–16). While the notion attracted constructive criticism for insufficient attention paid to the authoritarian tendencies enveloping the period of ‘roll-out neoliberalism’ (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Fabry, 2019), the lines of critique revolving around the question of periodisation and the discussion whether the post-2007 conjuncture signifies a qualitative change in authoritarian practices (Sandbeck and Schneider, 2019) are less convincing.

First, it ought not to be disputed that an ample number of neoliberal strategies have been inseparable from coercive machinations and authoritarian statecraft particularly in moments of restructuring unfolding outside of the heartlands of global economy (see: Taylor, 2002; Rutland, 2013; Valadbaygi, 2022). As the authors of this investigative prism readily acknowledge, one should not infer the existence of a ‘wholesale break’ between neoliberal strategies prior and after the crisis of 2007–08 (Bruff and Tansel, 2019: 239). Second, it would be disingenuous to posit that earlier frameworks of political economy tended to downplay the nature of neoliberalisation as being choreographed by concurrent functioning of market economics alongside reactionary and populist forces at the helm of government (Hall, 1988; Gamble, 1996). And yet, those critical observations only hold explanatory force when articulated in parallel with Weyland’s (1999: 379) reminder that the authoritarian rule is not a necessity for the imposition of neoliberal rule. In some instances, bourgeois democratic rule and market-oriented change have been compatible. Arguing to the contrary, as Bruff and Tansel (2019: 239) underscore, risks reducing authoritarian practices to a general capitalist law of motion, thereby also rendering the explorations of spatiotemporally idiosyncratic governance techniques irrelevant.

In line with aforementioned provisos, it is important to note that the penchants of authoritarianism have choreographed the pathways of Baltic neoliberalisation since the start of currency and monetary restructuring in the early 1990s. Currency conversion reforms geared at enabling the Baltic exits from the Ruble zone contained the institutionalisation of exchange-rate regimes centred around currency board arrangements, which were implemented (in Latvia and Estonia) without any recourse to the channels of parliamentary control. After the 2008 crisis, however, resurgent authoritarian neoliberalism came to rest on two novel and inter-related monoliths. The first has been ingrained in the Baltic Eurozone entry and the emergence of what Christophe Degryse (2012) terms the ‘New European Economic Governance’
(NEEG) structure. Fiscal rigidity has become embedded in the structure of the European Union (EU), serving to regularise the monitoring and the penalisation of ‘delinquent’ regulation of capitalism. The second monolith has ascended from the redefinition of statecraft in the name of preserving the contemporary political-economic regime. The state and its managers increasingly recalibrated the repertoire of political intervention by elevating the practices of curtailing, restricting and criminalising public resistance into the realm of urgency. It is through the examination of those monoliths that the contextual setting in which the far-right in Estonia could prosper becomes perceptible. In the following subsections two monoliths corresponding to regional and national spatial scales are explored.

The regional monolith: new European economic governance structure

The European integration project has intertwined the national economies to a far greater extent than before, giving rise to elite-level diplomatic bargaining and the construction of regional technocratic regimes to manage increasingly complex and interconnected networks of social relations (Davidson and Saull, 2017: 718). While the circuit of capital and its class sections have not been transnationalised and remain differentially articulated with one or another national jurisdiction (Anievas, 2008), the conditions for their collective reproduction are increasingly delimited through the institutional frameworks at the EU (and Eurozone) level. Herein, the NEEG attests to the pivotal mediator through which the effects of recalibrated capital-labour relation and the eradication of democratic oversight by the Baltic (and European) electorates over the decision-making processes are being realised.

A pertinent point of reference on this register is the European Semester that – under the aegis of the Europe 2020 strategy – introduced an annual cycle dedicated to ex-ante economic policy coordination and budgetary surveillance. In the aftermath of the 2008 and subsequent Eurozone crises, member states were instructed to prevent imbalances based on the neoliberal country-specific recommendations (CSRs) put forward by the Commission and adopted by the Council (Schulten and Müller, 2012: 183). The apparatuses of coordination were enhanced through the so-called Six-Pack designed to detect macroeconomic imbalances with reference to a scoreboard of economic indicators as well as instigate automatic procedures related to the imposition of financial sanctions for non-compliant Eurozone members. The Two-Pack has amplified surveillance and coordination procedures by requiring states to submit draft budgets to the Commission, which can demand immediate revisions if grave violations of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) are detected. Thus, while under the Six-Pack and the Two-Pack a failure to adhere to statistical thresholds outlined in the scoreboard might result in in-depth reviews, corrective action plans or even surveillance visits, any deviance from the revised SGP on the grounds of excessive ‘deficits’ or ‘macroeconomic imbalances’ can be sanctioned by a yearly fine (Bieler and Erne, 2015). The Fiscal Compact, meanwhile, required the signatories to enshrine the ‘balanced budget rule’ into the national law, preferably in the form of a constitutional amendment. In short, those institutes of the NEEG served to eradicate the spaces for democratic accountability and fundamentally reconfigure the balance of power towards capital and away from labour.
A glimpse at the CSRs for the Baltic republics over the past decade discloses the Commission’s promulgation to diminish the social safety nets for the most vulnerable sections of society, privatise pension systems, promote marketisation in sectors of higher education, electricity and gas and adopt judicial reforms conducive to ‘business-friendly’ legal environments. As far as Estonia is concerned, it remains the only Baltic country thus far subjected to the ‘Prevention and Correction of Macroeconomic Imbalances’ surveillance exercise as part of in-depth reviews introduced by the Six-Pack. In 2016, the scoreboard-based Alert Mechanism identified the country as warranting a detailed screening on the grounds of rapid unit labour costs growth (13 per cent from 2011 to 2014) that exceeded both the euro (9 per cent) and non-euro area (12 per cent) thresholds (European Commission, 2016: 5). In the Commission’s view, this constituted a risk insofar as it reduced cost competitiveness, weakened the country’s corporate profit margins and potentially decreased investment opportunities and growth prospects (European Commission, 2016: 13). Another pressing concern highlighted in the report had been the shrinking working-age population – the phenomenon conducive to the tightening of the labour market. To this end, the integration of low-income earners, people with disabilities and mothers with young children in the labour market by focusing on creating incentives to work and increasing activity rates under the new Work Ability system was called for (European Commission, 2016: 43–4). The review endorsed the government’s efforts to implement the latter reform, following the CSR issued in 2015 (European Commission, 2015: 4). The Work Ability system introduced far harsher assessment procedures regarding one’s qualification for the disability and incapacity-for-work benefits, enabling the government to slash earlier support schemes for nearly half of eligible recipients. Backed by the Commission, it was implemented regardless of the opposition from organisations representing people with disabilities which protested the rushed bill for not only failing to consider the unavailability of services (personal assistance, transport requirements, home customisation), particularly in peripheral municipalities, but also on the grounds of its unconstitutional and non-evidence-based nature (Eesti Rahvusringhääling, 2017).

For Estonian state managers the first monolith of reasserted authoritarian neoliberalism figures as an inconvenient reminder that the promises about the short-term necessity of ‘belt-tightening’ in the moment of the 2008 crisis were by nature illusionary. It is austerity in permanence that now masquerades as a temporality. Troika-style interventions have been regularised, while the terrains upon which working-class interests could be articulated with comparative ease (national parliaments) have been decisively enfeebled. Without anything resembling a popular European sovereign, actual class divisions continue to take a national form. In the context of neoliberal financialisation at the EU level, crisis management and resolution are articulated in nationalist rather than class lexicons. What Wolfgang Streeck (2014: 92) dubs as an ‘astonishingly popular reformulation of the politics of public debt in nationalist terms’ finds expression in oft-neglected Estonian state managers’ narration of the Eurozone crisis.

In the considerations of policy proposals around the EMU reform between 2010 and 2015, Estonian state managers were among the most steadfast advocates of fiscal disciplinary (as opposed to transfer union) course (Lehner and Wasserfallen, 2019). Berlin’s message that structural reform (à la Hartz IV) meant to improve competitiveness by reducing wages and prices to deliver export-led recovery was
appropriate for Southern Europe resonated strongly in Tallinn. By 2012, the Estonian government vehemently opposed any easing of the ECB monetary policy, while the joint Baltic–Finnish–German foreign ministries’ statement aligned the potential failure to fiscally discipline Southern Europe with a detriment to the ‘European project’ ([Agence France Presse [AFP]], 2012). In the words of the current Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, SYRIZA’s aversion to austerity politics amounted to ‘impolite’ behaviour – the behaviour ‘insensitive’ to ordinary Estonians ([AFP], 2015). The narration of the EMU reform and wider dynamics of the sovereign debt crisis on the part of state and political representatives of capital in Estonia cannot be accentuated strongly enough. Indeed, the discourses of crisis spoke directly to the far-right sensibilities, insofar as they visualised politics as based upon political identities – constituted by nothing else than nationalist language and imaginaries. Before considering how EKRE managed to capitalise on such lexicons, let us unearth the second monolith of resurgent authoritarian neoliberalism.

**The national monolith: statecraft in the name of public order**

Apart from the changes at the regional (EU-wide) spatial scale, the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and downturn has produced new modalities of capitalist statecraft attributable to the safeguarding of public order. In Estonia, this development has been exhibited through the increasing propensities of the state to restrict the freedoms of gathering and to deploy covert measures geared at intimidating dissenting publics.

Legal regulations governing the right of assembly are set out in Estonia’s Public Meeting Act, which came into force in 1997 ([Public Meetings Act, 2011]). With immediate effect, the Act guaranteed the right to public assembly only to Estonian citizens or those holding a long-term residence permit. Additionally, for demonstrations or protests to be deemed sanctioned, the notice documenting their objectives, the number of participants, location as well as the times of its beginning and end should be provided no later than four working days in advance. Even if those conditions were met, the police could still remove the participants based on the suspicion of an intention to commit a criminal offence. In the wake of the crisis and its management operation – from July 2008 to June 2010 – several amendments to the Public Assemblies Act were introduced to further restrict the right to gather. Section 3 of the Act, specifying the list of prohibited meetings, was extended to include those gatherings that may ‘incite discrimination due to … political views, property or social status’ ([Public Meetings Act, 2011]). Furthermore, as part of the amendment to Section 4, from July 2009 the protests and demonstrations held during the state of emergency would be ruled illegal. While before the crisis, the organisers had no obligation to inform the central and local governmental authorities about public gatherings, whose conduct would involve setting up a tent or a stage, the two-hour notice clause was then introduced. Most pertinently, as part of the amendments taking effect from July 2008 and January 2010, the Minister of the Interior, the Director-General of the Police and Border Guard Board or a prefect were given new powers to unilaterally render a public meeting illegal or change its time and place on the grounds of ‘unavoidability’.

These changing landscapes of state interventionism seem to have contributed to an erosion of political trust and legitimacy on the part of the Baltic, and particularly Estonian, publics. Although causal relationships cannot be drawn between the two
sets of social phenomena, the findings from the Eurobarometer surveys begin to shed light on the conjuncture conducive to the far-right reaction. The proportion of respondents agreeing with the statement that their voice counts at the national level has declined most precipitously in Estonia – from 55 per cent in 2010 to 37 per cent in 2016 (Eurobarometer, 2020). While the residents of Latvia and Lithuania tended to exhibit greater scepticism towards their capacity to influence the decision-making processes at the EU level, once again by 2016, the greatest decline on this register has been observed in Estonia (Eurobarometer, 2020). It is true that in comparison to its two Baltic counterparts, the Estonian population continues to evaluate the state of democracy more positively. However, when the number of respondents sharing negative attitudes (‘not very satisfied’ and ‘not at all satisfied’) with the way democracy works in the country is compared with the EU average, the Estonian scores have exceeded the latter by a considerable margin until recently. In 2009, 56 per cent of Estonian residents exhibited negative attitudes compared to 45 per cent share in the EU, with respective figures amounting to 52 per cent and 47 per cent for 2011 and 59 per cent and 52 per cent for 2013 (Eurobarometer, 2020). What also merits reiteration is that the flagship policy of crisis management in Estonia – the accession to the Eurozone – has attracted little support. On the eve of the accession, the proportion welcoming currency conversion hovered around a quarter and a third of the population (Broch, 2011). Almost a year after the currency conversion, no less than 55 per cent of Estonian residents noted that they would not support the euro were Estonia to make the decision again (Baltic Times, 2011).

Two implications are encapsulated in the preceding paragraphs. For one, contrary to the intuitions of mainstream political science, the far-right’s presence in government is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition when dissecting the authoritarian bents in contemporary Estonia’s neoliberal statecraft. As demonstrated earlier, the so-called consummation of the ‘return to Europe’ project (in the form of the Eurozone entry) after the 2008 crisis has very little in common with the revival of democracy. Instead, it is high time we acknowledged that the authoritarian bent in state practices can and does work in tandem with institutions and legal frameworks sustaining a minimalist conception of democracy. This insight mitigates against the commonly invoked reduction of ‘democratic backsliding’ to the rise of populist forces. It also contrasts with Jan Zielonka’s (2018: 131) suggestion that anti-liberal ‘counter-revolution’ in ECE will lead to ‘predatory capitalism’. Put simply, in the case of Estonia the rise of the far-right signifies a reaction to the resolution of crisis in neoliberal terms. It amounts to the response against the regime of capital accumulation already inflected with ever more assertive authoritarian tendencies. Whether EKRE’s presence on the political scene has instigated a departure from neoliberalism remains to be answered in the penultimate section. Second, and contra methodologically nationalist analytical imaginaries, the surge in support for EKRE has been assisted by the political-legal and institutional frameworks of the EU and the Eurozone. The developments located in those extra-national spatial scales functioned to render the regulation of capitalism exterior to democratic oversight. They shaped the contours of domestic politics by giving an impetus for the narration of the debt crisis in nationalist vocabularies by centre-right and centre-left forces. The discursive pointers employed by the ‘extreme centre’ (Ali, 2018) were subsequently appropriated, radicalised and exploited by the far-right. Finally, as part of the NEEG framework, the capitalist state and its personnel were compelled to suppress the outbursts of public discontent. The practices of policing
expressions of popular anger against ‘belt-tightening’ contributed to the eradication of public trust and legitimacy. In this sense too, the surge in support for the far-right has been consequential to – rather than causal of – increasingly coercive modalities of capitalist statecraft. It is this scalar political economy of immediate factors conducive to the far-right’s success that remains imperceptible for mainstream accounts. In the subsequent sections, we turn to another analytical couplet reserved for the vectors of popular disenfranchisement and the far-right’s class-constituted support base that so far has been dealt with only cosmetically. The exploration of those vectors not only shed light on the longer-term factors explaining EKRE’s success, but also bring the far-right’s ambiguous and contradictory relationship with neoliberalism to the forefront.

Politics of disenfranchisement and ambiguities of far-right reaction

The ascendance of the far-right in Estonia fits within Don Kalb’s (2011) taxonomy of rightist and xenophobic anti–elite mobilisations or ‘new populisms’ across ECE. Those mobilisations can be read as the vehicles through which large segments of disenfranchised populations come to make sense of their experiences with and discontents about the ‘post-political’ neoliberal environment. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the elevation of liberalism into the very essence of ‘post-communist’ state reason has been instrumental in depriving governments and ruling classes of legitimacy. The process unfolded in the context where the language of class has been stifled (Żuk and Toporowski, 2020), stimulating the twin crises of labour and popular sovereignty. The latter set up a downwardly mobile majority collectively identifying not in class terms but as an ‘ethno-national folk’ against a ‘cosmopolitan’ ruling class, disinterested in the fate of ‘the nation’. In this constellation, the ‘ethno-national folk’ imagined themselves as placed at loggerheads with ‘dangerous classes’. In its Estonian iteration, the latter were constitutive of the ‘surplus population’ of Russian-speakers and recently, a diminutive minority of refugees – whom the ‘cosmopolitan’ establishment allegedly defended by openly professing appreciation for mobility, migration, human rights and multiculturalism while loudly despairing over the bad tastes and political prejudices of the ‘nationals’ (Kalb, 2018: 307).

EKRE’s electoral success in 2019 was propelled by a temporal conjuncture of crisis wherein public debate inevitably had to grapple with the themes of the Eurozone bailouts (from 2011), same-sex unions, Russia’s annexation of Crimea (from 2014) and the so-called ‘migration crisis’ (from 2015). The far-right party has capitalised on each of those thematic rubrics, excelling in the domains of migration and political economy of the Eurozone crisis. The discourse on migration proved focal insofar as it allowed EKRE to demonise the ‘Muslim other’ through an engagement in the politics of hate as a distinctly cultural as opposed to a material phenomenon. EKRE’s election campaigning was riddled with images, video materials and publications invoking a large number of alleged ‘threats’ to European and Estonian identities posed by ‘rapidly growing’ Muslim population. For instance, Jaak Madison (now EKRE’s Member of the European Parliament) argued that the Notre-Dame de Paris fire may not have been an accident but the work of Muslims. The far-right coupled its racist gibberish and hate speech with the allegedly forthright promise to ‘rebuild’ war-affected areas in Africa and the Middle East by sending back refugees who were currently in Estonia (Rünne and Laanpere, 2020: 255).
The domain of the Eurozone crisis proved germane when contouring the debate on the country’s participation in the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). In doing so, the far-right party sought to further culturalise economic issues and play on the insecurities generated by neoliberalism without expressing any nuanced criticism of this regulatory regime. The act of joining those facilities was too hastily a move already resonated among the majority of the Estonian public as early as 2011 (Baltic Times, 2011). After its formation in March 2012 one of the main modes of operation of EKRE has been to stir up the public anger at the EU bailout programme for Greece by purveying the stereotypes of ‘lazy Mediterraneans’, in contrast to the financial rectitude of the ‘Northern Europeans’ (Kasekamp et al, 2019: 6). In August 2012 EKRE organised a demonstration against the ratification of the ESM Treaty in front of the parliament and launched a popular, if unsuccessful, referendum campaign on the matter (Baltic News Service [BNS], 2012a). As noted earlier, rather than attesting to the innovations of the far-right, those stereotypes further radicalised the lexicons previously used by the centre-right and centre-left political forces. Furthermore, EKRE’s capacity to construct a distinctively economic narrative, which subsequently translated into sizable protest actions has also been juxtaposed with deliberate efforts to exploit the insecurities created by neoliberalism. The protest movement against Estonia’s ‘unjustified’ contributions to the Eurozone bailout fund has repeatedly cited the mainstream parties’ inability to cater for ‘ordinary Estonians’ in particular with regard to the budgetary allocations for salaries in the education sector. This allowed EKRE to speak of the troubling if primitively enunciated metamorphosis of recently reclaimed national sovereignty from the Soviet Union as being usurped by the EU and international financial institutions. Such arguments disguised the far-right’s rather ambiguous relationship with the EU – the institution, which at least on the left is generally perceived to be the bastion of neoliberalism. While EKRE invoked the uncertainties generated by neoliberal governance at the national spatial scale, it simultaneously opposed debt mutualisation at the Eurozone level, criticising the EU from the position of ‘neoliberal nationalism’ (Harmes, 2012; Worth, 2019: 75) as an unaccountable, over-regulatory and interventionist supranational body.

Akin to its far-right counterparts elsewhere, EKRE has been well equipped to displace the experiences of disenfranchisement onto the signifier of the ‘nation’. In the 2019 election, it emerged as the most popular party in two out of 12 electoral districts – Pärnu County and Võru, and Valga and Põlva Counties. EKRE has performed outstandingly in the poorer (per-capita GDP below 60 per cent of the national average), depopulating and southernmost constituencies that demarcate historical epicentres of rural decline. The counties of Võru, Valga and Põlva consistently rank among the few regions where the employment rate failed to exceed 45 per cent since the onset of ‘transition-era’ agricultural reforms concomitant with lacklustre rural and regional development policies (Servinski et al 2016: 28). Furthermore, the far-right’s strongholds registered the highest material deprivation (ranging from 12.6 per cent to 15.4 per cent), unemployment (from 6.6 per cent to 9.1 per cent) and at-risk-of-poverty rates – twice above the national average (Statistics Estonia, 2021a; 2021b). These regions are characterised by a great proportion of households engaging in small-scale farming for their own consumption and for the purpose of local trading. They are also distinct due to a disproportionately high incidence of work-related pendulum migration (to other towns and abroad), which augments the
loss of livelihood stability, the deterioration of social cohesion and the dissolution of links with the home village. It is precisely these residents of rural southern Estonia who have been depicted in the public realm as exhibiting a lack of entrepreneurial skills, ‘kolkhoz mentality’ and ‘learned helplessness’ (Annist, 2017). EKRE’s success in the areas where both centre-left political platforms (the Centre Party, Keskerakond and Social Democratic Party, Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond, SDE) tended to perform well should not come as any surprise, especially given the latter’s embrace of ‘third way’ social democracy at the expense of recognising pervasive social inequalities (Karro, 2019).

It cannot be denied that in parallel to its ethnicist-populist rhetoric, EKRE also spoke to the concerns that other political forces did not regard pressing. These included stagnating wage growth and precarious employment conditions, inadequate social safety nets (to be ‘recuperated’ by restricting the ‘importation of non-EU workforce’), income tax and mortgage repayment burdens (albeit exclusively for pensioners and larger families) or the need to revive peripheral agricultural zones through farmer cooperatives network (EKRE, 2019). In 2018, together with its far-right ECE counterparts, notably Hungary’s Jobbik, EKRE entered a traditional left-wing terrain by advocating for the creation of the Europe-wide ‘Wage Union’ designed to place East-West EU wage inequalities at the top of the EU cohesion agenda. This popular signature collection campaign took ownership of the most sensitive issue in the ECE region by stressing the EU’s overt complicity in pushing the armies of Eastern European workers to migrate to the West thereby augmenting the ‘social disaster’ that tore apart families across the eastern part of the continent (BNS, 2018). While attention to most of these issues might at first sight be interpreted as the far-right’s determination to mount a challenge against the social costs emanating from neoliberal regime, it ought to be emphasised that these demands were aligned with EKRE’s advocacy of welfare chauvinism. The latter ideological stance is of course deeply embedded in the broader neoliberal critique of the social democratic welfare state as supposedly ‘bloated’, ‘inefficient’ and ‘wasteful’ institution (Saull, 2015: 41). This archetypical tendency of the radical right to invoke racist authoritarianism by rendering the welfare state as an exclusive domain of indigenous citizens by depicting immigrants (and ethnic minorities) as ‘free-riders’ who make little if any contribution to the system but reap its benefits is nothing but another indication of how the far-right deliberately exploit the insecurities generated by neoliberal capitalism. However, as we will see momentarily, this seeming concern with the effects of neoliberalism has been contradictory, if not wholly instrumental, for EKRE’s election campaign also openly advocated pro-market policies.

At this stage it is pertinent to highlight that while the electoral gains of the far-right can be attributed to the feelings of disenfranchisement shared by the sections of Estonia’s working class residing in peripheral regions, we ought not to caricature the reasons behind its surge. It would be incorrect to reduce the latter to the reaction on the part of the rural, less educated electorate against the interests of cultured and younger middle-class voters attuned to ‘cosmopolitan’ values. Such a contention would fail to register that the Estonian far-right has been the most popular political force among the youth (18–24 age category). This important detail constitutes an exception to the rule as far as typical (older generation) far-right support bases in Europe are concerned. On this register, EKRE approximates Geert Wilders’ Party of Freedom that proved capable of mobilising a younger support base. In addition,
it is important to underscore that Estonia’s middle class also bought into EKRE’s economic programme (Kook, 2019). It did so on the grounds of small and medium-sized businesses’ difficulties in meeting the EU directives and the high tax burdens on the self-employed and those in part-time employment, especially compared to the environment for foreign enterprises. Particularly attractive were the electoral promises to repeal the 25 most bureaucratic business laws and regulations, improve credit facilities for small and medium enterprises through the creation of public investment bank, introduce tax incentives ‘promoting life in Estonia’s rural areas’, cease payment increases to the EU budget, and in public procurement prioritise companies based on Estonian capital (EKRE, 2019). Estimates suggest that seven in ten of EKRE’s supporters voted based on these election pledges (Jaagnat, 2019).

Evidently these electoral pledges exhibit profound contradictions when read alongside EKRE’s aforementioned calls to address the issues of stagnating wage growth and precarious employment conditions, inadequate social safety nets or increases in and consolidation of income tax. What they do reveal is a degree of correspondence with the interests of domestic sections of the capitalist class, notably the owners of small- and medium-sized enterprises based in the rural parts of the country.

EKRE’s contradictory and ambiguous rhetoric directed against and in favour of the neoliberal regime in Estonia presages the difficult question of how to account for its support base. The exploration of opinion polls indicates that the far-right has attracted a diverse group of voters. The Kantar poll conducted in January 2019 (cited in Lepik, 2019) revealed that while EKRE was the second most popular party (23.3 per cent) among households with the lowest incomes, it was also second (17.3 per cent) in the category of highest-income-group households. The far-right also relied heavily on the middle-class segments of the population. Martin Helme described the electoral cartography of the 2019 polls by noting that while wealthier municipalities voted for the neoliberal Reform Party, and the poorer for the left-leaning Centre Party, those of Pro Patria and EKRE were distinctly middle class (BBC Monitoring Europe, 2019). The districts in which the party came a close second (Laane-Viru, Jarva and Viljandi) are typified by the highest average standard output per agricultural holding. They also qualify as those hardest hit by the economic recession, which again is indicative of the far-right’s ability to marshal support from relatively better-off electorate, disillusioned with their previous choice of the Reform Party (Valdvee and Klaus, 2015: 161). But this diverse support base is not necessarily an enigma, especially if we recall that the far-right’s contradictory stances regarding its critique of capitalism goes back to the fascist tradition (Saull, 2015). It is in fact only through such inconsistent approaches that the far-right can attempt a politics of ‘class transcendence’ and stand the chance of success at the ballot box. In Estonia, the tenuous social class base behind Estonia’s far-right ought to be seen as composed of ‘titular’ working-class segments, including agricultural labourers, typically with larger families, poverty-stricken pensioners and youths as well as aspiring but disenchanted smaller and larger business owners that despise the policies favouring multinational capital and ‘cosmopolitan’ ruling class. While the rootedness in provincial peripheries of the country defines this social base, some representatives of the largest domestically owned companies headquartered in Tallinn – such as the software consultancy multinational Helmes – unsurprisingly sympathised with EKRE’s economic programme (Lounaeestlane, 2019).

A closer examination of EKRE’s capacity to exploit the moods of societal disenfranchisement as well as its determination to mobilise cross-class constituencies...
reveals the far-right’s obstruse relationship with neoliberalism. While in some instances (opposition to Eurozone bailouts and welfare chauvinism) EKRE seems to have followed distinctly neoliberal nationalist ideology, its readiness to enter the traditional left-wing domain (by addressing the questions of wage stagnation, outward migration, or employment conditions) renders the economic strategy of the party incoherent at best. What it does share with both more statist and authoritarian far-right parties (see: Worth, 2019: 65–81) such as the National Front and their more neoliberal counterparts (Swiss People’s Party, The Freedom Party of Austria and Lega Nord) is the commitment to ‘nativism’ where judgements about the appropriateness of economic decisions are seldom grounded in detailed economic assessments and more frequently evaluated through pragmatic opportunism. Herein, the degree to which an economic policy will privilege the indigenous populations and discriminate against immigrants, minority ethnic groups or international financial agencies is of paramount importance. Bearing in mind this ambivalent nature of Estonia’s far-right, to what extent can its recent success at the ballot box be presented as a challenge to the neoliberal regime?

Rupturing (authoritarian) neoliberalism?

The electoral breakthrough of the far-right in March 2019 has been met with initial awe and subsequent ignominy on the part of the liberal establishment. EKRE’s inclusion in the governing coalition, as well as its core policy stances on migration, multiculturalism and EU integration, have been criticised not so much by accentuating the party’s neo-fascist undercurrents (nativism, racism and xenophobia) but by stressing the irreparable damage inflicted onto Estonia’s reputation in the eyes of foreign investors. The former prime minister, Andrus Ansip, accused EKRE of bolstering the polarisation of society, due to its ‘dangerous’ rhetoric that ‘constantly draws attention only to the negative’ and thereby compels ‘people to think that there has never been anything good [in Estonia]’ (cited in BNS, 2019a). With the far-right in government, ‘Estonia’s reputation as a liberal and tech-savvy nation that punches above its weight in Europe [is] at risk’ (cited in Cerulus, 2019). For Ansip and others, this amounted to a catastrophic development concerning Estonia’s aptitude to attract foreign capital and talent. Are verdicts such as this justified?

Throughout its short time in government, EKRE has initiated and proposed the policies of stricter regulations against money-laundering risks, lowered excise duty on alcohol and made a U-turn on its campaign pledges to increase budgetary allocations for education funding and provide tax concessions on land sales for Estonian buyers. In September 2019, EKRE MPs compared the visa-free travel agreement between the EU and Ukraine to a ‘Trojan horse’ for Russian influence in the country (BNS, 2019b). Having ordered an inquiry into the possibility of lifting the visa-free entry of Ukrainian citizens to Estonia, EKRE also sought to review the immigration exemptions and resident permits for seasonal workers. It was in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic when the party presented the single and perhaps the most formidable challenge to the neoliberal regime of regulation. The party initiated the amendments to the Aliens Act and the Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry Act that served to expel non-EU migrant workers from the country (with an exemption for those employed in agriculture) following the expiration of their work visas (Eesti Rahvusringhääling, 2020).
Thanks to the rhetoric and policy stances of EKRE, the coalition government has made international headlines on more than one occasion. For example, the government has sided with its Czech, Polish and Hungarian counterparts in blocking the agreement to target neutral carbon emissions across the EU by 2050. It was also a lone voice, despite inner quibbles, in opposing the ESM reform over the substitution of the unanimity principle with that of the qualified majority in fund allocation procedure (Toplensky, 2019). Upon the restoration of voting rights of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the extended board of EKRE suggested that Estonia’s membership in the Council should be stopped or put to a parliamentary vote (BNS, 2019c). The contention that Estonia’s system of justice would suffice for ensuring the protection of human rights also justified the Minister of Finance Martin Helme’s indication that the European Court of Human Rights is ‘of no use for Estonians’ (BNS, 2019d). Just as the electoral campaign pledges and its capacity to creatively exploit the so-called ‘migration’ and Eurozone crises explored in the previous section, suchlike ensemble of proposed and implemented policies as well as Eurosceptic rhetoric can be regarded as unorthodox and hostile to certain economic and political appearances of the current regulatory regime of capitalism. And yet, contrary to the liberal dramaturgy, EKRE’s conduct in government does not yield itself to any rupture against neoliberalism in general. This can be further inferred from the reaction to EKRE’s participation in the coalition government on the part of international agencies as well as from the far-right’s attitudes to multinational capital.

Despite liberal forecasts portending an appearance of dents in the façade of Estonia’s neoliberal regime, EKRE’s electoral breakthrough has been met with indifference in the corridors of international financial institutions, credit rating agencies and multinational corporations. There were no signs of disciplinary action towards the new government (IMF, 2019). Instead, financial markets continued to hold the commitment to the status of neoliberal poster child on the part of Estonian state managers and politicians in high esteem. In April 2019, the Fitch credit rating agency confirmed Estonia’s long-term sovereign rating with its stable, high-level stable outlook AA- (BNS, 2019e). Moody’s replicated the move only a month later, concluding that both short- and long-term bond and deposit ceilings would remain the same. Estonia’s fiscal position was expected to ‘remain strongest in the rated universe’ (Moody’s Investors Service, 2019).

For their part, the multinationals remained content with the far-right’s oratory, thereby downright ignoring the purported diversion from the conventional economic policy course. In part, this stemmed from EKRE Minister of Finance Martin Helme’s reassurance given to the representatives of foreign capital in the country. In December 2019, he noted that there were no plans to tax large digital multinational companies during the government’s period in office, citing the government’s intention not to cause tensions with the Trump administration (BNS, 2019f). Furthermore, and despite the alarmism of liberal citadels, the conclusion of the coalition agreement witnessed several major investments in the country over the short timespan since. Take, for instance, the Dutch SEAL’s €4.5m acquisition of a 30 per cent share in the Tartu-based pharmaceutical start-up TBD-Biodiscovery, which amounted to the largest foreign investment in the biotechnology sector (BNS, 2019g). In the first half of 2019, the Estonian start-up sector as a whole received €117m in investments, with 24 new transactions comparing favourably with 37 investments made throughout
2018 (KredEx, 2019). Another conspicuous deal has been the commitment of steel manufacturing giant Fortaco to invest €10m in expanding its production plant in Narva. Supported by the Estonian government, this venture will enhance factory’s capacity to work with the world’s leading original equipment manufacturing (OEM) customers. The factory is set to provide them with complex manufacturing capabilities such as steel fabrications used for different mobile lifting applications and mobile device components (BNS, 2019h). Of a similar stature were the Swedish Bed Factory’s – the largest bedroom furniture manufacturer – announcement in April 2019 that it would double its production volume in the Viljandi plant over the next year. The establishment of Amazon’s Estonian subsidiary in July gave rise to speculations about the retail heavyweight’s future intentions to create a data centre in the country. These instances signal that EKRE’s inclusion in the coalition government amounts to just another albeit highly contradictory ruling class’ attempt to manage the enduring crisis of neoliberalism.

Conclusion

This article aimed to locate the rise of the far-right in Estonia within a broader conjunctural terrain typified by capital’s proclivity to seek fleeting resolutions to its multiple crises in ‘authoritarian populist’ responses (Dale and Fabry, 2018). Against the backdrop of the bourgeoning discourse proclaiming the ‘democratic backsliding’ of ECE and a deafening silence pertaining to scholarly engagements with the lines of causality behind EKRE’s ascendance, we developed a political economy perspective to account for immediate and longer-term factors behind the far-right’s popularity in the last parliamentary elections. It has been demonstrated how this critically oriented account proficiently situates the electoral success of EKRE within the constitutive grammar of capitalist social relations – approached through the prisms of the 2008 crisis management operations at the European and national spatial scales, feelings of disenfranchisement, politics of class and the contradictory nature of the far-right’s critique of neoliberalism.

The contextualisation of the far-right’s reaction in Europe over a longer temporal horizon has formed the initial conceptual trampoline for our enquiry. The problematisation of assertions that conceive the ECE as a somehow unique space – prone to the most ferocious renditions of rightist projects – has been advanced by discussing the defeats of left-wing forces in the region and briefly rehearsing the evolution of the radical right’s ascendance to power across the West in the post-Cold War environment. The rise of EKRE exhibits profound similarities with earlier and contemporary electoral success stories of far-right formations in Western Europe. However, the far-right’s entrance into the landscape of governmental politics – the longer ‘post-communist’ history of populist phenomenon notwithstanding – thus far had no parallel in the Baltic region. Although this does not mean that an adequate account of its origins must reify the shorter temporal horizon during and after the 2008 crisis, the immediate triggers lie precisely in this conjuncture. As argued earlier, the far-right’s breakthrough in Estonia has been predicated on crisis management operations and authoritarian neoliberal conducts, which themselves do not necessarily entail the endpoints that parachute reactionary political forces in government offices.

With these conceptual provisos, the article deployed an investigative prism of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ to unearth the modalities of crisis management in Estonia.
This notion underscores how two-pronged conducts at the European and national spatial scales served to regularise fiscal restraint and police public discontent. While the assertion of authoritarian bents in neoliberal governance techniques functioned under the institutional veneer of democracy, it simultaneously engendered the conditions favourable to the electoral success of the far-right. On the one hand, with the birth of the NEEG structure and the adoption of the euro, austerity has become a permanent feature of Estonia’s neoliberal regime, manifest in the EU-based incursions through CSRs, in-depth reviews under Six-Pack and adherence to fiscal discipline under the remit of Fiscal Compact. In the episode of the Eurozone crisis, Estonia’s state managers expressed opposition to the transfer union. This opposition has been narrated through the discursive prism of nationalist moralisation and was later mobilised and radicalised by the forces of the far-right. On the other, the 2008 crisis in Estonia gave cogency to a recalibration of state interventionism. Its inventories became predicated on the restrictions of freedoms of gathering and expression alongside the measures of intimidation against dissenting publics. Demonstrating that the effects of resurgent authoritarian neoliberalism amounted to an erosion of political trust and legitimacy on the part of the Estonian public, we suggested locating the surge in support for the far-right as the consequence to – and not as the cause of – increasingly coercive modalities of capitalist statecraft.

In the third part of this article, the account of immediate conditions conducive to the far-right’s success in Estonia has been supplemented with an extended inquiry into the vectors of popular disenfranchisement and class-constituted support base. In the section, we posited that EKRE’s capacity to displace the experiences of post-communist disenfranchisement onto the signifier of the ‘nation’ proved instrumental in gaining electoral support. It was precisely in the districts ravaged by depopulation and economic decline, where the far-right proved most successful, especially considering the centre-left’s incapacity to speak to the concerns related to stagnating wage growth, precarious employment conditions, outward migration, heavy tax burdens faced by small businesses as well as rural decline. Yet, even when those considerations are taken on board, the reasons for EKRE’s surge cannot be simplistically reduced to the reaction on the part of the rural, less educated electorate against the interests of cultured and younger middle-class voters attuned to cosmopolitan values. As adumbrated earlier, the class base of Estonia’s far-right is composed not only of titular working-class segments and poverty-stricken pensioners but also the youths as well as aspirational but disenchanted middle-class sections, notably the smaller and larger business owners that despise the policies favouring multinational capital. It is EKRE’s capacity to attract younger voters, which makes the party distinct from its far-right counterparts in Europe (with the Party of Freedom in the Netherlands being another exception). While discussing these findings, the section also deciphered the ambivalent and contradictory nature of the far-right’s discordant critique of neoliberal capitalism. Although in some instances EKRE subscribed to distinctly neoliberal nationalist ideology, its readiness to enter the traditional left-wing domain (the practice that has been beclouded by incongruities) renders the economic strategy of the party incoherent at best. It has been argued that through its commitment to ‘nativism’ and pragmatic opportunism EKRE mimics its far-right counterparts in Western Europe.

Finally, we asked whether the practice of synonymising the recent epiphany of political barbarism on Estonia’s political scene with a sudden radical break from the long period of ‘liberal freedom’, ‘economic progress’ and ‘civility’ carries any
analytical purchase. While the ensemble of policies implemented by the coalition government – some of which came in the form of direct EKRE proposals – can be certainly regarded as unorthodox and hostile to the economic and political appearances of the regulatory regime of capitalism, it does not yield itself to any rupture against neoliberalism in general. Notwithstanding EKRE’s electoral success, the international financial institutions, credit agencies and multinationals operating in the country remained unperturbed by its rhetoric, indicating that the presence of the far-right in government might be just another attempt on the part of the ruling class to manage the crisis of neoliberalism. If one is to search for the lessons in the path-dependencies of ‘post-communist’ transformation – the disturbing aspect on that register relates to the question of whether the other two Baltic countries might well follow the region’s trendsetter as they so often did throughout the last 30 years. Rather than placing wagers, those longing for egalitarian, free and progressive futures will have to do their utmost to prevent replicating the ‘Estonian example’ this time.

Notes
1 I define EKRE as a far-right party whose ideology revolves around nativism, Euroscepticism and populism. Throughout this piece, the descriptors such as ‘extreme’ or ‘radical’ (according to Mudde’s definition, for instance, EKRE would fall within the second category) right are eschewed due to their tendency to judge parties normatively against a liberal set of values, which tend to coincide with the ideology of leading sections of capital.
2 The opinion polls in Estonia can be tracked at: www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/estonia/
3 It is important to highlight that the study operates with a crude definition of populism, using the term to describe any political force that 1) conceives of itself as a legitimate agent against an illegitimate establishment; and 2) claims to represent the will of the people against the establishment and other enemies (for example migrants). The study uncritically applies the term ‘populism’ to both left- and right-wing parties and thereby groups SYRIZA, Podemos, the Alternative for Germany, Law and Justice, and National Front together. Originating in the theory of ‘twin totalitarianisms’, this practice follows an old right-wing proclivity to eliminate all differences between right- and left-wing ‘extremisms’.
4 The lowest-income households denote those, where each member receives a monthly income of €500 or less, the highest €900 and more.

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**Conflict of interest**
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Monoliths of authoritarianism, cartographies of popular disenfranchisement


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