

ESTONIA AND FINLAND

# THE POLITICS

# OF A PANDEMIC

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The lessons learned from COVID-19 are not only about virology. The pandemic has intensified the dilemma between human and material values in national politics and reiterated the bitter contestation over the world order.

Estonia and Finland are small, rule-of-law abiding states. There are also historical and cultural similarities and ties between the two societies, to the point where people both in Estonia and Finland jokingly consider the social distancing more a normalcy than an exception in their social interaction. It is therefore not surprising that policies and decisions have not differed much between the two countries.

In some respect, the situation around the Gulf of Finland has not differed much from the rest of the world. We notice similar patterns of denial, confusion, and slow piecemeal decisions. And we have followed a similar trajectory to many other states: initial absentmindedness by public agencies about suitable measures, and attempts to downplay the effects of the virus on the population, soon followed by the realisation that the situation is much worse than originally thought. The Estonian and Finnish governments were both agile in declaring states of emergency, with powerful societal measures such as lockdowns and sheltering, closure of borders, and re-organisation of public and private operations. However, while the measures were decisive and forceful, they were still accompanied by denial and confusion from those in power.

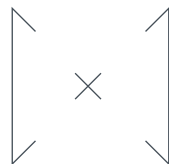
Other developments have been of a more domestic character. Estonian society tends to be enthusiastic and impatient regarding the adoption of new technologies, but also noticeably attentive to minimising the accompanying risks. Due to its long history of occupations and a relatively recent memory of totalitarian rule, the Estonian population is particularly sensitive to any attempts at limiting personal liberties or steps leading to the loss of freedoms, e.g. freedom of speech, thought, assembly, and movement.

This impatient but security-focused attitude characterises Estonian reactions to the global pandemic as well as the adoption of new technologies for empowering individuals and governments operating within it. In a digital society, technologies are regarded as a natural element of society where matters of security, transparency, accountability, data protection, technological dependency, and competition regulation have both technological and non-technological components. However, with the crisis-led trend to adopt new technologies without observing the usual procedures of political debate and oversight, the pandemic has underlined the need to pay special attention to the acceptability of government as well as privately led measures.

In other matters, the same trends and patterns have been observable in both Estonia and Finland. We have seen public broadcasting companies and newspapers re-emerging as trusted sources of balanced and knowledge-based information when covering the domestic and international state of emergency. The reliance on and trust in public authorities has also increased. Particular authorities, obviously national health agencies and boards but also the chancellors of justice and the data protection inspectorates, have been at the forefront in providing advice and concrete recommendations in the debates about suitable measures for managing the crisis.

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One such noticeable debate has focused on the question of whether Statistics Estonia (a public authority) could justifiably request private mobile operators to release their users' raw mobile phone tracking data for the government to gain an



overview of whether people's mobility patterns have changed as a result of the emergency measures. The debate involved several public authorities as well as all mobile operators, and focused predominantly on (1) the options for data sharing and (2) the potential danger that public authorities or members of present or future governments might find a way to abuse this. As a result of the deliberations, no raw data were released, and each private telecom carried out the analysis that the public authorities needed internally in compliance with data protection requirements, and Statistics Estonia received only the final results.

The pandemic has not only tested the healthcare system and standards but has also imposed a test of statehood. As a result, we may see greater attention paid to the functioning of governance systems and the effectiveness of public administration globally. This has certainly been true in Estonia and Finland.

Public authorities have, in general, followed expert opinion, initially of the medical and legal professionals and increasingly of the economic and security ones. Similarly, the crisis has underlined the political importance of scientific knowledge, especially that of virologists and other medical professionals with different statistical evidence and predictions. As the costs of governmental measures have become clearer, we also see more attention paid to national economists. In Estonia and Finland we can see that these respective value propositions and their practical applications have partially merged, resulting in a reopening of the societies and borders.

The collection, sharing, and analysis of data across society has also intensified under pandemic conditions. The trend that used to be justified with reference to improving the efficiency and quality of public services, now continues with suggestions to collect and analyse more private data in order to monitor, predict, and control the pandemic. These calls are most commonly led by computer scientists with a well-intended interest in helping with crisis management by offering more reliable research and statistics. Whether these calls should be followed or not, the pandemic has

reiterated the importance of the availability, relevance, and reliability of data. In Estonia, it has encouraged investment in ad hoc national data enhancement, such as the Estonian Cyber Defence League being deployed to assist the Estonian Health Authority. Along with that, it has reiterated the value of international institutions (like the World Health Organization) and global cooperation in such contexts.

All in all, COVID-19 has presented governments with hard choices between the life and the well-being of populations. The pandemic has tested not only crisis management and healthcare systems but also offered the much deeper challenge of preserving and promoting fundamental rights and freedoms. Amidst the global pandemic, we have been witnessing an intensified bifurcation between two competing value propositions: a human and a material one. The human proposition emphasises the quality of and the right to human life, including good care. The material one emphasises the economy. The proliferation of the virus has shifted governmental focus from the latter to the former. The shift has taken place through a re-organisation of businesses, reprogramming in working and private lives, testing of the public sector's operational capacity, and the emergence of new opinion leaders. That said, both Estonia and Finland have emerged from this challenge on the human side—placing human rights and fundamental freedoms over economic considerations.

The pandemic has also highlighted one entirely different dimension. For small countries like Estonia and Finland, international order and the sense of an international community are crucial. However, the global sense of urgency, even panic and dystopian depression, has led governments and the public to return to nostalgia, nationalism, and protectionism. This has manifested in calls for renewed reliance on national capacity, e.g. domestic production, domestic or like-minded supply chains for cash, medicine, equipment, and spare parts. The crisis seems to have drawn global attention away from climate change and environmental protection, and invigorated discriminatory and xenophobic tendencies in places where we believed these to have been abolished. The pandemic has also underscored that states'

*modi operandi* and prevailing ambitions are unlikely to change during a crisis. For example, the United States' accusations against China and cutting of funding to the WHO continue the trend of US exceptionalism and unilateralism. This shows how emergency decision-making continues to reveal the tendencies and priorities of executive power—pragmatism and expediency certainly, but also opportunism and unilateralism. Without societal and political resilience, there is a danger that crisis-mentalities become the new normal.

The global emergency has imposed restrictions and reduced freedoms in all countries. In societies where such restrictions are already common, the change has been least disruptive. In countries where such restrictions are temporary and need-based, success will be measured by the return to normalcy of fundamental rights and freedoms. The task for liberal democracies is to ensure that technological advances and innovation remain the source of economic and societal benefits, rather than becoming a new means of governmental control. That said, crises also present an opportunity to re-organise societies and renew societal processes—those leading on these fronts might turn out to be the greatest winners of all.

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