

Estonia

Period of democratic transition: 1990–1991

Pro-democracy civic movement: present

Soviet troops occupied Estonia during World War II, following a secret protocol in the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact that forcibly incorporated Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into the USSR. Under Soviet rule, approximately one-tenth of Estonia's population was deported, executed, or forced to flee abroad. Subsequent Russian immigration substantially altered the country's ethnic composition, with ethnic Estonians constituting just over 61 percent of the population in 1989.

During the late 1980s, a relaxation of rules against free expression led to demands for Estonian self-determination. Mass protests began as early as 1987, including the 1988 "singing revolution," in which people gathered to sing banned national songs. At the same time, a nonviolent, pro-independence, pro-democracy movement—the Estonian Popular Front—emerged; mass demonstrations and protests routinely attracted hundreds of thousands of participants. Some protests were coordinated among the three Baltic states. Most notable among these was a human chain organized in 1989, consisting of more than two million people who spanned the territories of Latvia and Lithuania. The Congress of Estonia, a democratically elected (though informal) body formed in 1990, served as a parallel legislature to the official Communist-dominated counterpart. The Congress represented a broad array of political, student, civic, women's, and cultural groups. Estonia took advantage of weakening Soviet control in the wake of the failed Soviet coup attempt against USSR president Mikhail Gorbachev by asserting economic independence before quickly claiming full independence on August 20, 1991. A democratic constitution was adopted in the summer of 1992, and open, multiparty elections were held in September 1992, solidifying the democratic transition.

After the first popular vote in 1992, subsequent presidential elections reverted to parliamentary ballot. The prime minister was chosen by the president and confirmed by Parliament. Subsequent parliamentary elections were free and fair, although recently some political infighting has dominated coalition ruling parties.