

Estonian political parties see TikTok as a gateway to youth



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Every fifth inhabitant in the Baltic states uses TikTok, Kantar Emor data shows. Still, not all political parties in Estonia have created an official account on one of the most popular social media apps today. The parties that have joined TikTok see it as a way to reach young people but fear the security problems associated with the platform.

As a result of the 2023 Estonian parliament elections that took place at the beginning of March, coalition discussions are held between three liberal parties: Reformierakond, Sotsiaaldemokraatlik erakond and Eesti 200. All of the mentioned parties have an official TikTok account.

Eesti 200 is one of the youngest political parties in Estonia, and it's also the most active on TikTok. They joined TikTok in August of 2021 and have since made over 100 posts, gaining over 35 thousand likes across their profile. The party's head of digital marketing, Joanna Veeremaa, said that in 2021, a 17-year-old member of Eesti 200 youth organisation Noor Eesti 200 had recommended using TikTok to reach people their age. "Because Eesti 200 is a youth-oriented party, we decided to go along with the idea," Veeremaa said.



Eesti 200, who has 1570 followers on TikTok, has followed many trendy video concepts, including the “Heartbroken” trend. The caption reads “When they

say that politics are boring (heartbroken emoji)” Source: @200tiktokis on TikTok

The youth isn't only on TikTok

Veeremaa explained that the main reason for using TikTok is to make politics more understandable to the youth and to get more people to use their right to vote. “We don't necessarily focus on getting them [young people] to vote for us; the priority has always been making politics an enjoyable topic,” she said. Based on the feedback Eesti 200 got during and after the election week, Veeremaa noted that they reached their goal of bringing young people closer to politics.

The winner of the latest elections, Reformierakond, has posted four TikTok videos, the first dating back to October of last year. However, the head of Reformierakond's digital channels, Karoliina Lorenz, said the party doesn't have a separate communication plan for TikTok. “We mostly focus on Facebook because we have the largest following there,” said Lorenz. Lorenz also believes that TikTok is a way to reach the youth. “But so is Instagram,” she added. Because the party's communication team already puts work into communicating with young people through Instagram by making audiovisual content, they decided to share the same videos on TikTok. But how do Instagram and TikTok differ? Lorenz said that a TikTok video has a higher chance of reaching an international audience. “I have noticed many more negative comments or just spam under the videos,” she added. Because Reformierakond tries to keep an upbeat comment section under its social media content, TikTok can be a challenging platform to keep clear of negativity.

But there is also a positive difference between the two social media apps.
„Thanks to TikTok, we can reach people living in and outside of Estonia and bring politics to the platform that they are already on,“ Lorenz said.



Sotsiaaldemokraatlik erakond has 622 followers on their official TikTok account. Their first video dates back to December 2022 and the caption reads

“Sotsid (the memebers of the party, G.J) came out of the closet. PS! This is not clickbait!! Source: @sotsdem on TikTok

TikTok makes politics an accessible topic to all

The liberal party Sotsiaaldemokraatlik erakond appeared on TikTok at the end of last year. They have since made 21 posts following trendy video concepts, showing their day-to-day activities and using clips from their members’ interviews. “Our goal is to show everyone that politicians are people, too,” said the party’s head of marketing, Kättriin Avarlaid.

Because the party has been on TikTok for only three months, there isn’t a separate strategy for the platform. “We are still experimenting, so it’s more like if something seems interesting enough to post, we do it,” said Avarlaid. “Some ideas have just come from scrolling on the app, but frequently we see intriguing interview clips of our members that could interest our audience.”

Still, the communication is mainly targeted towards a younger audience. “The political communication in Estonia is largely serious, so we decided to make it more accessible to the younger generation by using TikTok,” said Avarlaid.



During the election week, Reformierakond posted a TikTok of the Estonian prime minister inviting everyone to use their right to vote. The head of

Reformierakond's digital channels Karoliina Lorenz said that the video was framed like a FaceTime call to provide a more personal message.

Reformierakond has 1353 followers on their official TikTok account.

@eesti_reformierakond on TikTok

Is it safe?

At the end of 2022, the Estonian Information System Authority (RIA) warned that people shouldn't be using TikTok on work phones because the app collects a lot more data than is needed. In addition, that data is stored outside the European Union.

All of the Estonian coalition parties are aware of RIA's instructions.

Sotsiaaldemokraatlik erakond has gotten letters from citizens who are worried about the party using TikTok, said Kättriin Avarlaid. "People have asked if we aren't afraid of using our [TikTok] account because of all the data leak and hacking risks." Avarlaid added that the party's communication team follows RIA's instructions, and the app is never used on politicians' work phones.

But the risks associated with TikTok can be a reason or at least one of the reasons for deciding against creating an official TikTok account for the political party. A member of the management board for Eestimaa Rohelised, Liina Freivald, said that the most significant threat with using TikTok is the uncertainty of where the data goes. "We also don't want to support a big authoritarian country (China, G.J.) that hasn't claimed all the basic, important human rights," Freivald said.

Birgit Remiküll, a member of the youngest conservative party in Estonia, Parempoolsed, said that although the main reason for the party's absence on TikTok is the lack of funding, the cybersecurity threats have also been a part of deciding against joining it.

For the largest political party in Estonia, Keskerakond, the main reason for not joining TikTok has been a lack of an expert for the job, said the party's head of communication Andres Kalvik. "We have also read about the [RIA's] warnings, but I don't think that there is a need to ring the alarm because there haven't been any known problems associated with cyber security issues on TikTok in Estonia," said Kalvik. „But I think that everyone must consider these risks before joining [TikTok].“

The political parties EKRE and Isamaa didn't respond to the author's requests to do an interview.

The article focuses on political parties' official TikTok accounts. Communication strategies can also involve politicians' own TikTok accounts.

All data was collected on March 25th 2023.