

BY Jessica McKenzie

This Tuesday, April 9, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves of the Republic of Estonia presented the parliament with 16 proposals generated by civilians through the online platform Rahvakogu, or People's Assembly. As he handed the proposals over, Ilves requested that legislators take them seriously. The proposals cover topics related to Estonia's electoral laws, political party laws, such as party financing, and civil participation. As opposed to other ongoing solicitations for citizen-generated proposals and feedback, the Citizen's Initiative Act in Finland for example, People's Assembly will apparently be a one-time housekeeping event not a necessary permanent institution.

People's Assembly began with Charter 12, an Estonian citizens' initiative signed by 17 prominent public figures, which calls for greater democratic accountability from the authorities. According to opendemocracy.net, "Charter 12 was conceived as a response to rapidly rising levels of public anger after a series of scandals involving senior politicians unwilling to take responsibility for grave lapses of judgement [sic] — and unable to adhere to accepted canons of democratic communication."

The supporters of Charter 12 believe the Reform Party, which has been governing since 2007, has a monopoly on power in Estonia. Moreover, leaders of the Party are suspected of laundering political donations.

Charter 12 led to a "consultative process" and the creation of People's Assembly, an online platform for crowdsourcing ideas and proposals for possible legislation. In the first stage of the process, People's Assembly accepted proposals and comments until the end of January 2013. In February analysts grouped the proposals into "bundles of different possible scenarios and provide[d] them with impact analysis." A deliberation day took place in March, in which 551 randomly selected people of voting age were selected to discuss and vote upon the bundled proposals (around 300 people participated).

The success of the venture is still up in the air. One of the organizers, Olari Koppel, expressed satisfaction with the quality of the initial proposals: "To my great pleasure, the citizen's parliament has proved in less than a month that intelligent discussion and proposals —

discontented in their wording yet constructive — are possible on the online landscape in Estonia," he said on an ERR radio show.

But Sven Mikser, chairman of the Social Democrats, shared Koppel's doubt that Parliament would introduce the proposals into law. "In reality, the important questions, such as decreasing the influence money has over political decision-making and opening the doors to more political parties, have seen little positive initiative," he said. Some even question whether the final 16 proposals might even conflict with the initial Charter 12 goals.

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