

## **Changes in EU-consciousness in Estonia 1995-2002: discussion and public opinion**

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### **1. EU-consciousness in Estonia**

The term Europe is often used additionally to the geographic unit also as a meaning for a cultural, economical and political construction. Estonian top-politicians consider Estonia as belonging to Europe in all formerly mentioned fields. Typical for this are the considerations expressed by the former Estonian president Lennart Meri. In his New Year's Eve speech in 1996 Lennart Meri has said the following: "We are once again in Europe, where we are defended by its culture, which since antiquity has been also our own culture. Now there is need to put this process into juridical shape. This should be clear to us that it is not European Union coming to Estonia but Estonia joins EU, and this will increase Estonia's duties as well as rights. And first of all: this is choice between past and future" (*Meri 1997*).

Logical consequence of the mentioned changes for Estonia as a future member of the EU would be a step by step increase of the security guarantees offered by the EU. The Estonian's hopes for security guarantees accompanying accession to the EU are undoubtedly more clearly defined than the attitudes about identity. Estonians see the security guarantees on the part of the EU as a guarantee for maintenance of the national independence. The ethnic identity of people of Estonia is seen endangered by other social circumstances (for example, de-population) rather than by the European Union.

European Union is first and foremost an economic union, applying regulation to the Common Economic Area. This Common Economic Area acts as a tool in transforming of member countries national identities, generating similarities, but also differences. The same process also applies to accession countries. The eastward enlargement of the EU is an

objective process connected to the process of modernisation and globalisation of the world and to the associated deepening of co-operation of the European people.

Estonia aspires to be a full member of a joined Europe and the European image and the real European identity of Estonia can be demonstrated by the general acceptance of European idea. This is the only way for small state like Estonia to keep own identity integrating into the European cultural, political and security system. How can a new European statehood look like, so that it does not repeat the problems of the classic nation-states concerning legitimisation of power, this is still subject of theoretical inquiries.

Which possibilities exist to realise those - yet theoretical - ideas, this is highly dependent on the practical development of unification with the EU, where - besides economic considerations - also security interests are getting more and more important.

The stability ensuing from co-operation within the EU reduces the chance of a political or economic crisis in Russia being transferred to Estonia. Estonia's experience in regaining independence and discussions on EU enlargement demonstrate that, in the EU, Estonia has common foreign and security policy interests with the small states of the Baltic Sea region, primarily Finland, Denmark and Sweden. Consequently, the would-be role of small states in the EU decision-making system at the beginning of the third millennium is relevant for Estonia's foreign policy.

Question about future of EU and its new member states situated at the Baltic Sea is important also in all context of EU enlargement. Area around the Baltic Sea - states like Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is economically and culturally one of the most dynamic regions in the EU inhabited by general population about 50 million people.

If EU Enlargement is related mainly to cultural independence and political sovereignty of nation state then possible NATO eastward enlargement will bring along discussions related to Estonian territory and geopolitical security. In this respect Baltic co-operation could be more active and could get new practical content. Baltic States already have joint military

units, a military college in Tartu and other international joint actions. It is big challenge - strengthening of common identity through some global organisation.

Today, one of the key questions in discussions of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian politicians and the cultural elite is the danger of imposed shift of ethnic and cultural identity. Stating this fact should be the beginning of an overview of the changes in discussions concerning small state national interests for joining the EU. There were dozens of those speeches in the last few years and this is also expressed by the words of former Estonian minister of foreign affairs, Toomas Hendrik Ilves – "integrating into the European Union represents the culmination of Estonian's road back to Europe and Estonia's road forward to its rightful place as a well-functioning, modern nation-state" (*Ilves, 1999*).

## **2. Public opinion in 1995-1998 and at 1999 to 2002**

Since November 1994 EU enlargement became one of the leading discourses introduced in Estonian daily newspapers. One of the first important texts of this discourse was „Starting thesis about Estonian possible joining with EU” which described vision of costs and benefits of EU membership for Estonia in all main fields (economic, environment, culture, social problems etc) (*Eesti tee...1994*).

Since November 1995, when Estonia made the application for membership in the EU, in texts of politicians Estonia is definitely considered as a potential member of EU. Public opinion has been more conservative. This has been mainly discourse for politicians, they have been criticised by sceptic humanitarian intelligentsia and also by more practical ordinary people.

In years 1995 and 1996 public opinion in Estonia was in an euphoric phase of Euro-consciousness. Criticism against the EU was expressed carefully and neutrality kept. The number of supporters in case of accession was steadily more than 40%, “No” said only every fifth. Because of the lack of objective information every third was not sure how to vote or did not want to explain his possible point of view.

Since 1997-1998 in discussions of Estonian politicians and the academic elite a sharply defined understanding has been reached - Estonia has chances to become a member state of the EU. Today this topic has highest priority in the Estonian press and is also an important field of discussion in meetings of Estonian high-rank politicians with their foreign colleagues. But at the beginning this was like a discovery that Estonia is equal partner with other East European countries in a line to get a call from Europe to join with the economic and political structures.

By the end of 1996, the reduced euphoria in discussions concerning EU-topics and in the public opinion became apparent. The change can be called a break-through accompanying a better disposal of information concerning Europe. This resulted in a sudden reduction of "Yes"-votes in case of a referendum. The explanation is as following: in the context of an abstract perspective of accession, it was relatively easy to be of a seemingly supporting opinion, but in a more concrete voting situation people hesitated. In many fields a vacuum of information had emerged, due to the acceleration of accession to the EU. Since the need for competent information grew much faster than the ability to supply it, the interviewed people were feeling very insecure, which could be seen especially clear in November 1998.

There are signs that confirm existing hard „Euro-doubt“ in Estonia, some people are relatively irresolute about the decision-making concerning the European Union. However, there may be a certain basis for speaking about internal oppositions between generations and various categories of the population and their choice of priority strategies for European integration.

Euro-scepticism as a keyword has gained a rather ambiguous and contradictory response in the public opinion of Estonian elite. The magazine "Eesti Ekspress" (supplement - "Areen") has published an idea, which tries to express the attitudes of the elite at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a different light - "we have been Estonians, but we will get Europeans!" This vision expressed by Andres Langemets for the future of losing identity cannot be misunderstood. The gradual change of the national "face" of the Estonians (as the author sees it, an orientation towards others) is described as a national destruction, which occurs during several generations. The author as a sceptic is certain, that "the path

chosen by the people is the national path; projected to the future and acceptable" (*Langemets 2000*).

For several other Estonian writers and humanitarians EU is also interpreted in sceptical way. It is considered a supreme power from outside having certain negative feature. For example, social geographer Eiki Berg argued on the basis of critical analysis of discourses that „there is as yet no consensus on either the significance of a „new“ Estonia or its regional belonging. Both visions: the „old nation state as the frontier of Western civilisation“ as well as the „new multinational state in a gateway position“ are almost equally valid but neither has so far been put into use. The current model of a Western-oriented ethnic state with a divided society is a product of overlapping constructed and real boundaries, constituting in reality a conflicting and contradictory vision “ (*Berg 2000:142*).

Efforts of the group of Estonian Euro-sceptics are directed to necessity to change the Constitution. In 1998-2000 Euro-sceptical line became step by step more popular, and the discussion has got serious dimension as sceptics have published good analysis. Although their contribution to the political discussion has been very restrained, they expressed some clear warnings. A minor importance of Estonian national identity and an increase of the European identity, propagating the unity of the EU accompany accession to the EU, until it will possibly dominate already the next generation of Estonians. This has been also rather a political than academic discussion. They have warned also about huge increase of prices and low compatibility of Estonian economics (*Leito, Silberg 1998*).

At the same time it is undisputed, that the expectations in many fields greatly exceed the real possibilities of the EU and in the Estonian context limit more natural seeming solutions. Setbacks and failures in the field of business are connected - well founded and sometimes even groundless - with Europe. Failures are used to discredit the EU-representatives of a certain policy in election campaigns and private conflicts. Criticism of the EU can get to populism once in a while. This all leaves marks at the image of the EU. The unclear meaning of Euro-scepticism is mainly characterizing the present state of the society, it also mirrors the state of the distorted discussions that were provoked by Estonia's future joining of the European Union (*Kirch, 2000*).

The timetable of the road back to Europe is realised successfully. If Estonia has "survived" the change from Euro-euphoria to more rational considerations and doubts in the years 1995 to 1996, then since the summer of 1999 the need for defense and security has convinced Estonians again. Support for a referendum concerning accession to the EU has grown a little bit. Behind this positive trend stands the need to feel safe concerning foreign policy.

In general, one can divide political parties into two groups: parties who support quick integration with EU, and parties who want to slow down the speed of integration. According to opinion of Mart Nutt, member of the Riigikogu, geo-political situation pushes Estonia to quicker integration (*Nutt 2001*). He argues also that EU integration represents rather a process of protection of European and local identity than promotes globalisation and weakening of local and regional identification. Opponents from different small parties as Estonia Social-democratic Labour Party who have recently made common release about Nice summit and affirmed that Estonia is not ready to join EU, because economic circumstances are not sure about positive results of quick joining. Estonia must wait until EU will finish its internal reforms (*Toomsalu 2001*).

There seem to be a noticeable lack of people who are able to deal competently with the topic EU. Compared with the so-called "average Estonian", the opinion of the (opinion-making) elite (especially political elite) is mainly pro-EU. There is reason for the prognosis, that they as opinion-makers, as people speaking in the mass media will influence a more positive attitude towards the EU in the near future.

But for the most part, worries about lack of information and opinions mean the preservation of social guarantees. Predictions, that in Estonia a broad atmosphere against the EU will arise especially concerning questions of sovereignty, have also not been fulfilled. The accelerated moving of Estonia in the direction of the EU will quite probably not awake strong resistance in the near future. The comparison of the findings of numerous sociologists shows that both the interest on the European Union and the being informed on the EU have improved within the last years.

As a consequence an essential change will probably take place in the next time both in the Euro-discussion and in the voting behaviour of the people. The relatively linear and one-dimensional schemes of decision of the people will be replaced by multidimensional voting strategies, which outcomes will be harder to be predicted. In Estonia, the positive example of Ireland is well-known and very often the maintenance of Ireland's cultural identity and its further development is used as an argument, which could help working out a future perspective of Estonians in the EU and a new collective identity of the Estonian people. It is interesting that EU-experiences of neighbours – Finland and Sweden – are used less.

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The comparison of the findings gained by numerous sociologists shows that as well as interest to the EU and the information on the EU have improved during 2000-2001. The data in Table 1 confirm, that in 2002 a sudden positive change in the opinion of the Estonian population has taken place.

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Table 1. If a referendum concerning the accession of Estonia to the EU would be held tomorrow, how would you vote? (%)

I would vote ...	Nov 1995	April 1996	Nov 1996	Apr 1997	Nov 1998	May 2000	Oct 2001	June 2002
<i>In favour</i>	44	47	29	32	27	34	38	43
<i>Against</i>	14	24	17	23	14	26	27	31
<i>I would not vote</i>	–	19	–	13	13	8	21	12
<i>Undecided</i>	32	19	54	32	46	26	14	14

Soucre: Saar-Poll and AS Turu-uuringud ES Database in <http://www.elis.ee>, Applicant Countries Eurobarometer 2001 (Oct/ Dec. 2002), Results Summary, 5.

Because of the lack of concrete information on the economy, the social policy system, the labour market system etc. of the EU there are still large parts of the population (especially among pensioners) who cannot decide on their vote and cannot define a position towards the EU.

### **3. Contradictions in the Estonian EU Integration Process**

The public support to EU integration has been one in constant flux in recent years as the data of public opinion polls in Table 1 indicate. To grasp the inherent logic of the database, it would be interesting to compare it with the results of similar polls carried out in other EU accession countries.

It would also be necessary to analyse the results of *Eurobarometer 2001* on Estonia next to the other EU applicant countries (*Applicant Countries EUROBAROMETER 2001* [http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion)).

Based on the findings of several comparative studies, it has been pointed out that the considerably low level of knowledge on European Union cannot be explained by the lack of interest or poor education of people but has rather been caused by broader social and socio-political context.

The relationship between respondent's perception of his/her economic well-being on the one hand positive attitude towards EU and on the other



hand has been established. People with higher level of subjective well-being and good standard of living are strongly supportive with respect to the EU integration, the only segment to vote for the EU membership in EU referendum.

Table 2. Predict the probable EU referendum behaviour in the neighbouring Latvia and Lithuania and in other applicant countries (October 2001).

	<i>I would vote for...</i>	<i>I would vote against or would not vote</i>	<i>Undecided</i>
Romania	85	10	5
Bulgaria	80	10	9
Hungary	70	23	7
Slovakia	66	26	8
Slovenia	56	31	13
Czech Rep.	54	33	13
Poland	54	37	9
Lithuania	50	35	15
Latvia	46	41	13
Estonia	38	48	14

Source: *Applicant Countries EUROBAROMETER 2001*  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion), p 5.

Results of a research carried out by Estonian marketing research firm ES Turu-uuringute AS in June 2002 say that a person who would say „yes“ to EU membership if the referendum was held, belongs rather to a segment of people who are well off (with above Estonian average income), hold higher education diploma and reside in Tallinn.

The opinions given with regard to EU integration are associated with Estonian fast and positive economic development and values reflecting subjective wellbeing. The social indicators and positive outcome of referendum are significantly related as demonstrated on [Graph 1](#).

However, a considerable number of people in Estonia are either doubtful or strictly opposing the EU membership. To illustrate, according to the aforementioned study designed in 2002, 43% of the eligible electorate were either strongly supportive or supportive of EU integration, with 16% probably opposing and 15% strictly opposing. In addition, 12% would not participate in the referendum and 14% could not say how they were going to vote if the referendum were held. **That is, the probable proportion between „yes“, „no“ and „don't know“ answers could be 43:43:14.**

Those people who are against the EU integration are in fact not against EU but express with it their opinions about several socio-economic processes in Estonia and/or their disappointment over personal economic hardship. Furthermore, the judgements given to economic development and wellbeing are closely related to judgements on democratic process and trust in Estonian national institutions. The issue of trust or mistrust into the top national institutions (Riigikogu, Government, President) has direct relation to the broader political judgement to become indicative in satisfaction with democratic process in Estonia. Also, the majority of respondents are either opposing or doubtful, but as the correlations are strong, it reveals that the opinions of both – supporters and those doubtful have been clearly settled on.

***Why is the current situation complicated given that a year has been left to the referendum (probably held in September 2003)?***

**First, ideological reasons can be mentioned.** The striving of Estonia to become EU member and EU membership itself will significantly change the climate apparent in socio-economic relationships, and also people's attitudes towards nationality, the identity of a small modern nation state in the European Union.

Estonia's integration into the EU is a unique process as far as the aspect of national consciousness is concerned. It is „a great leap into the unknown“ for a small state like Estonia after only 10 years of regaining independence. People have started to value instead of historically common for Estonians collective national values more those values, which are more reflective of one's personal well-being in the fear of the possible upcoming rapid changes in economy.

People's insecurity in the sphere of labour, changing employment relations and social conditions in the overall state of flux in Estonia do not contribute to stable social and professional identity formation at present. Therefore, even though the motivation to work and professional skills have significantly improved in Estonia over the last ten years, the rapid fall in the numbers of work places in previous years have forced people to switch their field of profession, to learn new professions, perhaps unknown in Estonia ten years ago. Accordingly, personal sense of insecurity has gone up. And yet, stability in employment is one of the factors of foremost importance that helps to secure national stability, strong sense of social identity and loyal citizenry.

**Secondly, organizational reasons can be brought out.** The insufficient readiness to the referendum indicates gaps in information policy of state institutions while explaining their pre integration activities to the public. The time when uncomplicated information presentation could be used to convince the Estonian electorate is over by now. Studies have indicated that the information policy has not been sufficiently rational and effective, consequently reducing the chance of positive referendum outcome.

***Why has the information policy failed keeping the current requirements in mind?***

It can be pointed out that even though a lot has been done in order to provide people with information on EU, it is not sufficient to guarantee the success of the 2003 referendum. Specifically, it is easier to predict, which segments of the population probably support EU (at the moment of referendum) and which oppose. Harder is to answer the question why a big fraction of the population remains neutral.

Estonia must acquire image of a future member state of EU whose economy is stable and predictable in order to gain its national interests in the EU. The current economic development of Estonia is satisfactory. Data gathering and analysis proving Estonia's economic and social convergence with European Union current members is an important task next to other tasks in the pre-referendum situation in order the result turned to be positive.

For example, quite probably EU membership will enhance economic growth but the rate of unemployment will stay around 10% under the

prognosis of income growth up to 11000 crones per month. In other words, two parallel processes are co-happening simultaneously which means heavy competition on labour market for the well-paid jobs. As a result, a considerable proportion of the population will be marginalized and chronically unemployed receiving social benefits. It can be maintained that personal marginalisation and non-existent employment and social motivation has pushed several big social groups into situation where they are not able to define broader social processes in Estonia, including integration with European Union as a strategic choice.

#### **4. Conclusions**

1. Estonia's integration into the European Union has been dealt by the representatives of Estonian elite mainly as a political process.
2. At the same time, an intensified battle with Europe concerning enlargement policy could be one of the most important mechanisms in initiating a real discussion in the society. Very often introducing debates replace the exchange of ideas of the political groups and also those directly concerning the interests of the people.
3. Because of the lack of concrete information on the economy, the social policy system, the labour market system etc. of the European Union there are still large parts of the population (especially people of 50 years, pre-pensioners and pensioners) who cannot decide on their vote and cannot define a position towards the European Union. This will be a serious resistance to carry out successful referendum.
4. Estonia's joining the European Union means a radical change for its people who have been "awarded" with re-sovereignty only during a last decade. The decision to make in a referendum is therefore probably more difficult than for those nations who have been sovereign for centuries. Therefore, it is very important, how this joining will take place.

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