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The impact of Estonia's established relations with the EU on the success of its post-communist transition

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Abstract

This paper investigates Estonia's post-communist transition and the successes and challenges of its accession and integration into EU. Specifically, it examines the tumultuous history between Estonia and Russia over the course of the last century and how this affected Estonian independence in the 1990s and the path to EU accession. Due to historical and ethnic factors, Estonians had always been opposed to Russification. This factor, coupled with Estonia's consolidated liberal democracy and working market economy, has led the country's accession to the EU to be one of the most successful examples of an effective post-communist transition. EU accession has benefitted Estonia in terms of protection against the ever-lingering threat of Russia, but such benefits have not come without a cost. Estonia has struggled with treatment of minorities and refugees, while its support for EU integration has been tested by the rise of populism both within and beyond its borders.

Key words: Estonia, Estonian Independence, EU accession, EU-Estonian Relations, European Union, Post-Communist Transition

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, for the first time in 50 years, Estonia was an independent and democratic country once more. Despite its small population and former heavy reliance on Russia, Estonia has been considered by many to be a great example of post-communism transition success, to the extent of being one of the first formerly Soviet countries to be at the negotiating table with NATO and the EU, before its eventual EU accession in 2004. EU-Estonian relations have remained positive, with Estonians always having been 'closer to Europe' in their mindsets than other Eastern European countries. This essay is structured as follows. First, a glimpse into Estonia's modern history with Russia and its post-communism transition period is provided. Next, the established relationship between Estonia and the EU after Estonia's 2004 accession is discussed. Finally, the current relationship between Estonia and the EU and final thoughts about the future of EU-Estonian relations will be considered based on the evidence presented. This shall be followed by a brief conclusion.

The post-communist transition

There were doubts that Estonia could stand up on its own two feet after the fall of the USSR in 1991. Historically, Estonia had only been independent between 1918 and 1940, and thus its democratic experience was short-lived. This fact further decreased its ‘assumed potential,’ especially when Central European states were considered (Bennich-Björkman, 2007). For Baltic people, WWI began as a Russian-German conflict but ended as a war of independence. Following the fall of the tsarist regime in Russia in 1917, Estonian demands for autonomy grew, leading to a mass demonstration of 40,000 Estonians in Petrograd. For Estonia, the main conflict was an external defensive war with Russia known as the ‘war of freedom’ in Estonian historiography (Taagepera, 2018). On 31 December 1919, there was an armistice between Estonia and Russia and by February 1920, the Tartu Peace Treaty was signed, which saw Estonia be granted 1500km of formerly Russian-occupied land and the creation of mutual trade relations. By 1920, Estonia was fully independent with a parliamentary republic based on a sense of community of language as 88% of the population spoke fluent Estonian (Taagepera, 2018). During this brief period of independence, Russians made up 8% of the population. Despite this number being low and the presence of the Tartu Peace Treaty, the Estonian government’s main enemy was public expectation that Estonia could not resist Russia. This sentiment extended up to and throughout the 1990s, as due to its economy being tightly connected to Russia’s, analysts predicted a gloomy post-authoritarian future for Estonia (Ruutsoo, 2002), and the fall of the Soviet empire as potentially fatal for all Baltic states (Bennich-Björkman, 2007). Despite such doubts, Estonia’s was one of the easier and more successful post-communist transitions (Titma, Tuma and Silver, 1998; Norkus, 2007), marked by rapid de-Sovietisation, democratisation, economic liberalisation, and the rise of consumerism and Internet access (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Reinsalu, 2009). According to Reinsalu and Winsvold (2008), ICT development went hand in hand with civic participation as the Internet strongly influenced e-participation and subsequently democracy, thus becoming much more integrated into the concept of democracy and political participation in Estonia. This rise in ICT development and accessibility began in the late 1990s, with Estonia ‘taking off’ in terms of the number of computers owned, while its Baltic neighbours Latvia and Lithuania were essentially ‘left behind’ (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Reinsalu, 2009). Vogt (2008) summarises by saying that this ‘technological utopia’ was a driving factor for widespread social and political change in Estonia, as people wanted to have the same possibilities as those in Western Europe as soon as they could. Because of these factors, Estonia has been hailed as a ‘shining star’ from the Baltics (Hansen and Sorsa, 1994).

Scholars suggest that Estonians had always been anti-traditionalist and strongly attached to capitalist values (Mattusch, 1997), with Soviet institutions being viewed as ‘alien’ as opposed to authentic (Titma, Tuma and Silver, 1998). According to Arias-King (2003), radical de-Sovietisation was crucial for Estonia’s success as a newly independent nation state, which was achieved in part by the youth, courage, and low level of administrative competence on the part of the leaders implementing reform – something which often helped as opposed to hindered the reformation process after the collapse of the USSR. According to Norkus (2007) and Grennes (1997), Estonia’s geographical and linguistic proximity to Finland also helped Estonians avoid Russification, as citizens could watch Finnish television during the Soviet era, and thus not be as isolated from Western influence to the same extent as other ex-Soviet countries. In Soviet times, work units were segregated and organised on the basis of

language, which helped Estonians to avoid Russification, as those who spoke Estonian were all grouped together (Titma, Tuma and Silver, 1998). Norkus (2007) adds that this geographical proximity to Finland did not offer an important economic advantage for Estonia, as the Finnish economy was facing a deep recession of its own in the early 1990s. Overall, Estonians had better access to Western ideas and practices (Grennes, 1997), but it is important to consider the limitations of Western influence, as it only helped in so far as enhancing the vitality of Estonia's own cultural traditions, thus slowing its erosion under the communist regime (Norkus, 2007).

Transition into the EU

The success of a country's post-communist transition is defined by having a consolidated liberal democracy and working market economy (Norkus, 2007). Today, all three Baltic states are considered successful, but in the first few years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Estonia was leagues ahead of its neighbours – a fact acknowledged by the EU in 1997, as Estonia was invited to the negotiating table two years before Latvia and Lithuania. According to scholars, the transition in Estonia can be broken down into five distinct stages ranging from 1987 to 2005+ (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2009). These were: The 'Singing Revolution' of 1987 to 1991, radical reforms from 1991 to 1994, economic stabilisation and the beginning of EU and NATO integration talks from 1995 to 1998, preparations for EU accession from 1999 to 2004, and finally identity crises and new challenges following accession (2005+). To summarise, the 'Singing Revolution' was a social movement consisting of civic participation in rallies and debates about the future of Estonia as an independent state, mobilising up to 70% of the Estonian population (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2009). This movement was known as the 'Singing' Revolution because Estonians gathered in their thousands to sing banned patriotic songs (in Estonian, of course) and wave the Estonian flag instead of the Soviet one, showing that the people strongly disagreed with and opposed the communist regime imposed upon them.

A frontrunner of *perestroika*, Estonia was granted independence in August 1991 after a referendum with 77.83% of voters voting in favour (Vorotnikov, 2016). Shortly after the collapse of the USSR, Estonia held two presidential and three parliamentary elections. Seven governments were formed and a multiparty system had developed. From 1991 to 1993, Estonia made progress towards joining the Council of Europe, which was seen as the first step into EU integration. In 1994, joining the EU was Estonia's main goal (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengefeldt and Reinsalu, 2009), as a country that had 'made a clear break with the previous regime' by reaching high levels of economic stability and political freedom (Melo, Denizer and Gelb, 1996). According to Grennes (1997), in all transition economies, the outcomes of reform tend to favour the more radical reformers. Therefore, as Estonia was the most liberal and radical of the Baltic states, its real income increased faster than that of its neighbours after real income fell in all three countries following independence. Inflation rates dropped from 55.3% in 1993 to 29% in 1995 (Grennes, 1997), and Estonia was the first Baltic state to sue its own currency (the kroon) in place of the ruble. In 1995, Estonia experienced positive GDP growth – the first formerly Soviet state to do so, and by 1996, only 16% of property was owned by the state (64% by private owners and 20% by foreign investors). At that time, Estonia was the only formerly Soviet country to do the majority of its trade with countries not also part of the formerly communist Eastern Europe (Titma, Tuma and Silver, 1998). Despite all Baltic states inheriting serious problems from the Soviet command economy, Estonia was fortunate in that it did not inherit as

much heavy inefficient industries as its neighbours (Grennes, 1997). By 1997, Estonia was among the ‘first wave’ countries that were invited to the EU integration negotiating table. For Baltic states, the EU was seen primarily as a guarantor of economic stability and financial assistance, with Estonia being granted 8.56 billion euros in aid upon its accession (Vorotnikov, 2016). In September 2003, there was an EU membership referendum, with over two-thirds of Estonians voting in favour. The subsequent 2004 eastern expansion was seen as a ‘return to Europe’ (Boeri, 2002; Kuus, 2004; Moisis, 2007; Vorotnikov, 2016) for formerly communist countries to be welcomed into the EU. According to Ehin and Kasekamp (2005) and Mihkelson (2003), Baltic accession was understood as having the potential to restructure the three states’ rocky relationship with their neighbour Russia, and thus in the Baltics, the hope was that this new bond between the EU and Baltic states would force Russia to let go of its post-imperial demeanours and treat the Baltic states as ‘normal’ countries, not as part of its ‘near abroad’ sphere of influence.

Thus, Estonia, after announcing itself as an independent country to the world in the 1990s and demonstrating that it was just as ‘normal’ as others, wanted to be seen as a ‘top student’ of the EU (Papp-Váry, 2008). The Lisbon Treaty of 2007 was quickly ratified in Estonia (in 2008), as Estonia was ‘eager’ to demonstrate its commitment to integration (Kasekamp, 2013). Under this treaty, the EU would ‘speak with one voice’ in external relations, which, to Estonia, meant that it would no longer be alone in dealing with the threat of Russia. This is highlighted in the ‘Bronze Soldier’ saga of April and May 2007, which saw the Estonian embassy in Moscow blockaded and ambassador attacked after a Soviet war memorial was relocated in Tallinn, causing riots by ethnic Russians. Russia deliberately turned it into an international crisis, to which the EU responded by showing solidarity with Estonia, with then European Commission President José Manuel Barroso at the EU-Russia Conference of May 2007 stating that: “an Estonian problem is a European problem as well” (Kasekamp and Veebel, 2007: 19). This was the first time that the EU had publicly voiced its solidarity against Russian pressure on new Member States – something that undoubtedly strengthened Estonian faith in the EU (Kasekamp, 2013). For all three Baltic states, the common negative ‘other’ was Russia, and primary positive ‘other’ the EU (Pavlovaite, 2003; Lehti, 2006; Miniotaite, 2003), and so they strove to seek identification with the EU while resisting the influence of Russia. To uphold this faith in the EU, Estonia joined the European single currency on 1 January 2011, with then Prime Minister Andrus Ansip claiming that joining the eurozone was a ‘matter of security’ for his country (Kasekamp, 2013).

EU accession has also led to a rapid expansion of foreign policy. For example, the Middle East’s sudden relevance to Estonia as a Member States led to the opening of Estonian embassies in both Egypt and Israel. Estonia is one of the few European Allies that actively meets NATO’s target of 2% of GDP spent on military expenditure per year – something which shows Estonia’s strong commitment to NATO and maintaining a close relationship with the US (Kasekamp, 2013). Estonia held presidency of the Council of the EU from July to December 2017, which EU officials and diplomats of other Member States hailed as a ‘very well-managed exercise’ (Raik *et al.*, 2019). In general, Estonia is seen by experts as a ‘frontrunner’ in many fields due to its conscientious adherence to EU rules (Kasekamp, 2013).

Challenges of integration

However, the relationship between Estonia and the EU has not always been smooth-sailing and without any clash in ideals. There has always been a reluctant approach to naturalising ethnic Russians ('non-Estonians' who make up 35% of the population) as citizens, especially those who moved to Estonia during Soviet occupation. There was an overwhelming desire for 'historical justice' after half a century of forced Russification, and a subsequent 'deepening moral vacuum' in the country (Lauristin and Vilahemm, 2009). Lauristin and Vilahemm (2009) also suggest that the majority of Estonians were strongly opposed to relaxing citizenship regulations encouraged by Western experts, however, the influence of the international community did help to prevent the implementation of extreme proposals including 'Soviet occupants' be denied social guarantees. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, there was pressure from the EU for Estonia to liberalise its language and citizenship laws, with concerns of human rights violations taking place against ethnic Russians. Thus, the Council of Europe in 1993 and OSCE from 1995 to 1997 monitored Estonia for such abuses, but found no evidence (Feldman, 2001). If nothing else, the EU was mistrustful towards Estonia in this regard before accession. It was not only the EU that had doubts about Estonia before its accession, but also Estonians themselves. Despite a strong consensus among politicians, Estonians were among the most EU-sceptical populations in all Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), at 67% in favour of membership in 2003 (Mikkel and Kasekamp, 2008). They were reluctant about joining another Union after gaining independence from the USSR. After accession, popular support grew after Estonia's economic revival, reaching the highest levels in all of the EU by 2007 (Kasekamp, 2013), as people realised that the EU was more than a single market and had both political and security-based value for Estonia, especially when it comes to keeping the threat of Russia at bay. According to Lauristin (2007), political competition in Estonia draws not a line between left and right, but instead between national/reform policies and Soviet/anti-reform policies (which also include anti-EU or anti-Westernisation sentiments). However, Estonians had a problem with the EU's answer to the refugee crisis of 2015 and 42% were strongly opposed to meeting the quota imposed on Estonia by the European Commission (Veebel and Markus, 2015). Estonia has had a conservative stance on the relocation of refugees in its national refugee policy for the past two decades, and thus was opposed to the 'burden-sharing' among all EU Member States (Veebel, 2015). Estonians wanted to prioritise helping vulnerable permanent citizens before accepting outsiders, as they "don't understand why (they) need to help Greece while there is enough poverty in Estonia already" (Human Rights Centre, 2015: 1).

The past five years have also presented challenges to the EU-Estonian relationship, namely the 2016 election of President Trump and the rise of populism across the EU, including in Estonia itself. According to Raik and Rikmann (2021), the rise of 'illiberal populism' in other Western countries – namely the USA – put pressure on the core liberal tenets of Estonian foreign policy. For example, Trump's presidency made actively participating in CSDP missions while maintaining a strong bilateral relationship with the USA difficult for Estonia, with his hostile attitude towards the EU being unprecedented in American history (Raik and Rikmann, 2021). There was pressure on CEE countries to 'de-Europeanise' their policies, with Trump favouring those countries with similar ideologies to his own, such as Poland and Hungary. Because of NATO, the USA is 'the indispensable security ally' (Raik and Rikmann, 2021) for Estonia, which led to confusion and uncertainty about which way Estonia

would lean in the divide between European unity and transatlantic cooperation, especially with the EKRE (Conservative People's Party of Estonia) being part of the ruling coalition government in Estonia from 2019 to 2021, who expressed sympathy towards Trump, whom they view as a role model and source of inspiration for Estonia. Rapidly increasing in popularity between 2014 and 2016, EKRE's policies consisted of an anti-Russian stance, Euroscepticism, promotion of family values and anti-refugee discourse, and fear of the EU becoming a 'super state' that destroys nation states (Kasekamp, Madisson and Wierenga, 2019). They also praised Viktor Orbán's Hungary for defending national sovereignty in the EU and stopping migration (Raik and Rikmann, 2021). Because of EKRE's strong support for Trump, there were conflicting messages from the Estonian government regarding the EU and other important international concerns like migration and climate change, which led to confusion and uncertainty about Estonia's stance on the EU and its transatlantic ties. However, despite this threat of populism taking Estonia in the direction of other CEE EU Member States like Poland and Hungary, Estonian policies did not change significantly, with Estonia continuing its efforts to maintain strong transatlantic ties while also committing to European integration (Raik and Rikmann, 2021). EKRE's popularity in Estonia was low, and they were only in power for less than two years, so no significant or irreversible damage to EU relations was done.

The future of EU-Estonian relations

The future is looking bright for EU-Estonian relations once more in 2021 and 2022. First, Estonia was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council from 2020 to 2021. Estonia has always been a strong supporter of EU enlargement, having benefitted enormously from its own 2004 accession, and often states that enlargement is the most successful EU foreign policy, genuinely believing that further enlargement (into the Balkans and Turkey, for example) will also be beneficial for the EU, not to mention those countries themselves (Kasekamp, 2013). In January 2021, Estonian de-Europeanisation was halted due to two important events: The election of President Biden in the USA, and the collapse of the Estonian government, which has seen EKRE move to the opposition. The election of President Biden means the end of the United States' recent hostile attitudes towards the EU and integration developed under President Trump, and should lead to stronger transatlantic cooperation, which, coupled with Estonia's newly elected government, should in turn strengthen Estonia's role and faith in the EU. Under EKRE, Estonia's reputation as a constructive EU Member State and reliable partner was at risk due to EKRE's volatile approach to the EU, which also threatened to increase the difficulty of developing a united, effective foreign policy on the EU level – going against Estonia's history of encouraging and advocating for building a stronger EU foreign policy (Raik and Rikmann, 2021). Raik and Rikmann (2021), add that mutually reinforcing domestic and external pressures towards foreign policy de-Europeanisation has only retreated (but not disappeared), and that should the right-wing regain influence and become more established to lead again with a bigger following in the future, the outcome will be more detrimental to the EU and European integration as a whole.

The furtherance of positive and conflict-free relations between Estonia and the EU depends on three things: the governments of Estonia and the USA's stances on the EU as an institution, the continued stability of the eurozone (any instabilities would lead to the endangering of Estonian economic security), and NATO's presence in the Baltics. As Estonia relies on the USA and NATO, a positive American perspective on the EU

strengthens transatlantic ties significantly, and thus plays a role in Estonian feelings towards the EU. Under Biden, this positive perspective should be renewed and reinforced, thus also reinforcing NATO's interest in the area. However, Wrangé and Bengtsson (2019) argue that Estonia is regarded as irrelevant to NATO (being a secondary consumer not a provider) but its location is of high strategic significance, and so if NATO were to turn its attention elsewhere, Estonia would be left extremely vulnerable to Russia, as Russia has already tested the boundaries of Estonia's Western allies in its expansion into Georgia and Ukraine. The reluctance of Estonia's allies to intervene in Russia's movements means that Estonia, if left unprotected, might very well be the next target, as a way into Scandinavia and the EU itself. However, based on the history of Estonia's positive post-communist transition and subsequent 'exemplary behaviour' during and after its 2004 EU accession, Estonia is here to stay as an ally and member of the EU.

Conclusion

Estonia's has been one of the more successful post-communist transitions, with EU accession having been a top priority since the 1990s. Initially there were doubts about Estonia's survival as an independent country after its heavy reliance on Russia and Russia's economy, but with successes in de-Sovietisation, economic liberalisation, and democracy, the world was pleasantly surprised with Estonia's ability to stand on its own two feet with the support and security backing of NATO and the EU. Estonia was the first ex-communist CEE state to have positive GDP growth and trade with non-CEE countries. Despite these successes, there have been issues within Estonia with ethnic minorities, public opinion about the EU, and the rise of populism, which went hand in hand with the 2016 election of President Trump. However, the future is looking bright with the 2021 election of President Biden and dissolution of the right-wing anti-EU populist government in Estonia. This bright future depends on some external factors, including the stability of the eurozone, continued support from NATO, and the government of the USA. Estonia continues to be a 'faithful ally' to NATO and the EU (Wrangé and Bengtsson, 2019) and is likely to remain that way in the foreseeable future should all factors remain as they are in 2021 and early 2022.

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