

A Double-Edged Sword

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Popular support in Estonia for accession to the European Union has been among the lowest of the applicant states, despite intense government-driven information campaigns. Much has been written in Estonia about this ambivalence, which pollsters typically explain as a result public ignorance.

The number of Estonians who would vote "yes" to EU membership in a referendum remained below 50 percent throughout most of the last five years, and sometimes dropped as low as 25 percent. Numbers against, on the other hand, briefly exceeded 50 percent in 2001, having ranged from the high 20s to the high 40s since the late 1990s. [1] The number of undecided has fluctuated widely, between one-tenth and one-half of potential voters. Yet despite intense government-driven information campaigns, Euroscepticism has not diminished.

Lukewarm support for accession has frequently been put down to fear on the part of Estonians of another external "union," given their unhappy experience with the Soviets. [2] But why would Estonian voters, who have had little direct experience with EU institutions, associate the European Union with the Soviet one? Perhaps the reasons for such ambivalence can be traced to the fraught notion of Estonian national identity. The rhetoric of both pro- and anti-EU camps in this Baltic country relies less on economic analysis than on existential claims concerning the very survival of the Estonian nation and state. Those in favour say membership will guarantee the continuity of the Estonian national identity. Those against allege that EU accession could erode that same identity. This apparent contradiction demands closer examination of the way in which the notion itself is used in arguments about Estonia's efforts to join the EU.

First, the pros. Those who argue that joining the EU is a prerequisite for the continuation of the Estonian identity, nation, and state tend to draw on Samuel Huntington's thesis of a clash of civilizations. In such arguments, Estonia is conceived of as a Western nation bordering on an Orthodox civilization to the east. Membership in the EU is construed as Estonia's return to its cultural home and a counterweight to the proximity of the Orthodox world. In 1999, then-Prime Minister Mart Laar proclaimed that, for Estonia, Europe is "not a market but a civilization". [3] Estonia's foreign and domestic policy choices are presented in binary terms imbued with an impending threat: Estonia will either integrate swiftly into the EU (and NATO) or revert to the Russian "sphere of influence." Estonia's options are as simple as a "mathematical equation," said then-President Lennart Meri in 1999, "on one side Europe, on the other Russia." "We are on the border," he warned, "and therefore only a small push is needed to make us fall over to one side or rise to the other." [4] The perception of a Russian threat is indeed widespread. In January 2000, 80 percent of ethnic Estonians considered Russia to be a threat to Estonia's independence. [5] Commenting on the low popular support for EU membership in early 2001, the chairman of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee noted that those who do not support EU accession simply have not looked at the map. [6] Perhaps ironically, the notion of a Russian threat actually appears to be a precondition for Estonia's pursuit of EU membership--its disappearance would undermine, if not actually dissolve, enthusiasm for the EU.

This is not to imply that Estonians in general fear that Russia will invade their country; it is simply to note the use made of the notion of a Russian threat in politics. The emphasis on a cultural schism between Estonia and Russia frames the threat to Estonian national identity not in political or military terms, but as a nebulous, fundamental divergence in values. For instance, in a 1994 address on Independence Day, President Meri claimed that Estonia's eastern border

has been for "centuries the eastern border of the European legal system, and will so remain (...) our border is the border of European values." [7]

The Eurosceptic Response

As for the Eurosceptics, their arguments focus on the high number of Russian-speaking Estonian residents, who make up approximately 35 percent of the total population. Constructed in terms of identity and values, the Russian threat is here perceived as much internally as externally, stemming not only from what Russia and Estonia do as states, but also from who Estonians and Russians are within Estonia itself. It appears therefore logical to question whether Russian-speakers are "Estonian-minded" or "loyal" to Estonia, and this theme is prominent both in the Estonian media and in academia. A high-profile 1997 study of the political attitudes of non-Estonians in Estonia, produced by the Tartu University Market Research Team, captures the tone, claiming that non-Estonians "do not consider Russia a potential threat. [Instead they] accept and consider normal Russia's potential malevolent actions against Estonia." [8]

Within the framework of an impending cultural threat, many Estonians view control over the issues of citizenship, minority rights, and the use of the official language (Estonian) as crucial for the security of the Estonian national identity. However, the European Commission--as well as other European institutions, such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and various member states--has chosen to focus on precisely these issues as part of the mandatory "political criteria" for accession. EU recommendations to accelerate the "integration" of Estonia's sizable Russian-speaking population into the wider society are selectively framed within Estonia, as "the erosion of the fundamentals of the nation state". [9] "A citizen of an integrated Europe," according to one prominent commentator, "would have given up her national identity and would in that sense resemble an American or a Soviet." [10]

EU membership is thus viewed as a potential threat to Estonia's sovereignty over matters of citizenship, language, and minority rights. The EU sanctions against Austria after Joerg Haider's far-right Freedom Party entered the government in 2000 were interpreted in Estonia as proof of the unduly restricted sovereignty of member states over matters of national identity. It is not simply that EU institutions or policies are construed by Eurosceptics as potentially dangerous to Estonia. Rather, critics allege that Russia--aware that Estonia eagerly follows recommendations from the West, has pressured Estonia through western institutions such as the EU and the OSCE. In such arguments, the European Union is construed as a Trojan horse spearheading the Russian threat; concessions to the EU are read as *ipso facto* concessions to Russia. The same nationalist politicians who most urgently warn against the Russian threat are also the most adamant critics of what they perceive as inappropriate foreign (read EU) interference in Estonia's domestic affairs.

Taken together, the twin oppositions of a European Estonia versus a non-European Russia and the notion of an internal versus an external threat function as a double-edged sword in Estonia's relations with the EU. On the one hand, EU membership is framed as a precondition for security against Russia. On the other, the same principles are invoked to argue that, by requiring further naturalization of "civilizationally alien" non-Estonians, EU accession constitutes a potential threat to Estonian culture and identity. Despite their apparent differences, the premise is precisely the same--the same threat that necessitates EU membership also cautions against membership.

Estonian Euroscepticism can thus be viewed not simply as a fixed conviction but as a flexible set of arguments, which have been selectively deployed in political debates. It is less an example of irrational fear, ignorance, or paranoia than a logical consequence of the same sense



of existential threat to Estonian identity that underpins pro-EU rhetoric. In that sense, for those wishing to promote accession and gain greater support for it among Estonians, it would be perhaps more productive to alter the very premise of the argument. Rather than focusing on the notion of a "Russian threat," it might be more effective to emphasize issues more central to the European project, such as individual welfare and quality of life.

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Footnotes

[1] For summaries of survey data, see Merje Kuus, 2002, "European Integration in Identity Narratives in Estonia: A Quest for Security", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 39 no. 1, pp. 91-108; Toomas Mattson, 2001, "Andres Tarand: Eesti tee viib Venesse või Euroopasse", *Postimees*, 28 March.

[2] See Erkki Bahovski, 2000, "Baltlased Eli kandidaatriikidest sceptilismad", *Eesti Päevaleht*, 8 November.

[3] *Lecture by Mr. Mart Laar, Prime Minister of Estonia at the French Institute of International Affairs in Paris, 10 April 2000.* Tallinn: Office of the Prime Minister, 2000.

[4] *Eesti Päevaleht*, 1999, "Lennart Meri: Valik on Euroopa ja Venemaa vahel", interview with *Eesti Päevaleht*, 6 March. Tallinn: Office of the President.

[5] Antti Oolo, 2000, "Venemaa-hirm tuleneb ajaloost", *Eesti Päevaleht*, March 20.

[6] Toomas Mattson, 2001, "Andres Tarand: Eesti tee viib Venesse või Euroopasse", *Postimees*, 28 March.

[7] Quoted in Mikko Lagerspetz, 1999, "The Cross of the Virgin Mary's Land: A Study in the Construction of Estonia's Return to Europe", *Finnish Review of Eastern European Studies* 3-4: 17-28; p. 19.

[8] Tartu University Market Research Team, 1997, *Estonia's Experiment - The Possibilities to Integrate Non-Citizens into the Estonian Society*. Tallinn: Open Estonia Foundation. Chapter 6, p.3.

[9] Sirje Endre and Mart Laar, 1997, "Valitsus kõigutab rahvusriigi alustalasid", *Eesti Päevaleht*, 12 December.

[10] Andres Langemets, 2000, "Integratsioonijutt kui importkaup", *Eesti Päevaleht*, 31 March.