

Stemmen in Estland over Europa

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Het lijkt erop dat de Europese Unie vooral een eliteproject is waarvoor de burgers getuige de lage opkomst en de eurosceptische geluiden nog niet warm lopen. De Europese Unie wordt vaak als een uitdijend bureaucratisch apparaat neergezet dat ver van de gemiddelde burgers af staat en democratische legitimatie mist. Politici zijn er onvoldoende in geslaagd kiezers met pro-Europese argumenten te overtuigen.

Mari-Ann Kelam, voormalig parlementslid van de Pro-Patria Union in Estland gaat in op de lage opkomst bij de Europese verkiezingen en schetst de weg van Estland naar de herwonnen onafhankelijkheid en reïntegratie in Europa. In een referendum dat op 14 september 2003 gehouden werd, stemde nog tweederde van de kiezers vóór toetreding tot de EU en was de opkomst ruim zestig procent. Op 13 juni daarentegen toen men voor het eerst zes delegatieleden voor een Europees parlement kon kiezen, was het enthousiasme getemperd en de opkomst slechts 26 procent. Er kunnen verschillende verklaringen voor dit contrast gegeven worden. De belangrijkste verklaring is volgens haar dat de burgers (in tegenstelling tot bij het referendum over de toetreding) nu niet het gevoel hadden dat hun stem enig verschil zou kunnen uitmaken.

Following the Second World War, European integration and the creation of what became the European Union were motivated by the Cold War and the need to end conflict among western allies. But as the very idea of war breaking out among any of the member states has become very nearly unimaginable, this concept of the EU as a kind of preventative measure against the recurrence of the worst-case scenarios of European history has also faded. As a result, the EU and its institutions are now often criticized for being a meddling and expanding bureaucracy, remote from the average person and deficient in democracy.

The vision and the hope for progressively deeper cooperation among member states to institutionalize a new political reality and enhance the traditional values which evolved out of European enlightenment seems to be held mostly by those directly involved in some aspect of the EU. The politicians have not convinced the voters that Europe can or should speak with one voice in areas such as foreign policy. Although deeper cooperation among nations in Europe should theoretically help improve areas which have a direct impact on the quality of life of individuals (food safety, environmental issues, transportation, education,



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communication, health issues and aging populations, the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking) large numbers of European citizens seem to be at best indifferent to what is often derided as 'Brussels'. While economic and cultural ties have practical and tangible value, many Europeans do not see the need for a European public prosecutor or foreign minister. As the clamor about the draft constitution brings more public demands for referendums, it sometimes seems as if only the politicians and bureaucrats are really in favor of deepening European integration. And, whether due to ineffective communication or arrogance, they are not convincing the voters with good pro-European arguments. Veiled and outright anti-Americanism may be fashionable, but it is a poor long-term base for building European unity and enhancing European identity.

The EU now is often portrayed as an evermore powerful and highly centralized super state.

The latest trend in several nations appears to be growing disaffection, even opposition to the EU that, in great contrast to the original vision of Robert Schuman and the other founding fathers, now is often portrayed as an evermore powerful and highly centralized super state. This trend is reflected in reduced voter support for the mainstream political parties and further exacerbated by a dangerous trend of growing popularity for fringe and even lunatic parties. And this may become a problem for Estonia, a small European nation that regained its sovereignty peacefully by using the precepts of international law with the precise aim of re-joining Europe.

After fifty years of brutal foreign totalitarian occupation, Estonia re-established its independence as a parliamentary democracy in 1991, drafting a new constitution, adopting a new currency, electing a parliament and reform-minded government - all within a few months. Ending the military occupation took longer - the last former Red Army troops did not leave until September 1994.

Rule of law and international law were the keys to Estonian success. Citing the Tartu Peace Treaty signed between Soviet Russia and Estonia on February 2, 1920, and the fact that, *de jure*, most western nations had never recognized the USSR's annexation of Estonia, leaders of the independence movement based their demands and activities on the legal continuity of the Republic of Estonia as well as the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and similar international documents.

More active support for Estonia and the other Baltic states began to develop in the United States and elsewhere in the 1980's. President Ronald Reagan set the goal of bringing down the Soviet Union and the communist system. By an overwhelming majority, even the European Parliament passed a resolution in 1983 "On the situation in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania" calling for the restoration of self-determination for the Baltic States. The Soviets never completely eliminated

resistance in Estonia – brave partisans fought for years in the forests, underground groups circulated appeals and declarations, political and religious activists were sent to the Gulag. The first large public demonstrations in Estonia took place in 1987 and soon fledgling non-communist political parties were formed. The greatest and most successful initiative of the Estonian democratic forces was the registering of citizens of the Republic of Estonia from April 1989 to February 1990. Under the noses of the Soviet authorities, voluntary citizens' committees registered 790,000 citizens and about 60,000 applicants for naturalization. On February 24, 1990, nearly 600,000 voters – 90% of those eligible – elected 499 delegates to the representative body of Estonian citizens, the Congress of Estonia. On August 20, 1991 a national agreement was reached between the last Supreme Soviet and the Congress of Estonia whereby the Republic of Estonia was restored based on legal continuity and the principles of the Congress of Estonia.

After restoration of independence, the main objective of Estonia's foreign policy became complete integration into European and transatlantic structures. Although it sometimes seemed that integrating with a continually evolving Europe was like catching a moving train, Estonia persevered. Only half a year after diplomatic ties were established in 1991, the signing of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement on May 11, 1992, created a legal basis for the Estonian-EU relationship. The Free Trade Agreement was signed on July 18, 1994 and Estonia's formal application for EU membership was made November 24, 1995. The application was based upon the understanding that membership is a commitment to both defending the main objectives upon which the EU is founded and to the furthering of economic, political, cultural and monetary union. On July 16, 1997, the European Commission gave a positive advice on Estonia's readiness to join the EU. The Luxembourg European Council approved this opinion on December 13, 1997 when it was decided to open negotiations with six candidate countries, including Estonia. That historic decision was testimony to the success of the radical reforms undertaken by Estonia as well as to the fact that by implementing pragmatic and realistic reforms, Estonia had already achieved a significant level of integration with the EU. In a referendum held September 14, 2003, two thirds of the voters approved joining the EU. The turnout was over 60% giving a clear mandate for joining and full membership was attained on May 1, 2004.

Yet, on June 13, 2004, when for the first time Estonians could elect six delegates to the European Parliament, the turnout was a mere 26%. Various theories have been proposed to explain this - everything from confusion about the function of the European Parliament to concern about the draft constitution to dissatisfaction with the current governing coalition. Typically, the answer is complex. Although

anti-EU and EU-skeptic groups have continued to try to make their case even after the referendum vote, their impact is not yet considered to be significant. The original fears of huge price increases for basic consumer goods have not materialized and generally EU membership does not yet seem to have affected ordinary people's everyday lives to any appreciable degree. Understandably, after half a century as unwilling members of the Soviet Union, some people were initially concerned about the possible loss of sovereignty and identity. In addition, the demagogic slogan "We just left one union, why should we join another?" was easy to repeat as a kind of protective mantra. However, in the end, the desire for stability and security won out. In fact, in September 2003, ever more strident and dramatic anti-EU activists probably motivated many undecided people to go to the polls in support of joining the European Union. Voters who tended to be more passive or uninterested began to believe that their personal vote might actually make a difference. Fears that Estonia might be the only one left out may have helped to raise voter participation and to bring a positive result in the referendum. The government and most political parties also carried out an intense campaign to boost participation.

"I already took a position on this, why are you asking me again?"

In contrast, voting for the European Parliament representatives in June 2004 had no such motivating factors. The role of the European Parliament and what Estonia's MEP's might actually do there is not very clear for the average person. Moreover, voters seemed to have no serious fear that anything would go seriously wrong if they did not make the effort to get more information or to vote. After the intense pre-referendum campaign, the attitude of many can be stated as, "I already took a position on this, why are you asking me again?" The EP election was instead viewed as a kind of popularity contest important to the candidates and their political parties, but not as very relevant to Estonia or its future. Some voters even expressed the opinion that just six seats out of 732 is not enough to make a difference, in any case. Even the fact that this was the first such election in Estonia did not make it historic or vital enough for many people to make the effort to go to the polls. Quite the reverse – with no tradition of participation in EP elections voters were even less enthusiastic. Some analysts have also theorized that Estonian voters are simply getting tired of a rather frequent series of different kinds of elections since the restoration of independence. During the past twelve years, at least as many significant nationwide campaigns and elections have been held - local, parliamentary, presidential, and special elections. It must be noted also, that, despite the fact that economic development after restoration of independence has not benefited all Estonian citizens equally, resulting in some rather marked differences in income among different groups and different regions, life in general is quite good, resulting in less motivation to vote.

Estonians want to be Europeans, but also to remain Estonians.

Partly due to its geographic location, Estonia has for centuries suffered many invasions and foreign occupations. Therefore, increased security and stability are the main attraction and benefit of EU membership for many, if not most Estonians. Being officially part of united Europe also helps to neutralize Russia's otherwise threatening references to the Baltic States as its 'near abroad'. With Estonia's border now constituting part of the EU's border with Russia, there is finally an end to the insecurity of being kind of a 'gray zone', with its territory potentially up for grabs. Being part of a large common market is of great interest and potential benefit to every kind of entrepreneur – from producers and manufacturers, to the tourist and service industry, to handcrafters and artisans. The same applies to the fields of art and culture. The freedom to move around within the European space – to travel, to work, to study in various countries – has great appeal. But for the average person in Estonia (as well as in many other countries) the sense of common European identity is fairly weak. Europe is mostly viewed as a geographical location where one finds clearly identifiable nation states that share common values, many similar features, opportunities and regulations, even a common currency, but that have their own languages, histories and unique cultures. Indeed, regional identity is often stronger than an overall European identity. And this state of affairs is quite acceptable to most Estonians who may not be so familiar with the term subsidiarity, but who instinctively support the concept. As the old saying goes, Estonians want to be Europeans, but also to remain Estonians.

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