

# EU-28 WATCH



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## On the project

Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections in 2014, the EU's Neighbourhood in light of the Ukraine crisis and power relations in the EU: The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states as well as Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2014. Most of the 33 reports were delivered in June 2014. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-28 Watch website: [www.EU-28Watch.org](http://www.EU-28Watch.org).

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**Estonia**

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**1. Euroscepticism and European Parliament elections***Foreign policy and corruption at the core of the election campaign*

The key topics in the election campaign vary, depending on interpretation. Thus, ex-prime minister Andrus Ansip (stood down in March 2014), who took the largest number of votes individually, attributed his success to the fact that he and his party (Reform Party, right of centre) had been able to assuage the Estonian public's fears about the country's security. The setting for these remarks was the events in Ukraine earlier this year. These had a palpable bearing on public debate in Estonia given that the country has a large Russian-speaking minority and abuts Russia.

Another interpretation was suggested by Indrek Tarand, an independent candidate, who took the second largest share of votes individually, and was narrowly beaten by Ansip. Tarand stood, for the second time in a row, on an anti-political-corruption platform. This put him on a collision course with Estonia's four parliamentary parties. Tarand's campaign this year exploited echoes of an upsurge of public distrust in the government in 2012, which had manifested itself in street demonstrations (rare in Estonia) and a popular manifesto highlighting political corruption (undeclared party financing, above all) and other shortcomings in Estonia's democratic record. Tarand's success - he was comfortably re-elected - suggests his interpretation is at least partially cogent.

Wider European issues, to do with the economic crisis and constitutional issues, played a minor role in the campaign. The three EU frontrunners - Juncker, Schulz and Verhofstadt - were all solicited for an op-ed contribution by the largest Estonian daily, Postimees. All three were asked by the paper to confine their remarks to foreign policy and security issues. Public recognition of all three as European party leaders - or even as political figures - is virtually non-existent.

*Vocal but weak euroscepticism*

Euroscepticism did indeed play a role in the election campaign. However, it was (inevitably) of a home-spun variety and as such presented a highly local take. Estonian eurosceptics tend to argue for three main objectives: the returning of power in the EU to the nation states (devolving the bloc institutionally to somewhere around 1986 levels of integration, according to Martin Helme, a prominent Eurosceptic); the ejection of southern states needing EU bailouts as economically and culturally impossible to integrate; and measures to ensure no southern immigrants reach Estonia via Schengen. However, the main proponent of Euroscepticism, the Estonian National-Conservative Party came a distant fifth among the parties, falling far short of a mandate.

It bears noting that the issue of openness to European Union (and the world) remains highly coloured in Estonia by the 20th century experiences of the country as part of the Soviet Union.

*Low level of interest in EU affairs*

National security concerns vied with broader domestic political discontent for primacy in the campaign. The turnout in Estonia was low, even by Eastern European standards Estonia -- 35 percent, eight percent down from 2009. This can partly be explained by the low level of interest in European affairs among the Estonian public, and partly by the inability of most (if not all) leading candidates to generate a sense of relevance among the electorate for the views they propounded.

## **2. The EU's Neighbourhood**

### *The Ukrainian crisis and the "Russian threat"*

The Ukrainian crisis caused perceptible anxiety among the Estonian public. Russia is widely seen as a threat. About 26 percent of Estonia's population is ethnically Russian -- or prefers Russian to Estonian in everyday communication. The government took the opportunity to appeal both to NATO and the EU for greater military and political support. NATO allies (predominantly the US and UK) have now temporarily stationed 150 troops in Estonia. An airfield, brought up to NATO specifications in recent years, was put into service earlier this year and now acts as a base for a wing of NATO jets.

Domestically, three of the four parties in the Estonian parliament support a hawkish response to the perceived Russian threat. The two parties to the right of the centre (Reform and The Union of Pro Patria and Res Publica) also support further increases in defence expenditure, currently at 2 percent of GDP. The Social Democrats, currently the junior partner in the government led by the Reform Party, are content with keeping the spending at current levels. The only major left-of-centre party - the Centre Party - has caused controversy by expounding non-conformist views on Ukraine (casting doubt on the legitimacy of the transitional government etc.). It relies heavily, though not solely, on the Russian-speaking vote in Estonia.

On the other hand, the sense of crisis has not led to any significant easing of Estonia's citizenship policy. The entry of the Social Democrats into the government in March 2014 was expected to soften the current fairly restrictive line, but has so far only led to minor adjustments targeting children born to non-citizens on Estonian territory (numbering perhaps just over a thousand a year).

Estonia's stance vis-à-vis Russia will in the foreseeable future be determined by two calculations. The first involves a reliance on NATO to the fullest degree that the alliance (mostly the US) will accommodate. The second proceeds from the belief that all efforts should be made to put Estonian-Russian relations on the clearest possible legal basis. With this in mind, the government has pushed ahead with the ratification of the border treaty signed with Russia only weeks in advance of the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis. Both strategies enjoy broad public support.

### *Emancipating ENP countries from Russian control*

There has been an upsurge of public sentiment in favour of Ukraine - but the events are very much seen through a Russia-dominated prism. This mirrors trends in Estonian foreign policy, which over the past decade or so has sought to build closer links with all of Russia's neighbours willing to cooperate, regardless of their democratic record (ex-prime minister Ansip annually visited Central Asia).

Tangible public support to large-scale aid for Ukraine and other ENP countries remains minimal. There is certainly no pressure on the government to commit greater resources to the cause, nor does the issue of Ukrainian (or Georgian or Moldovan) EU membership excite any overt public sympathy. At a more abstract level, there would certainly be support for more effective EU policies geared towards emancipating the ENP countries from what is perceived as a Russian stranglehold.

### *Official support and public opinion's indifference to Turkey's EU membership*

The government has been outspoken and steadfast in its support for Turkish EU membership over the past decade. This view used to closely reflect the position of London, but has now become more ambivalent in terms of its integration into Estonia's stance within the EU as the country has drifted significantly closer to German positions from 2010 onwards.

The Estonian public remains agnostic over Turkey. Well-made claims portraying Turkey as a potential drain on EU resources or a source of large number of Muslim immigrants could certainly sway public opinion against the idea.

### **3. Power relations in the EU**

#### *A staunch supporter of Germany*

The Estonian government has made a conscious effort to re-orient its EU policy to Berlin since Estonia acceded to the Eurozone in 2011. The standard view among senior politicians throughout the acute phase of the debt crisis was that, should the bloc disintegrate, Estonia would do its utmost to stick with Germany. This is partly explained by changes in geopolitical calculations -- Germany has obviously begun to play a key role in counter-balancing Russia. However, there is also a sense - on the Estonian side, at least - of a historical and moral kinship with Germany. Various German-dominated political forces played a leading role in Estonian history from the 1200s onwards. Lutheranism was adopted early in Estonia, and in the 19th century the German higher-caste minority, though resented, played an important role in the drive to neutralise Czarist attempts to Russify the country. In the wars of the 20th century, Germany was predominantly seen as the better of two bad alternatives, the other being Russia. In the course of the more recent economic crisis, Estonia has come out strongly on the side of those supporting austerity, aiming to exploit its balanced budget and very low public debt levels as leverage for political gains within the EU. In short, Estonian governments over the past decade or so have increasingly welcomed German leadership -- though remaining wary over Berlin's policies towards Russia ("Ostpolitik" is perceived in Tallinn as something verging on appeasement).

#### *On the side of "austerians"*

Austerity has so far trumped growth hands down. This has partly had to do with the fact that, until very recently, the right-of-centre Reform Party-led coalitions have managed to ensure satisfactory growth levels of the economy. Also, the fact that Estonia, a relatively poor ex-Soviet nation, was effectively forced into the bailouts assembled for Greece and others via the ESM facility, has contributed to strong public prejudice when it comes to loans and spending. Another factor here is a perceived kinship with "northern" EU nations, seen as they are lined up against "southern" Europeans.

Estonia, as things stand today, is firmly on the side of the "austerians" within the EU. Only the left-of-centre Centre Party would conceivably countenance a radical shift in policies should it come to power (something which at present looks very unlikely due to its inability to form coalitions)

#### *'Brexit': Germany replacing the UK as cornerstone of Estonia's foreign policy*

The government has to all practical intents and purposes acquiesced to the possibility of the United Kingdom's exit from the EU. Officials have been highly critical of London in on and off record briefings for a number of years now. Britain's goals and tactics are seen as needlessly and at times dangerously divisive for the European Union. As Germany has moved to the centre stage of Estonia's foreign policy orientation - at least as far the EU is concerned - the attitudes towards London's antics have become increasingly fatalistic. Successive Estonian governments have been increasingly clear that the country casts its lot with the EU.

Links:

- Estonian Public Broadcasting, [News](#), undated.
- National Electoral Committee, [European Parliament Elections 2014](#), 26 May 2014.
- Ahto Lobjakas, [Gathered and scattered](#), 27 May 2014.