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Estonia: Independence and Interdependence

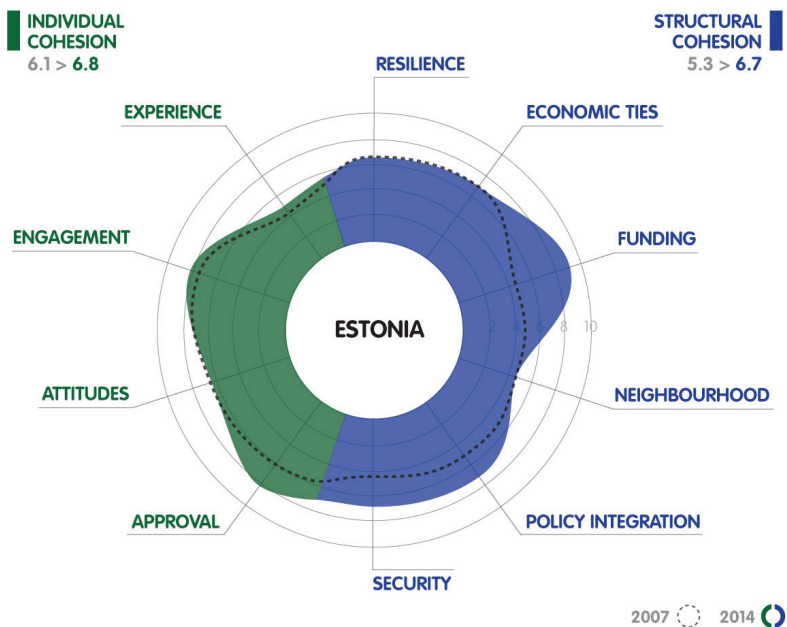
Since Estonia joined the European Union in 2004, it has been debating the optimal balance between independence and interdependence. The debate seemed to be subsiding during Estonia's initial, successful years of EU membership and of remarkable economic growth, but it has been reinvigorated by the EU's recent crises.

Balancing fears

Estonians have noted the link between mass emigration in search of jobs – the internal flow from the regions to big towns, but more significantly, out of the country – and the financial and economic crises, but they have not directly attributed this to the EU. However, the refugee crisis, at least among the wider public, is straightforwardly associated with the shortcomings of the EU. Therefore, it is no wonder that doubts have increased about the benefits of EU membership – for example, some are now ready to sacrifice Schengen at the altar of immigration fears.

Nevertheless, any negative aspects of the EU have been countered in the public imagination by the fear of Russia's growing aggressiveness and pressure. The historical experience of being squeezed between big powers, a consequence of Estonia's insecure geographical location at a border between civilisations, continues to play an important role.

So, in Estonia at present, EU membership tends currently to be seen against the backdrop of those two basic fears – the first, Russia, and the second, the possible outcome of mass immigration. On the whole, there is a certain paradox in Estonian thinking on the EU: on “big” questions such as immigration, a selective withdrawal appears to be the favoured tactic, but at a more fundamental level, strengthening membership remains the only viable strategy. However, while the two sides are relatively in balance at the moment, that could change if problems related to mass emigration (ever-



increasing costs and continuous downscaling of public services) should come to be associated with the economic and other asymmetries prevailing in the EU since the crisis. This could become a crucial concern when viewed in the context of the country's most salient existential problem: the demographic downslide (the popular narrative of "dying out") awaiting Estonia, should migration and other trends continue.

Countering Euroscepticism

The absence of strong democratic leadership has been a problem, especially in relation to the refugee crisis. In a leadership vacuum, attitudes have become more radical (as also evidenced in the United Kingdom with the example of Brexit). Estonian pro-independence parties point out possible alternatives (for which there are several rational arguments), but the leaders of government coalition parties tend to see even debates related to EU membership as irresponsible and unnecessary. Therefore, since the pro-EU forces refuse to engage in debate, the public mindset is quite strongly influenced by pro-independence party leaders.

On the other hand, the conflict in Ukraine has motivated Estonian citizens to educate themselves on the more profound meaning of belonging to the European family, on how best to contribute to it, and on what can be expected in return. This experience has visibly reinforced Estonians' appreciation of EU membership. And here, relatively strong moral leadership can be detected, if not primarily from the leading politicians then from wider opinion leaders.

On the question of how to cope with the fast-growing support for radical anti-European parties and ideas, better strategic communication with targeted groups and their more active inclusion into decision-making appears to be the answer. It is worth noting that EU cohesion is much lower among Russian-speaking people in Estonia. An effort from the Estonian government, backed with EU funds, is needed to enhance the conditions and improve the individual experience of the Russian-speaking population.

Structural cohesion

In the EU Cohesion Monitor's index for 2007, Estonia's individual cohesion score was somewhat higher than that of structural cohesion, but by 2014 ten years of EU membership have strengthened structural cohesion.

The structural features of EU membership may not have been overly successful in balancing out the effects of financial and economic crises, but even so, the visible signs of structural cohesion are undoubtedly growing. The role of EU funding is ever more visible (accounting for 20 percent of the central government budget) and economic integration with other EU member states deepens every year.

During the last couple of years, the main symbol of cohesion has been the Rail Baltica railway project. This scheme has both a mental and a financial dimension. While the project was largely positively received in the beginning, significant opposition to it has grown. It is thus vital for the government to better explain the decisions related to the scheme to the public.

Airline services have recently become a hot topic, related to illegal state aid given by the national government to the flag carrier, Estonian Air, and the airline's subsequent bankruptcy after investigation and decisive conclusions of the European Commission. In connection with this issue, peripheral location, low population density, and special security concerns appear to make some EU internal market rules, that are rational from the perspective

of core countries, both impractical and unpopular in Estonia, where the only way to keep up the number and frequency of connections is to give state aid. In this regard, what clearly aggravates the situation is the fact that the European Commission has not been overly eager to use the derogations and exceptions at its disposal to support the peripheral and less developed member states.

Accordingly, in the context of treaty reform, paying more attention to the special needs of small peripheral states would increase Estonia's feeling of being a valued member of the European family.

The EU rules and soft law on commercial aviation protect namely free competition, which, since the airlines (due to the pressure on ticket prices) cannot internalise the relatively significant indirect benefits to the economy (tourism, business, cultural contacts etc), takes a heavy toll on connectivity in peripheral states.

Conclusion

The financial crisis and the refugee crisis and related political debates have played an important role in terms of individual cohesion in Estonia. As radical pro-independence groups and pro-European groups have mobilised their supporters, people have become entrenched on opposing sides. As a result, social tensions are unmistakably growing.

Euroskepticism and anti-EU movements have reached a deeper, structural level. Hitherto a matter of public debate and concern, they now form the cornerstones of two radical nationalist parties, one of which enjoys public support at around a significant 18-20 percent.

Thus, while Estonia has shown and continues to show a remarkably strong profile in the EU Cohesion Monitor, with impressive gains particularly in structural cohesion, its future development path appears less secure, with the first challenging issues already evident in public debates.