

**CHANGES AND CHALLENGES OF
EUROSCEPTICISM IN ESTONIAN
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION, FIFTEEN
YEARS ON FROM ACCESSION**

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Abstract

In May 2019, Estonia celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of its accession to the European Union (EU). The occasion was marked by commemorations in Estonia, its diaspora communities, and across the other nine states that joined the EU at the same time. However, the narrative surrounding Estonia's EU membership and experience with European integration has not been exclusively positive. Eurosceptic sentiments have constantly evolved in nature and intensity throughout the country's fifteen-year EU membership, as well as before and during its accession process. This article focuses on the different ways in which Euroscepticism has manifested in Estonia, dating back to the 1990s, and how such attitudes have had a limited but evident impact on Estonian integration into Europe. Firstly, it looks at the restoration of independence and pre-accession period, followed by the period of accession negotiations. Then it looks at Estonia's EU membership, examining societal and political sentiments, as well as the presence (or lack thereof) of Eurosceptic parties in Estonian politics. Subsequently, this article explores the April 2019 government coalition between Centre, Isamaa, and Estonian Conservative People's Party (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE), a Eurosceptic party. Lastly, the article examines how this coalition and EKRE's role in government has created new narratives in Estonian politics, its detrimental impact on Estonia's reputation on the world stage, and whether it negatively affects Estonia's experience with European integration.

As the clock struck midnight on 1st May, 2004, the Old Town of Tallinn, Estonia's capital city, was filled with revellers celebrating the country's accession to the European Union (EU). Associated Press archival footage shows Estonians bearing their own country's flag, alongside the EU's twelve-starred gold and blue.¹ This magnanimous occasion was the country's key objective since it gained its freedom from the Soviet Union in August 1991, and was later deemed by the Estonian government to have a "positive impact" on the country, providing "excellent opportunities and expand[ing] our horizons considerably."² In May 2019, Estonia celebrated fifteen years of EU membership. This was again touted as a major milestone in Estonian integration into Europe. However, Estonia's experience with European integration has been neither linear, nor unmet by challenges. Estonia's decade and a half in the EU has been marked by difficulties – integration into the Eurozone at a time when parts of the EU were plagued by economic turmoil, expansion of the Schengen Zone to encompass the new 2004 entrants, and a EU-wide 'migration crisis' that escalated in 2015 – alongside the great successes touted by many political commentators. Among these challenges is Euroscepticism, a broad umbrella term encompassing all those who are sceptical or opposed to European integration and the EU. Vasilopoulou notes that "Euroscepticism is a contested concept. It describes a multidimensional political phenomenon that may vary depending on actor and citizen preferences. Some scholars conceptualise Euroscepticism as a continuum,

¹ Associated Press Archive, "Midnight Celebrations as Estonia Enters the EU," 1 May, 2004.

² Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Estonia -10 Years in the European Union: Together We Have Made Estonia Bigger!," 8 May, 2014.

and other in categorical terms.”³ The different definitions and existing research surrounding the concept of Euroscepticism are discussed below. In Estonia, Eurosceptic sentiments even pre-dated Estonia’s candidacy and accession processes throughout the 1990s. This Euroscepticism has manifested itself differently over time, and has, more recently, become especially evident in the second government of Jüri Ratas, a coalition of Ratas’ Centre Party, Isamaa Party, and the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE), the latter being a Eurosceptic and far-right party. The formation of Ratas’ government, and EKRE’s role in it, has evoked questions surrounding the evolution of Eurosceptic sentiments in Estonia over the past two decades and the ongoing impacts of such ideas. More recently, questions have emerged surrounding precisely what role EKRE plays in Estonia’s continued process of European integration, and whether the impact of EKRE’s Euroscepticism is proportional to the widespread media attention it has received, or if the party’s impact is overstated. Thus, this paper seeks to address these questions by exploring how Eurosceptic sentiments have shifted in Estonian government and society since the 1990s, and the impact these ideas have had, and continue to have, on the Estonian experience with European integration. It hypothesises that Euroscepticism has been present in Estonia even pre-dating its candidacy and accession, albeit less politically impactful or well-formed in comparison to many of its Central and Eastern European neighbours. This paper suggests that the formation and subsequent rise of EKRE over the past decade has signalled a new, more effectively mobilised brand of Euroscepticism in Estonia with actual representation in

³ Sofia Vasilopoulou, “Theory, Concepts and Research Design in the Study of Euroscepticism.” In: Benjamin Leruth, Nicholas Startin and Simon Usherwood (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Euroscepticism*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, p. 26.

government, but that EKRE's impact on Estonian European integration, as suggested, is indeed overstated.

Euroscepticism as a term emerged in the British press in the 1980s, but was first meaningfully defined and discussed in an academic context by Taggart in 1998⁴. This initially broad definition was refined by Taggart and Szczerbiak, to create the divide of hard and soft Euroscepticism: the former, “a principled opposition to the EU and European integration... [which] can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership” and the latter, “where there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU.”⁵ Vasilopoulou notes that, across more than two decades that Euroscepticism has existed as a field of academic study, “a variety of scholars from different backgrounds have sought to conceptualise, measure, understand and explain Euroscepticism,” producing a number of different conceptualisations of the term.⁶ For instance, Kopecky and Mudde critique Taggart and Szczerbiak's distinction of hard and soft Euroscepticism, noting that “Soft Euroscepticism is defined in such a broad manner that virtually every disagreement with any policy decision of the EU can be included” and can be “wrongly... ascribed to parties and ideologies that are in essence pro-

⁴ Paul Taggart, “A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems,” *European Journal of Political Research* 3 (1998), p. 366.

⁵ Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak, “Introduction: Opposing Europe? The Politics of Euroscepticism in Europe.” In: Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart (eds.), *Opposing Europe?: The Comparative Politics of Euroscepticism, vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 7-8.

⁶ Sofia Vasilopoulou, “Theory, Concepts and Research Design in the Study of Euroscepticism.” In: Benjamin Leruth, Nicholas Startin and Simon Usherwood (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Euroscepticism*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, p. 31.

European.”⁷ They instead suggest that political parties can be further categorised as Euroenthusiasts, Europragmatists, Eurosceptics, and Eurorejects⁸. Flood also proposed six categories of classification as an alternative to Taggart and Szczerbiak’s two-pronged approach: rejectionist, revisionist, minimalist, gradualist, reformist, and maximalist⁹. Despite the broad body of categorisations of Euroscepticism, most of the articles pertaining to Estonian Euroscepticism, as well as Euroscepticism in its neighbouring countries, referenced throughout this article use Taggart and Szczerbiak’s hard and soft Euroscepticism when labelling political parties.

The study of Euroscepticism in the context of Central and Eastern Europe also represents a unique sub-field, varied from Western Europe as a result of distinct social and political realities. Pisciotta notes that with regime changes across the region in the late 1980s and early 1990s, “a division between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ in the nation-states of Eastern and Central Europe was closely connected with the rise of nationalist and ethnic dynamics stemming from the collapse of the Soviet Empire.”¹⁰ According to Bekišas, the party systems of Central and Eastern European countries, including the Baltic States, were greatly shaped by the post-communist transition to democracy, as well as “fragmentation, weak links between voters and parties, and party platforms that lack clear, well-defined ideological stances,” which differentiates them

⁷ Petr Kopecky and Cas Mudde, “The Two Sides of Euroscepticism: Party Positions on European Integration in East Central Europe,” *European Union Politics* 3 (2002), p. 300.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

⁹ Christopher Flood, “Euroscepticism: A Problematic Concept,” *Paper Presented at the UACES 32nd Annual Conference and 7th Research Conference, Queen’s University Belfast.*

¹⁰ Barbara Pisciotta, “The Centre-Periphery Cleavage Revisited: East and Central Europe from Postcommunism to Euroscepticism,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 22 (2016), p. 193.

from those in Western European countries¹¹. Indeed, ethno-nationalist dynamics have been present in the Estonian case, where Peiker deems that ‘nationalist defense’ has formed one key faction of competing models of democracy¹². Annus argues that what Estonia, as well as Latvia and Lithuania, are experiencing could be deemed ‘decolonisation,’ as the Baltic states’ Soviet experience does not neatly qualify as an ‘occupation’¹³. Vachudova notes that Euroscepticism, and political parties and systems, do not remain consistent across the period being examined. She notes that “there is a predictable change over time,” which has seen marked change in the pre- and post-accession periods: countries’ political parties would adopt “agendas that are consistent with EU requirements in the run-up to negotiations for membership,” but after gaining membership, would broaden party competition and allow for Eurosceptic sentiments¹⁴. Kopecky and Mudde similarly indicate this change over time, noting that political parties “that would seriously consider alternatives to joining the EU” were rare in the early 1990s, but have emerged over time, even before the EU’s 2004 enlargement¹⁵. Their work studies Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, noting Hungary as the most optimistic candidate EU member. However, the situation in these countries has changed significantly in the 18

¹¹ Tomas Bekišas, “Party Positions on the European Union in the Baltic States: Do They Compete? Do They Mirror Voters’ Positions?” *Baltic Journal of Political Science* 6 (2017), p. 77.

¹² Piret Peiker, “Estonian Nationalist Through the Postcolonial Lens,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 1 (2016): p. 120.

¹³ Epp Annus, “The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 1 (2012), p. 29, 35.

¹⁴ Milada A. Vachudova, “Tempered by the EU? Political Parties and Party Systems Before and After Accession,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 6 (2008), p. 862.

¹⁵ Petr Kopecky and Cas Mudde, “The Two Sides of Euroscepticism: Party Positions on European Integration in East Central Europe,” *European Union Politics* 3 (2002), p. 298.

years since the article was published, particularly with the soft Eurosceptic government leadership of Hungary's Fidesz Party¹⁶ and Poland's Law and Justice Party, as well as the presence of hard Eurosceptic Hungarian party Jobbik¹⁷.

Euroscepticism has also been studied in the political systems of Estonia's neighbours. The most pertinent neighbouring case studies to Estonia include Finland, with which Estonia shares close linguistic and cultural ties, and Latvia and Lithuania, with which Estonia shares a collective Baltic identity and common history as unwilling Soviet republics. In Finland, which gained membership of the EU in 1995 (nine years prior to Estonia) two Eurosceptic parties, the League for Free Finland and the Alternative to the EU, were established prior to Finland's 1994 referendum on EU accession, but experienced limited electoral success, between them 2.7 percent of the vote, in 1996 elections¹⁸. Since Finnish EU accession, the country's most successful Eurosceptic party has been the Finns Party, for whom "Euroscepticism has been a defining image of the party," and which gained 17.7 percent of the vote in 2015, entering parliament for the first time¹⁹. As with Estonia's EKRE, the Finns Party has a charismatic leader in Timo Soini,

¹⁶ Tibor Hargitai, "How Eurosceptic is Fidesz Actually?" *Politics in Central Europe* 1 (2020), p. 189-190.

¹⁷ Nóra Lázár, "Euroscepticism in Hungary and Poland: A Comparative Analysis of Jobbik and the Law and Justice Parties," *Politeja* 33 (2015), p. 216.

¹⁸ Tapio Raunio, "The Difficult Task of Opposing Europe: The Finnish Party Politics of Euroscepticism" In: Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart (eds.), *Opposing Europe?: The Comparative Politics of Euroscepticism, vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 171-172.

¹⁹ Juha Herkman, "The Finns Party: Euroscepticism, Euro Crisis, Populism and the Media," *Media and Communication* 2 (2017), p. 1.

but conversely, receives relatively limited media coverage within Finland and abroad²⁰.

Latvia and Lithuania gained EU membership at the same time as Estonia. In Latvia, Apals points out that soft Eurosceptic parties enjoyed limited success prior to the country's accession – with six parties running on Eurosceptic platforms in 2002, receiving a total of 2.6 percent of the vote – while this number had decreased by 2014²¹. Austers adds that Latvia's loudest Eurosceptic voices came not from political parties, but from “a few personalities, none of whom has ever held an elected post,” including journalists or fringe politicians²². In the 2018 parliamentary elections, Eurosceptic party Kam Pieder Valsts? (lit. Who Owns the State?) finished in second place with 14.3 percent of the vote and 16 seats, but did not form part of the leading coalition and in 2020 polls at around 2 percent²³. In Lithuania, Vitkus argues that Euroscepticism is more influential in civil society than in political parties; there are strictly soft Eurosceptics “a minority wielding little influence, they do not enjoy continual or specific attention²⁴”. Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė outlines the limited success of Lithuanian Eurosceptic parties both prior to, and immediately following accession, noting that the most successful Eurosceptic party has been the Order and Justice Party, which

²⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

²¹ Gints Apals, “Euroscepticism in Latvian Politics: Twenty-Five Years of Change.” In: Aldis Austers and Kārlis Bukovski (eds.), *Euroscepticism in the Baltic States: Uncovering Issues, People and Stereotypes*. Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2017, p. 21.

²² Aldis Austers, “Euroscepticism in the Baltic States: Much Ado About Nothing?,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Riga* (2017), p. 9.

²³ Politico, “Latvia – National Parliament Voting Intention,” 31 May, 2020.

²⁴ Gediminas Vitkus, “Small is Small: Euroscepticism in Lithuanian Politics.” In: Aldis Austers and Kārlis Bukovski (eds.), *Euroscepticism in the Baltic States: Uncovering Issues, People and Stereotypes*. Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2017, p. 38-39.

gained 11 seats in the 2012 Lithuanian parliamentary elections, but fell to five seats in 2016²⁵. Wierenga suggests that Estonia's neighbours had Eurosceptic parties present in their political systems much earlier than did Estonia²⁶. It is both interesting and necessary to examine the broader Central and Eastern European context of Euroscepticism to gain insight into the Estonian case. The study of Estonian Euroscepticism is also useful more broadly, especially given that the country was considered to be 'decolonising' after Soviet rule from 1944 to 1991. Across Central and Eastern Europe, other states were similarly undergoing post-colonial processes, thus studying Euroscepticism in the country, particularly vis-à-vis its experience with European integration, could be particularly demonstrative, as patterns and similarities could be examined.

This article both draws from and builds upon the existing body of scholarly work focused specifically on Euroscepticism in Estonia, and more broadly, on Estonian politics since the country regained independence in 1991. Lauristin and Vihalemm have devised key stages in the Estonian transitional period: breaking with the old system and the 'Singing Revolution' (1988-1991), reforms and a new political, economic, and social order (1991-1994), economic stabilisation and start of integration with the EU and NATO (1995-1998), preparations for EU accession (1999-2004), and new challenges in the post-EU accession period (2004-2008)²⁷. The present work adopts similar timelines, while focusing on the post-Soviet period, and slightly modifying

²⁵ Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė, "Eurosceptics in Lithuania: On the Margins of Politics?" *European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities* 4 (2014), p. 11-12.

²⁶ Louis Wierenga, "Russians, Refugees and Europeans: What Shapes the Discourse of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia?" *Uptake* 6 (2017), p. 5.

²⁷ Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vihalemm, "The Political Agenda During Different Periods of Estonian Transformation: External and Internal Factors," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 1 (2009), p. 5.

these stages to account for the specificities of Euroscepticism. It also introduces new time periods for the rise of EKRE and its entry into government coalition in 2019. These new time periods represent a new contribution to the existing body of literature on Estonian Euroscepticism, which, as outlined above, has clear linkage to Estonia's neighbours and the broader study of Euroscepticism in Central and Eastern Europe. In the pre-accession period, the work of Kuus²⁸ and Feldman²⁹ look at Estonian attitudes toward European integration, and indeed narratives of scepticism, in the 1990s and early 2000s. The work of Auers and Kasekamp,³⁰ and Mikkel and Kasekamp³¹ have both examined the presence of Eurosceptic and far-right political parties in Estonia, prior to the country's accession to the EU, as well as in its early years of EU membership. As Wierenga correctly identifies, EKRE and its role in Estonian politics has been studied only in a limited capacity thus far³². At the same time, Kasekamp, Madisson and Wierenga³³, Petsinis,³⁴ and Wierenga have all examined EKRE's belief system, aims, and political role prior to 2019 parliamentary elections.

²⁸ Merje Kuus, "European Integration in Identity Narratives in Estonia: A Quest for Security," *Journal of Peace Research* 1 (2002).

²⁹ Merje Feldman, "European Integration and the Discourse of National Identity in Estonia," *National Identities* 1 (2001).

³⁰ Daunis Auers and Andres Kasekamp, "Explaining the Electoral Failure of Extreme-Right Parties in Estonia and Latvia," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 2 (2009).

³¹ Evald Mikkel and Andres Kasekamp, "Emerging Party-Based Euroscepticism in Estonia." In: Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart (eds.), *Opposing Europe?: The Comparative Politics of Euroscepticism, vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 299.

³² Louis Wierenga, "Russians, Refugees and Europeans: What Shapes the Discourse of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia?" *Uptake* 6 (2017), p. 3.

³³ Andres Kasekamp, Mari-Liis Madisson and Louis Wierenga, "Discursive Opportunities for the Estonian Populist Radical Right in a Digital Society," *Problems of Post-Communism* 1 (2019).

³⁴ Vassilis Petsinis, "Identity Politics and Right-Wing Populism in Estonia: The Case of EKRE," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 2 (2019).

This article draws on scholarly works, in addition to government reporting, election results, and Eurobarometer surveys, in sections one through four. In the fifth section, it contributes to new scholarly dialogues surrounding Estonian Euroscepticism and the broader field of Estonian politics by examining the impact of EKRE since it became part of Estonia's leading government coalition in April 2019. As a result of this coalition being a reasonably recent development, at the time of writing there has been little academic work examining the impact of the new government coalition. Therefore, the final section of this paper draws on statements from political figures inside and outside of EKRE, party manifestos and articles, Eurobarometer surveys, NGO reportage, and Estonian and international news reporting related to Estonia's current political situation. Lastly, it examines the impact of these Eurosceptic sentiments in Estonia today, drawing future prognoses for the country's European integration project.

1. Early Independence and pre-Accession Negotiations (1991-1998)

When Estonia regained its independence from the Soviet Union in late August 1991, its attention immediately turned toward a return to what was perceived as its rightful place in Europe and a "return to the West."³⁵ EU membership also offered an opportunity for Estonia to "restore historic ties with Europe and re-establish traditional cultural, economic and political links" that had connected Estonia with the broader region for centuries prior to Soviet occupation³⁶. Kuus notes that membership in supranational

³⁵ Marju Lauristin, "The European Public Sphere and the Social Imaginary of the 'New Europe,'" *European Journal of Communication* 4 (2006), p. 398.

³⁶ Siim Kallas, "Estonia and the European Union," *European Business Journal* 3 (1996), p. 19-20.

organisations was “among the principal political goals of Estonia since the re-establishment of its independence in 1991.”³⁷ While UN membership came quickly, in September 1991, EU accession processes were significantly lengthier, with rigorous entry requirements, but also with benefits in which Estonia was interested. Beyond immediate security or economic terms, EU membership also appeared to offer protection of “culture, demographics, linguistics, and pedagogy as issues deemed vital to the survival of the Estonian nation.”³⁸ Further, after Estonia’s Soviet experience, joining supranational organisations like the EU offered “an escape from the economic and political sphere of influence of Russia,”³⁹ the Soviet Union’s modern incarnation. It was also an “attempt to distance Estonia from its former imperial overlord as much and as quickly as possible.”⁴⁰

During this period, all Estonian political parties supported Estonian European integration. The Reform Party, especially, “constantly stressed the gains of EU membership,” while Pro Patria and Res Publica (now Isamaa) and the Social Democrats did the same, while the Centre Party, with a “somewhat pro-Russian background” was also officially pro-EU⁴¹. Many prominent political figures, including former Foreign Minister Siim Kallas⁴²

³⁷ Merje Kuus, “European Integration in Identity Narratives in Estonia: A Quest for Security,” *Journal of Peace Research* 1 (2002), p. 95.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Piret Peiker, “Estonian Nationalist Through the Postcolonial Lens,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 1 (2016): p. 121.

⁴⁰ Evald Mikkel and Andres Kasekamp, “Emerging Party-Based Euroscepticism in Estonia.” In: Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart (eds.), *Opposing Europe?: The Comparative Politics of Euroscepticism, vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 299.

⁴¹ Viljar Veebel, “Opposing the European Union or Looking for More Reforms: Different Facets of Euroscepticism in Estonia,” *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 2 (2017), p. 96.

⁴² Siim Kallas, “Estonia and the European Union,” *European Business Journal* 3 (1996).

and his successor (and later President) Toomas Hendrik Ilves vociferously expressed their support for Estonian membership in the EU⁴³. It was not until the early 2000s that any real Eurosceptic sentiment emerged in the Estonian political arena. However, in this period of post-independence, pre-accession negotiations, voicings espousing scepticism surrounding Estonia's prospective accession to the EU could be heard, albeit in small numbers, outside of the Estonian government itself. The prevailing concern was that Estonia would be leaving one federation, the Soviet Union – with which its experience was overwhelmingly negative – for another, the EU.

Indeed, genuine concerns were voiced about Estonia's readiness to join the EU. Questions were raised about the country's economic capacity, transitioning to a capitalist system after almost half a century of a centrally-controlled economy. The newly-introduced Estonian Kroon was pegged to the Euro, and Estonia sought "full compliance with the letter and spirit of the EU treaty" and "fulfilment of the Maastricht Treaty."⁴⁴ Nonetheless, concerns remained about whether Estonia could truly keep up. Further concerns were expressed about Estonia's citizenship policy, the main charge being that it was discriminatory against the country's sizable Russian minority. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) began monitoring operations in Estonia in 1993. The OSCE chastised the Estonian government for what it saw as an overly rigid language requirement for citizenship. Furthermore, an estimated 80,000 to 90,000 people were left

⁴³ Toomas Hendrik Ilves, "Estonia, the European Union and the New North," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 4 (1999).

⁴⁴ Andres Sutt, "Challenges Facing the Estonian Economy on its Way to the European Union," *Atlantic Economic Journal* 4 (2003): p. 312-313.

stateless by the mid-1990s⁴⁵. However, responses from the EU and OSCE varied greatly; Ozolins deems these two organisations took a carrot and stick approach, respectively⁴⁶. In examining Estonia's EU membership bid, the EU "mentioned citizenship and related issues only briefly, and gave a positive evaluation of Estonia's human rights record."⁴⁷

Ultimately, neither admittedly limited Eurosceptic sentiment, nor concerns surrounding Estonia's economy or citizenship policy could hinder the country's bid for EU membership. Lauristin notes that "Estonia became... 'a model pupil,' quickly developing the capacity to absorb external input and adjust to new rules."⁴⁸ In 1995, Estonia applied for membership to the EU, and in 1998, entered into accession negotiations with the EU, notably the first former Soviet republic to do so. With the onset of these accession talks, Estonia entered a new era in its European integration experience.

2. Accession Negotiations and pre-Accession (1998-2004)

As the Estonian government engaged in accession negotiation talks with the EU, Eurosceptic sentiment also entered a new era. It is important to note that Estonian sentiments toward the EU were relatively lukewarm at this time: support for Estonian EU membership was low, but scepticism was even

⁴⁵ Aleksei Semjonov, "Estonia: Nation-Building and Integration – Political and Legal Aspects." In: Pal Kolsto (ed.), *National Integration and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Societies: The Cases of Estonia and Moldova*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, p. 123.

⁴⁶ Uldis Ozolins, "Between Russian and European Hegemony: Current Language Policy in the Baltic States." In: Sue Wright (ed.), *Language Policy & Language Issues in the Successor States of the Former USSR*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, p. 33.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 41.

⁴⁸ Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vihalemm, "The Political Agenda During Different Periods of Estonian Transformation: External and Internal Factors," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 1 (2009), p. 9.

lower⁴⁹. However, Euroscepticism was present amongst the Estonian populace and, for the first time, within the Estonian political arena. Mikkel and Kasekamp note that a period of “Euro-enthusiasm” was experienced in Estonia from 1995 until the start of the new millennium, as Sweden and Finland – two countries geographically and culturally interconnected with Estonia – joined the EU. However, historical legacy still shaped Eurosceptic sentiments in Estonia at this time, with the “popular Eurosceptic cliché of going from ‘one union to another’” constantly repeated, as well as likening Brussels to Moscow⁵⁰.

Genuine concerns about Estonia’s readiness to join the EU still lingered in public sentiment. Even Estonian President Lennart Meri directly addressed such concerns in his 1999 Independence Day speech: he recognised that improvements to Estonia’s economy, defence mechanisms, and track record with rule of law were necessary for accession talks to move forward⁵¹. In terms of both public opinion and political sentiment, Euroscepticism in Estonia was greatly influenced by more developed anti-EU factions in Finland, a country with which Estonia has close links, both linguistically – as members of the Finno-Ugric language family that is disparate from other European languages – and culturally. With an already existing Eurosceptic scene in Finland, Estonian Eurosceptics commonly borrowed arguments from their Finnish counterparts and similarly attempted to penetrate the political domain.

⁴⁹ Evald Mikkel and Andres Kasekamp, “Emerging Party-Based Euroscepticism in Estonia.” In: Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart (eds.), *Opposing Europe?: The Comparative Politics of Euroscepticism, vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 299.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 296.

⁵¹ Lennart Meri, “President of the Republic on the 81st Anniversary of the Republic of Estonia in the Estonia Theatre Hall,” 24 February, 1999.

The first Estonian political party that attempted to form a platform on opposition to EU membership was the Estonian Future Party (EFP) in the late 1990s. However, the EFP failed to register in the 1999 Riigikogu (parliamentary) elections and entirely ceased to exist shortly thereafter. In the leadup to the 2003 Riigikogu elections, several parties emerged voicing opposition to Estonian EU membership. The Social Democratic Labour Party declared itself anti-EU in 2001, while only holding one seat in parliament. The Christian People's Party and the self-described "nationalist right-wing anti-European party" Republican Party both campaigned to enter parliament on anti-EU platforms⁵². Ultimately, none of these Eurosceptic parties fared successfully in the 2003 elections: the Social Democratic Labour Party failed to retain their seat in parliament, the Christian People's Party received only 1.1% of the vote, failing to meet the 5% threshold, while the Republican Party did not field any candidates at all after an unsuccessful showing in local elections in 2002⁵³. Though certain parliamentarians expressed scepticism of Estonia's EU membership – Reform's Igor Grazin was a prominent sceptic in the early 2000s, for example – after 2003, the Estonian Riigikogu returned to a situation in which "not a single deputy represented a Eurosceptic party."⁵⁴ These parties experienced practically no electoral success, while Estonia's major political parties supported EU accession. In 2003, a referendum asked Estonians: "Are you in favour of accession to the European Union and passage of the Act on Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of

⁵² Evald Mikkel and Andres Kasekamp, "Emerging Party-Based Euroscepticism in Estonia." In: Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart (eds.), *Opposing Europe?: The Comparative Politics of Euroscepticism, vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 398, 310.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 309-310; 311-312.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 308.

Estonia?”⁵⁵ The referendum ultimately affirmed that 66.8% (of a turnout of 64% of eligible voters) of Estonians wished to join the EU. This was seen as “the culmination of a process since independence in 1991,” whereby integration into Europe via the EU was a predominant goal⁵⁶. It was only a short time later, approximately eight months, that Estonia acceded to the EU, alongside nine other states, including its Baltic counterparts, Latvia and Lithuania.

3. Early Membership (2004-2012)

On 1st May, 2004, Estonia gained membership into the EU in the so-called ‘Big Bang’ enlargement, which saw nine other states, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe, also join. Dominant political and public discourse surrounding Estonia’s EU accession was largely positive and optimistic, and remained so throughout this period. At a ceremony raising the flag of the EU at Tallinn’s Kadriorg Palace, Estonian President Arnold Rüütel opined that “the current unification of Europe [through the EU] is the best and most lasting. It entails free will and cooperation of the parties and is the most diversified and balanced. With the help of intellectual and executive level integration, it aims at the welfare – for not just a few but many... Estonia is positively transforming!”⁵⁷ Such sentiments were supported in scholarly work: for example, Levchenko, Zhang, and Fumagalli quantified welfare gained as a result of trade integration in Europe, examining comparative welfare gains in Eastern and Western Europe. They found that the mean gain

⁵⁵ Evald Mikkel and Geoffrey Pridham, “Climching the ‘Return to Europe’: The Referendums on EU Accession in Estonia and Latvia,” *West European Politics* 4 (2004): p. 728.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 718.

⁵⁷ Arnold Rüütel, “President of the Republic Remarks at the Flag-Raising Ceremony to Mark in Front of Kadriorg Palace,” 1 May, 2004.

in Eastern Europe was 9.23%, while Estonia experienced a 19.86% welfare gain as a result of its increasingly integrated trade, more than 4% higher than the next highest beneficiary, Latvia⁵⁸.

Despite what these figures show, Estonia's actualised EU membership has provided a new opportunity for Eurosceptics to critique Estonia's role in the EU and its experience with European integration. There has also been a continuation of the narrative of "replacing one union (the USSR) with another (the EU)."⁵⁹ Veebel notes that the prevailing Eurosceptic discourse in Estonia "could be classified as soft Euroscepticism, combined with some Euro-populist views," a combination of existing theories of Eurosceptic labelling⁶⁰. As is characteristic of Taggart and Szczerbiak's definition of soft Eurosceptics, with Estonia firmly inside the EU, Eurosceptic sentiment is often associated with specific EU-related projects, such as the Trans-European Transport Network or Rail Baltica project, "or the country's own ability to implement projects or safeguard its interests at the EU level," particularly in terms of economic control⁶¹.

This period also saw Estonian Euroscepticism become even further associated with both far-right and nationalist sentiments. Far-right Estonian nationalism saw a particular rise in 2006 and 2007, with events related to the Bronze Soldier statue in Tallinn. Amidst clashes between Estonians and

⁵⁸ Andrei A. Levchenko, Jing Zhang and Chiara Fumagalli, "Comparative Advantage and Welfare Impact of European Integration," *Economic Policy* 72 (2012): p. 571, 581.

⁵⁹ Daunis Auers and Andres Kasekamp, "Explaining the Electoral Failure of Extreme-Right Parties in Estonia and Latvia," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 2 (2009), p. 244.

⁶⁰ Viljar Veebel, "Opposing the European Union or Looking for More Reforms: Different Facets of Euroscepticism in Estonia," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 2 (2017), p. 90.

⁶¹ Viljar Veebel, "Opposing the European Union or Looking for More Reforms: Different Facets of Euroscepticism in Estonia," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 2 (2017), p. 93.

Russians over a Red Army statue being moved from central Tallinn to a military cemetery on the outskirts of town, increasingly “radical Estonian nationalists started to construct an opposing meaning [of the statue], namely that it was a symbol of Soviet occupation” and carried the Estonian flag and symbolism, attempting to create “a strong emotional reaction among Estonians.”⁶² Such sentiments persisted amongst the general population for several years before later entering the political realm. The predominant Eurosceptic party also dominating the far-right space during this period was the Estonian Independence Party. Its primary focus was “protecting Estonian sovereignty from further European integration,” and thus, explicitly opposed to Estonia’s European integration project⁶³. However, the party did not enjoy any electoral success, never winning more than 0.5% of the vote and failing to gain any mandate. Petsinis argues that this was the “result of its extremist profile and unrealistic conceptualization of Estonia” as a buffer between the EU and Russia⁶⁴. More broadly, Auers and Kasekamp say that far-right parties have experienced a lack of electoral success due to their extreme rhetoric, and “legitimation of virulently anti-homosexual language, as well as the continuing salience of the ethnic cleavage” in Estonian society⁶⁵.

In this early stage of EU membership, much like the period of accession talks preceding it, Eurosceptic parties experienced almost no electoral success in Estonian politics. Only the Social Democratic Labour Party held a

⁶² Martin Ehala, “The Bronze Soldier: Identity Threat and Maintenance in Estonia,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 1 (2009): p. 146.

⁶³ Daunis Auers and Andres Kasekamp, “Explaining the Electoral Failure of Extreme-Right Parties in Estonia and Latvia,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 2 (2009), 244.

⁶⁴ Vassilis Petsinis, “Identity Politics and Right-Wing Populism in Estonia: The Case of EKRE,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 2 (2019), 217-218.

⁶⁵ Daunis Auers and Andres Kasekamp, “Explaining the Electoral Failure of Extreme-Right Parties in Estonia and Latvia,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 2 (2009), 252.

seat in parliament as it expressed Eurosceptic sentiments, but was swiftly voted out of office in 2003. Other parties often experienced electoral implosions, and were unable to gain either the 5% threshold for a seat in the Riigikogu, nor roles in local-level government. The threshold for the establishment of political parties is admittedly higher in Estonia than its neighbours – only requiring 1000 members at a cost of 300 Kroons (approximately €20) prior to Estonia’s adoption of the Euro⁶⁶. The more compelling explanation, however, for the lack of success amongst Eurosceptic groups in Estonian politics prior to 2012 is these parties’ failure to effectively mobilise their support base to the extent that they could actually enter political office. Even so, this was poised to change in 2012 as a new far-right Eurosceptic party came onto the Estonian political scene, activating a support base and coherent political platform far more effectively than any similar party that came before it.

4. Formation and Early Years of EKRE (2012-2019)

In 2012, the Estonian Conservative People’s Party (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) was formed and immediately established itself in a different, markedly more charismatic manner than other Eurosceptic or far-right parties in Estonia. The party emerged out of the ruins of the People’s Party, a rural-focused party that collapsed in 2011, and the Estonian Nationalist Movement (also referred to as the Estonian Patriotic Movement, Eesti Rahvuslik Liikumine), which originated with the Bronze Soldier incident in 2006-2007⁶⁷. Even long after the Bronze Soldier incident, and the

⁶⁶ Riigi Teataja, “Political Parties Act,” 11 May, 1994.

⁶⁷ Andres Kasekamp, Mari-Liis Madisson and Louis Wierenga, “Discursive Opportunities for the Estonian Populist Radical Right in a Digital Society,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 1 (2019), p. 48.

April 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia that incapacitated government, bank, and news media websites for three weeks, this nationalist movement persisted, and ultimately founds its way into Estonian politics by way of EKRE. The newly-merged party was, and continues to be, spearheaded by the father and son duo of Mart and Martin Helme; the party's main support base has been described as "male and socially conservative, with an anti-establishment disposition."⁶⁸ EKRE describes "Estonia's highest political goal" as "to preserve Estonianness," and thus, its brand of Euroscepticism expresses concerns on governance shortcomings in the areas of sovereignty and security as a member of the EU that currently prevents Estonia from achieving this.⁶⁹ The party asserts that European integration has gone too far in a multitude of capacities⁷⁰, and takes issue with the unacceptable loss of sovereignty that Estonia has experienced as a result of EU membership, "especially when it comes to the migrant crisis, security issues, and the presence of non-Estonians in Estonia."⁷¹ EKRE's platform also contains a number of conservative ideologies: advocating traditional gender roles and family values, while espousing ardently anti-LGBT, anti-feminist, and anti-immigrant views⁷². However, it is the party's platforms directly pertaining to Euroscepticism that are explored here.

⁶⁸ Vassilis Petsinis, "Identity Politics and Right-Wing Populism in Estonia: The Case of EKRE," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 2 (2019), p. 215.

⁶⁹ EKRE, "Conservative Program," n.d.

⁷⁰ Andres Kasekamp, Mari-Liis Madisson and Louis Wierenga, "Discursive Opportunities for the Estonian Populist Radical Right in a Digital Society," *Problems of Post-Communism* 1 (2019), p. 51-52.

⁷¹ Louis Wierenga, "Russians, Refugees and Europeans: What Shapes the Discourse of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia?" *Uptake* 6 (2017), p. 7.

⁷² Andres Kasekamp, Mari-Liis Madisson and Louis Wierenga, "Discursive Opportunities for the Estonian Populist Radical Right in a Digital Society," *Problems of Post-Communism* 1 (2019), p. 49.

As is characteristic of Peiker’s ‘nationalist defense’ camp of democracy in a post-colonial Estonia, EKRE’s manifesto emphasises the achievements of Estonia’s democracy, alongside “the survival of the Estonian people” and “the preservation of Estonianness in Estonia and the world.”⁷³ EKRE’s 2012 manifesto declares that Estonia has “been partially transformed into a region representing the interests of the European Union.”⁷⁴ Both Mart Helme and Jaak Madison, EKRE’s deputy chairman, have deemed the EU “undemocratic” for their seemingly rigid mandates and penalties for non-compliance;⁷⁵ Madison also “advocates for the Estonian government to better represent Estonia’s interest in Brussels.”⁷⁶ EKRE contended for Estonia’s six European Parliament seats unsuccessfully in 2014, but was able to procure one of its seven seats in 2019; Jaak Madison is EKRE’s sitting representative in the European Parliament, thus attempting to act on the above assertions.

EKRE has differentiated itself from previous Eurosceptic parties in Estonia in a number of key ways. Even in its early years, EKRE offered a far more extensive and coherent political platform than any Eurosceptic or far-right party that came before it in Estonia. As described above, its platform addressed pressing concerns with Estonia’s membership in the EU, while also including a multitude of additional issues in its platform: its current party program addresses not only issues such as governance, foreign and security policy, defence, and regional and local development, but also includes topics

⁷³ EKRE, “Conservative Manifesto,” 24 March 2012.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Viljar Veebel, “Opposing the European Union or Looking for More Reforms: Different Facets of Euroscepticism in Estonia,” *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 2 (2017), p. 98.

⁷⁶ Louis Wierenga, “Russians, Refugees and Europeans: What Shapes the Discourse of the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia?” *Uptake* 6 (2017), p. 8.

ranging from family, education, culture, health care, and energy policy⁷⁷. This range of policy platforms is far more extensive, well-rounded, and formed than that of any Eurosceptic party examined in the previous three sections of this paper. Another reason for EKRE's success, unlike Eurosceptic parties that came before it in Estonia, was that it filled the void of a charismatic leader, which Wierenga identified as a gap in the previous time periods of Estonian politics examined in this paper⁷⁸. Mart and Martin Helme formed a cult of personality of sorts that mobilised a previously immobilised voter base, and contributed to the electoral success of EKRE; such success was absent from previous periods of post-Soviet Estonian political history.

In 2015 Riigikogu elections, EKRE gained 8.1% of the vote, earning seven seats in parliament⁷⁹. This was the first significant representation of a Eurosceptic party in Estonian politics (save for the Social Democratic Labour Party's brief one-seat stint between 2001 and 2003), and actually remarkably late vis-à-vis Estonia's neighbours, who had successful equivalent parties represented in government much earlier⁸⁰. Both EKRE and the Helmes continued to grow in popularity after the party's initial electoral success in 2015. Throughout 2017 and 2018, EKRE was the third most popular political party in Estonia⁸¹. It is important to note that general support for Estonia's EU membership and European integration project was high during this time,

⁷⁷ EKRE, "Konservatiivne Programm," n.d.

⁷⁸ Louis Wierenga, "Russians, Refugees and Europeans: What Shapes the Discourse of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia?" *Uptake* 6 (2017), p. 8.

⁷⁹ Valimised, "Eesti Vabariik," 20 March, 2015.

⁸⁰ Louis Wierenga, "Russians, Refugees and Europeans: What Shapes the Discourse of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia?" *Uptake* 6 (2017), p. 5.

⁸¹ Vassilis Petsinis, "Identity Politics and Right-Wing Populism in Estonia: The Case of EKRE," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 2 (2019), p. 211.

peaking in 2018⁸². Despite this, political strategy and increased voter support saw EKRE's popularity skyrocket in the first seven years of its existence, but even further elevated its political role in 2019 with Estonia's most recent Riigikogu election. With that, Estonia entered yet another new era of Eurosceptic sentiment, socially and, uniquely, in the highest levels of its political leadership.

5. EKRE in Government Coalition (2019-present)

On 3rd March 2019, Estonian Riigikogu parliamentary elections were held, the eighth since the country regained its independence. Only about one-quarter of Estonia's approximately 880,000 eligible voters took part.⁸³ The big winner was the Reform Party, which won 28.9% of the vote and 34 of 101 seats⁸⁴. It looked to be a milestone election for women: Reform's leader, Kaja Kallas, received the highest number of votes for a single candidate in Estonian history. A record 29 women were voted into the Riigikogu, as Estonia appeared poised to have a female President and Prime Minister for the first time in its history⁸⁵. However, this election saw further electoral success for EKRE, which received 17.8% of the vote and 19 seats, rising to third place and gaining 12 more seats than in 2015⁸⁶. Ultimately, amidst tensions between Reform's Kallas and the Centre Party's incumbent Prime Minister Jüri Ratas, Centre entered coalition talks with Isamaa and EKRE. This move drew ample criticism from Estonia's more liberal factions, and

⁸² European Parliament, "Eurobarometer Survey Shows Highest Support for EU in 35 Years," 23 May, 2018.

⁸³ Valimised, "Voter Turnout Statistics," 5 March, 2019.

⁸⁴ Valimised, "Voting and Election Result," 8 March, 2019.

⁸⁵ ERR, "Kallas: I was Told to Act More Masculine," 6 March, 2019.

⁸⁶ Valimised, "Voting and Election Result," 8 March, 2019.

even within Ratas's Centre Party. For instance, municipal-level Centre Party member Abdul Turay penned an open letter to Ratas, imploring him not to form a deal with EKRE, on the grounds of its "fascist" and sexist stances⁸⁷. Raimond Kaljulaid, who was voted into parliament as a Centre Party member in 2019, resigned from the party's board in protest as coalition talks were initiated⁸⁸. Ultimately, the coalition went ahead despite these protests, and the second Ratas government – a partnership of the Centre Party, Isamaa, and EKRE – was formed in late April 2019.

Almost immediately, this new coalition was the source of controversy with EKRE at its epicentre. At the swearing in of the new government, Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid attended wearing a shirt that read "sõna on vaba" (speech is free), in response to EKRE members' attempts to influence the Estonian media⁸⁹. Even before the coalition was formed, Peeter Helme, the nephew of EKRE's Mart Helme, was appointed editor-in-chief of Estonia's largest news publication, Postimees. This resulted in the resignation of journalists who had penned pieces critical of EKRE in 2019 and early 2020⁹⁰. In early April 2019, Martin Helme also specifically addressed Estonian Public Broadcastin (ERR), demanding that its journalists who were critical of EKRE face punishment⁹¹. The ordeal saw ERR's prominent journalist and

⁸⁷ Abdul Turay, "Abdul Turay in a Public Letter to Jüri Ratas: EKRE Are Flat Out Fascists," 12 March, 2019.

⁸⁸ ERR, "Raimond Kaljulaid Quits Centre Board Over Party Talks with EKRE," 12 March, 2019.

⁸⁹ ERR, "President Attends Riigikogu Oath Ceremony Wearing 'Speech is Free' Slogan," 30 April, 2019.

⁹⁰ Sten Hankewitz, "The First Estonian Journalist Leaves a Major Newspaper Over Her Views," 23 April, 2019.

⁹¹ Vahur Koorits, "Martin Helme Nõuab ERR-ilt EKRE Suhtes Kriitiliste Ajakirjanike Karistamist Ja Ettrist Mahavõtmist," 28 March, 2019.

radio host, Ahto Lobjakas, leave the network⁹². Responding to Kaljulaid’s protest of EKRE’s interference with the press, Mart Helme called the president “so emotionally upset as a woman.”⁹³ Further controversy was generated with the newly-appointed EKRE Minister of Information Technology and Foreign Trade Marti Kuusik was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol⁹⁴ and later faced allegations of domestic violence against his wife⁹⁵. Kuusik resigned from the post days later and was replaced by Kert Kingo, also of EKRE, who drew criticism for refusing to travel on overseas visits or speak English in foreign meetings, and also later resigned as a result of lying before the Riigikogu about one of her advisors⁹⁶.

EKRE’s Eurosceptic beliefs became apparent in a very visible way, almost immediately following the formation of the coalition. The day after the new government was sworn in, EKRE’s Henn Põlluaas gave an order for the flag of the EU to be removed from the Riigikogu’s White Hall, a space typically used for hosting formal events inside the Estonian parliament building. As Estonia celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of its accession to the EU on 1st May, 2019, only days later, the Reform Party called for the flags – which were of great “symbolic meaning” – to be re-instated immediately⁹⁷. Põlluaas argued that the flags were no longer necessary, as they had been placed in the White Hall when Estonia held the rotating presidency of the Council of the

⁹² BNS, “Journalist: I Was Given a Choice Between Self-Censorship and Leaving,” 27 April, 2019.

⁹³ ERR, “President Kaljulaid ‘Emotionally Upset as a Woman,’ Says Helme,” 3 May, 2019.

⁹⁴ ERR, “Incoming IT Minister Caught Driving Both Speeding and With Trace Alcohol,” 23 April, 2019.

⁹⁵ Mari Mets, “Allegations of Domestic Abuse Against New Minister,” 30 April, 2019.

⁹⁶ ERR, “IT and Foreign Trade Minister Kert Kingo Submits Resignation,” 24 October, 2019.

⁹⁷ ERR, “Reform Party Calls on Riigikogu President to Bring Back EU Flags,” 30 April, 2019.

EU in 2017, a role it no longer held; instead, these flags should only emerge when EU dignitaries visit⁹⁸. A vote on the matter in June 2019 deemed that the flags would not return⁹⁹. Though the removal of the EU flag was a symbolic measure, it was impactful for the significance of Estonia's EU membership, especially as a perceived 'escape route' or 'departure' for its Soviet past, within Estonia. It also had an impact on external perceptions of Estonia and its EU membership, as have the other controversial measures taken by EKRE since the new government was formed. These moves have gained international attention, with various news outlets outside of Estonia, ranging from the BBC¹⁰⁰ to BuzzFeed,¹⁰¹ taking notice of its government's move toward the far-right.

The Reform Party first initiated a vote of non-confidence against Mart Helme in May 2019, but was not held to a vote until that December. At that time, Helme's derogatory remarks toward incoming Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin; Reform leader Kaja Kallas called Helme's comments had "damaged Estonian-Finnish relations and the reputation of the Estonian state, and degraded women and people of various social backgrounds."¹⁰² The non-confidence motion failed by a total of 44 votes to 42, with 15 abstentions or absences. As the Centre-Isamaa-EKRE coalition comprises a majority of seats in parliament, and also given that 51 of 101 votes are required for a

⁹⁸ BNS, "EU Flags Removed From Riigikogu Reflect Current Realities, Speaker Says," 30 April, 2019.

⁹⁹ ERR, "Riigikogu Opts to Keeps EU Flag Out of Toompea White Hall by One Vote," 13 June, 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Jean Mackenzie, "Estonia: How Boom-Time Baltic Republic Embraced Far Right," 15 May, 2019.

¹⁰¹ Alberto Nardelli, "Two European Politicians Made a 'White Power' Sign as They Were Sworn in as Government Ministers," 30 April, 2019.

¹⁰² ERR, "Reform's No-Confidence Vote Against Mart Helme Fails," 17 December, 2019.

successful non-confidence motion, it does not appear that Helme is going anywhere. Helme and the EKRE party appear poised to continue their prominent and vocal role in the current government coalition and in broader Estonian governance, including the country's role in the EU. As previously mentioned, since 2019, EKRE's Jaak Madison has held one of Estonia's seven seats in the European Parliament. Curiously, in a September 2019 European Parliament vote, Madison abstained from voting on a resolution "on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe," including the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that brought Estonia into the Soviet Union¹⁰³. In June 2019, grounded in EKRE's stance of climate change denial,¹⁰⁴ Estonia was one of four countries who refused to back the EU's formal agreement on achieving net carbon emissions by 2050 in the European Council, although they were later brought on board.¹⁰⁵ Estonia's voting record under EKRE in various EU institutions has not only been puzzling, but also jeopardised the country's 'public image' and reputation in the EU.

¹⁰³ European Parliament, "Joint Motion for a Resolution," 18 September, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Stella Schaller and Alexander Carius, "Convenient Truths: Mapping Climate Agendas of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Europe," (2019), p. 81.

¹⁰⁵ Mauro Anastasio, "Infamous Four: Decision on Carbon Neutral EU Delayed by Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Estonia," 21 June, 2019.

6. EKRE's Impact on Estonia's European Integration: Conclusions

While head of Estonia's Foreign Policy Institute Kirsti Raik has maintained that EKRE has "received attention disproportionate to its influence in government," holding five of 15 cabinet positions and 18% of seats in parliament, she does maintain that relations with the EU is the area in which EKRE's role could be most harmful¹⁰⁶. Defence Minister Jüri Luik, a member of Isamaa Party that is also in the current coalition with EKRE, acknowledges that EKRE has "created a 'serious image problem'" for Estonia¹⁰⁷. This public image issue has emerged not only out of EKRE's Euroscepticism, but also its broader platform that also includes anti-immigrant, anti-LGBT, and anti-feminist sentiment. These sentiments are especially impactful for members of the groups that EKRE has specifically targeted: the LGBT community, immigrants and refugees, members of ethnic and religious minorities, and perhaps most poignantly, Estonia's ethnic and linguistic Russian community, who, Kus-Harbord and Ward argue, have been "relatively deprived in socio-political and economic terms... occupying a weaker position in the society," vis-à-vis ethnic Estonians since 1991¹⁰⁸. This is particularly disruptive to the cohesion across various identity lines that the EU strives for.

The criticism that EKRE has received has been widespread. In early 2020, Reporters Without Borders expressed that it was "extremely concerned for

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Richard Milne, Michael Peel and Mehreen Khan, "Estonia's Golden Image Threatened by Far Right," 17 July, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Larissa Kus-Harbord and Colleen Ward, "Ethnic Russians in Post-Soviet Estonia: Perceived Devaluation, Acculturation, Well-Being, and Ethnic Attitudes," *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation* 1 (2015): p. 67-68.

the future of independent journalism in Estonia,” specifically addressing the Postimees scandal¹⁰⁹. Freedom House, which gave Estonia a score of 94 out of 100 for democracy in its 2019 report,¹¹⁰ expressed concern on its blog that liberal democracy in Estonia may be jeopardised by EKRE¹¹¹. At the time of writing, the organisation has not yet allocated Estonian democracy a score for 2020. EKRE’s vocally-espoused views have also drawn criticism from EU officials and political figures in EU member states, including former Belgian Prime Minister and Member of European Parliament Guy Verhofstadt¹¹² and Sweden’s former Prime Minister Carl Bildt¹¹³. Interestingly, the most prominent criticisms and controversies surrounding EKRE have emerged not out of the party’s Euroscepticism, or more specifically, its concern with sovereignty and security as its main driver of Euroscepticism. Rather, these have resulted from events such as its attempts to influence the Estonian press, derogatory remarks about female Estonian political figures, statements regarding minority groups during its time in the leading coalition, and other issues that fall outside of those central foci. In many ways, it is EKRE’s other platforms that have been most damaging to Estonia’s reputation in the EU, and thus impacted the country’s experience with European integration. As Estonia underwent EU accession negotiations in the late 1990s, and even after gaining membership, Lauristin discussed the image problem of Estonia as

¹⁰⁹ Reporters Without Borders, “Does Crisis at Leading Daily Mean End to Investigative Journalism in Estonia?” 13 January, 2020.

¹¹⁰ Freedom House, ‘Freedom in the World 2019: Estonia,’ (2019).

¹¹¹ Arch Puddington, “In Liberal Estonia, Right-Wing Populists Are Making Their Mark,” 2 July, 2019.

¹¹² ERR, “Guy Verhofstadt Implores Jüri Ratas to Call Off EKRE Talks,” 14 March, 2019.

¹¹³ ERR, “EKRE Hand Signal Concerning, Says Former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt,” 30 April, 2019.

former Soviet state: “new members of the EU were viewed with suspicion, their values, lifestyles and interests were perceived as alien,” as the stigma of their Soviet past lingered¹¹⁴. Now, Estonia once again faces a similarly suspicious gaze from the EU and even further abroad, only this time for EKRE’s perceived missteps, and after a decade and a half as a member of the EU.

However, enthusiasm for Estonia’s membership in the EU remains high across the general populace. The 2019 Eurobarometer survey of EU member states’ attitudes toward the EU found that if a referendum were held tomorrow on EU membership, 74% of Estonians would vote to remain in the EU¹¹⁵. Another positive impact for Estonia’s European integration project may come not from EKRE, but from the United Kingdom’s experience with Brexit. As the UK has exited the EU and begun its transition phase in 2020, it has been argued that Brexit and its potential political and economic detriments to the country may actually curb similar movements, particularly hard Eurosceptic movements and political parties, across Europe¹¹⁶. Therefore, it is possible that if Estonia follows this trend, it will not see EKRE evolve to a hard Eurosceptic stance, nor that a new hard Eurosceptic movement pushing for a Brexit-style withdrawal of Estonia from the EU will emerge. However, given that Estonia was relatively late to see the formation of a coherent and successful Eurosceptic party compared to the rest of Europe, it may be that such a trend will also come to Estonia late. On the

¹¹⁴ Marju Lauristin, “The European Public Sphere and the Social Imaginary of the ‘New Europe,’” *European Journal of Communication* 4 (2006), p. 398.

¹¹⁵ European Parliament, “Closer to the Citizens, Closer to the Ballot: Spring Eurobarometer,” (2019), p. 22.

¹¹⁶ Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart, “How has Brexit, and Other EU Crises, Affected Party Euroscepticism Across Europe?” 18 May, 2017.

contrary, EKRE varies from other European Eurosceptic and far-right parties in that its main ‘other’ is Russian, so there is a possibility that Estonia may diverge from European trends. Given that Europe, more broadly, is still at odds with Russia over issues such as the 2014 annexation of the Crimea, over which the EU still maintains sanctions against the Russian Federation, it is also possible that Estonia’s future with EKRE, and especially over matters pertaining to Russia, may become volatile. Public support for EKRE has seen some growth, while support for its coalition partners, Centre and Isamaa, and opposition, the Reform and Social Democratic parties, has fluctuated¹¹⁷. It is unclear how future government coalitions involving EKRE could take shape, although it is highly unlikely that either of the other parties with mandates in parliament at present time, Reform and the Social Democrats, would join forces with EKRE.

Estonia’s experience with European integration has not been linear, nor has its Eurosceptic sentiments, both in the general populace and within its political system. Eurosceptic sentiments have become more coherent, vocal, and sophisticated over time; early Eurosceptic parties such as SLDE were unsophisticated and did not enjoy electoral success. With EKRE’s entry onto the Estonian political scene, its platform and key Eurosceptic ideals became much more organised and ultimately mobilised a voter base to first receive seats in parliament, later forming the leading government coalition. While this is unprecedented territory, it is not necessarily impactful proportionate to the attention EKRE has received. Eurobarometer survey results show that, as a whole, Estonians are happy with their country’s EU membership and the

¹¹⁷ ERR, “2019: Three Pollsters’ Party Ratings in Review,” 30 December, 2019; ERR, “Party Ratings: Estonia 200 Support at Year High,” 23 January 2020..

project of European integration¹¹⁸. However, EKRE's overarching platform of not only Euroscepticism, but also conservative family values, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBT, anti-feminist, and anti-Russian sentiments have been disproportionately detrimental for members of those identity groups. EKRE's platforms, and voting records, have also been harmful for Estonia's public image on the international stage, and indeed, within the EU. International indicators of democracy, freedom of the press and internet, have fallen over the past year in Estonia, and tarnished Estonia's reputation on the world stage. Attempts to remove EKRE's leader, Mart Helme, through a non-confidence vote have failed; thus, this coalition appears likely to stay in place for the time being. With political parties' support levels constantly fluctuating, and with the next Riigikogu elections not until 2023, it remains unclear the role that EKRE and its Eurosceptic sentiments will play in Estonian government moving forward. As even Helme himself has said, Estonia's political future appears likely to be in a state of "rock in roll," or at very least, one of flux for the foreseeable future.

¹¹⁸ European Parliament, "Closer to the Citizens, Closer to the Ballot: Spring Eurobarometer," (2019).

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