

CEBAST News
A Newsletter from the Centre for Baltic Studies at the Öresund University

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***** Special Issue – Latvian and Estonian EU Referenda: Analyses from Within *****

As anticipated in the last issue, this number of CEBAST News will present two analyses of the referenda on EU accession that took place in Estonia and Latvia. The following contributions are by Daunis Auers of the EuroFaculty, University of Latvia, and Silvi Teesalu, leader of the Danish Cultural Institute in Estonia.

CEBAST News wishes to thank both of them warmly.

The Editor and CEBAST

EU-referendum in Estonia

By Silvi Teesalu, PhD, leader of the Danish Cultural Institute in Estonia, lecturer at the Academy Nord, Tallinn.

Since regaining national independence in August 1991, the people of Estonia went to the referendum ballot boxes for the second time. The first referendum was held on 28 June 1992, where 66.8% of the eligible voters took part. 91.3% voted in favour of the new Constitution.

On 14 September 2003 the country held the national referendum on the future of Estonia in relation to the European Union.

Of the nine acceding countries in which EU referendums were held, Estonia was the only country in which constitutional reform was also included on the ballot. There was no minimum participation requirement as was the case in Lithuania and Slovakia.

Public opinion surveys conducted by the *Estonian Market Opinion Research* (EMOR) in 2002 and 2003 indicated a relatively stable trend in public opinion. Support for the accession remained between 48% and 62% for more than two years preceding the vote.

The difference was nevertheless too small to remain content with the developments. The responsible offices worked intensely to constantly disseminate information concerning the various aspects of the EU negotiations. This truly active EU campaign was launched more than a half year before the referendum was held. Media channels were exploited to the full to bring out opinion leaders to engage with voters all over Estonia.

Different referendum campaign types were organised in Estonia; these can be classified *neutral*, *yes* and *no* campaigns.

The President of the Republic, Chairman of *Riigikogu* (the Estonian Parliament) and the Prime Minister, who had all proclaimed their support for Estonian EU-membership in meetings with voters and in the media, did not consider it proper to offer opinions in a taxpayer-financed campaign. Instead, the state-organised campaign was designed to be unbiased and merely encouraged people to vote; nevertheless, the pro-EU message was clear.

Criticism was raised from among the people that the extreme focus on the EU left Government and Parliament little time for the affairs of their own country and its people. Another line of criticism compared the European Union to the Soviet Union, stressing that for a small country like Estonia, the two unions bear much in common. These voices predominantly came from amongst the highly nationalist segments of the population.

The European Union Information Secretariat of the State Chancellery of Estonia (EUIS) was formed on 13 October 1998 to provide information to as many people as possible regarding the EU via information centres, info-points and support organisations, thus enabling an increasing number of interest groups to participate in the relevant and meaningful public discussions preceding accession to the EU. Supported by the local authorities and working together with voluntary organisations, this network worked intensively from the very outset. The information centre staff were very actively engaged in arranging meetings and conferences and distributing informative materials.

The European Commission organised a special *Eurobus tour* in Estonia to serve as a neutral informative action. The bus tour consisted of 84 stops in county centres, villages and farms over the course of almost a month. The primary intention was to distribute information materials and organise quizzes responding to questions regarding the European Union. The embassies of EU member states also contributed, mainly by arranging cultural programs for the people gathering to meet the Eurobus. For example, the author of this article participated in such arrangements in two towns in Southern Estonia where the Danish Embassy arranged concerts by the Maria Faust Band (a Danish-Estonian music group from Esbjerg Music Academy), a Lego train exhibition put together by a Danish young fan who had resided and worked in Estonia for five years, served Danish food, etc. These arrangements were well-received by most of the local people and well-visited. The Eurobus crew responded to thousands of enquiries.

The Estonian European movement arranged a “*Before September 14*” festival in all counties, including outdoor advertisements, t-shirts, stickers and meetings with voters, which became popular local events. *Yes* campaigns were also organised by the political parties that came up with various different slogans, most of which expressed something along the lines that Estonia has a better future within Europe and encouraged people to vote for the accession. Not all were of the same position, however.

Extremely heated debate transpired within one of the leading parties, *Keskerakond* (Central Party). This party is characterised by the support it receives from the Russian minority in the country. The party congress, held one month prior to the referendum, resulted in a decision *not to vote for the EU*. The influential leader of the party deliberately refused to express his own opinion until the very last minute; he was even unclear about his views at the party congress. The conflicting opinions were published in the media. One disgruntled party board member declared that his party neither had political principals nor any clear conscience. Another expressed certainty that the outcome in September will be a *yes* to the EU. Several political commentators indicated that the negative proclamation emerging from the *Keskerakond* congress served in fact to balance the overall situation; this led many, particularly the “undecideds,” to choose sides often according to the popularity of the chairman or party in his/her personal “poll.”

Compared to the *yes*-campaign, the press noted that the *no*-campaign was not homogeneous. Some of the participants in the movement against the EU were wholly against the EU, arguing that accession was a breach of the first article in the national constitution, which declares: “Estonian independence and sovereignty is interminable and inalienable.” Others wanted to postpone accession to the EU and renegotiate the conditions. Some asserted that the EU economy was too restrictive and “socialist” for the liberal Estonian economy; that it was better to become a “Hong Kong” or “Singapore of the North”. Some regarded joining the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) or even the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as an alternative to the EU. Three distinct campaigns could be identified: Movement No to the European Union, Research Centre Free Europe, which also received support from the British Foundation “Equality at the Estonian referendum,” and Information Centre “Our State”. They did not arrange many of their own activities in Estonia; instead often turning up to present their arguments at meetings or actions arranged by *yes*-movement actors, e.g. the Eurobus campaign. The latter received attention from the *Danish Folkebevægelsen mod EU* (The People’s Movement Against the EU), which sent a representative to the Eurobus stop in Võru. This representative created debate and actively argued against the Danish Embassy presence in the Eurobus campaign. Although the Embassy was not directly involved in the campaign, they had arranged the cultural programme for the gathering, introducing Denmark and Danish culture. Angry articles subsequently appeared on the *Folkebevægelsen* homepage in Denmark, thus creating debate on the other side of the Baltic Sea.

During the whole period, the campaign in Estonia regarding EU accession was deliberately channelled away from everyday political issues out of fear that negative attitudes towards government policy, concrete political figures, or concrete government actions, could be converted into negative opinion concerning the EU. As some of the examples demonstrated, it was not difficult to get the people to blame the EU for negative developments in Estonia. The media coverage indicated that the referendum activity would be considerably higher than the voter turn-out in the previous parliamentary elections. It was evident that those supporting the government parties also supported EU accession.

A public opinion poll conducted during the first week of September showed that 75% of Estonian citizens would definitely participate in the accession referendum on 14 September. 65% of these would vote *yes* and 35% would vote *no*. The polls also indicated that the more people actually know about the EU, the more they believe that Estonia would benefit from EU membership. Nonetheless, studies have also demonstrated that many Estonians tend to perceive the EU as something *strange* and threatening to their national identity and sovereignty. Therefore, they often related to the EU as a periphery to a metropolis: seeking its approval on the one hand while perceiving it as a subordinating and “non-us” institution on the other.

Materials from the Estonian Foreign Ministry would seem to indicate that the most important factors affecting public opinion concerning the EU included: personal financial status; education; place of residence; level of information on the EU; rating of the Government; negative news about the EU (e.g. foot and mouth disease); myths about the impact of joining the Union; and results of the accession negotiations on sensitive and important issues, e.g. agricultural and financial issues. The surveys revealed that people with higher education were generally more positive about the EU. As to the personal status, those with higher incomes were usually more positive about the EU than those with lower incomes. The unemployed were considered to be the most negatively minded social group towards the EU. One of the greatest fears during the entire period was of possible inflation subsequent to joining the EU. It was clear that urban people were more positive about the EU than rural people.

Nevertheless, the EU SAPARD programme contributed significantly to increased EU support amongst farmers, which is thought to increase even more after the accession.

These issues were the focus of constant discussion in the media, in meetings between Parliament Members and voters, at the workplace, in private homes, etc. Interest was high amongst people of all ages. The media was actively involved; a number of new radio and television programs were organised with the EU issues under discussion.

On that background, the referendum itself did not produce any actual news. The referendum resulted in a resounding *yes* vote in Estonia. Perhaps the result was disappointing in terms of voter turnout in light of the public opinion surveys conducted immediately prior to the referendum; however, two-thirds of the voters nevertheless came out to give their *yes* to the European Union.

The referendum turnout was 64.6%, of whom 66.83% voted *yes* and 33.17 % voted *no*.

The highest percentage of *yes*-votes, 72%, came surprisingly from Tartu, which is consistently characterised by low turnouts in local elections. Even the lowest *yes*-vote, 57% in North-East County, was still definitely on the positive side. In Harju County, part of the region surrounding the capital city Tallinn, 69.86% of the votes were *yes*.

The Latvian EU Referendum

By *Daunis Auers*, EuroFaculty, University of Latvia

An unexpectedly convincing majority of Latvian citizens voted in favour of European Union accession on 20th September 2003. The turnout of 72.5% was much higher than had been expected, exceeding even the turnout at the 2002 national election, and was the second highest among the ten EU referenda held in 2003. Moreover, the solid ‘*yes*’ vote of 67% was much higher than anticipated.

This came as a huge relief to the Latvian political elite, which had united to steer the country into the EU, but had been displaying increased signs of nervousness in the run-up to the poll. Politicians had done everything possible to create a favourable environment for a ‘*yes*’ vote. First, they had chosen to hold their poll last among candidate countries, hoping to ride a wave of *EUpHoria* into the Union. Second, they had composed an innocent sounding question for the ballot paper, ‘are you for Latvia’s participation in the European Union’, avoiding more legally correct, but controversial, terms such as ‘membership’. Yet opinion polls continued to show a close race, prompting both the President and Prime Minister to adopt a higher profile in the last few days of campaigning. Indeed, Prime Minister Einars Repse took to strutting around with a folding map of Europe tucked under his arm. This map starkly divided EU member states (including the nine that had already voted *yes*), from a dark mass of eastern non-EU members. This crass message was typical of the general tone of the campaign.

The Latvian government had allocated some 1 million Lats (1.5 million euro) to the official campaign, significantly more than neighbouring Estonia and Lithuania. However, the campaign was one-sided and made no effort to balance *pro* and *contra* arguments. Rather, it set out to convince people to support EU accession by concentrating on the issue of identity. It failed to engage the public in debate, but rather sold its product – the European Union – through slick newspaper and TV advertising. The official

campaign was aided by the absence of any credible eurosceptic opposition. Underfunded, demoralized and populated by the extreme left and right fringes of Latvian politics, the eurosceptic campaign failed to penetrate the mainstream and rally support for its cause.

The result itself confirmed the regional and ethnic voting variations seen in national elections. Most particularly, the eastern Latgale region and the capital city Riga, where the greatest number of ethnic Russian-speaking citizens are concentrated, vote differently to the rest of Latvia. Indeed the Daugavpils region of Latgale actually mustered a clear majority against EU accession. Clearly, the polarizing identity tactics adopted by the government-funded campaign alienated those many Russian-speaking citizens who maintain close ties with Russia and other post-Soviet States.

The political elite temporarily put aside personal animosity and political differences to push Latvia into the EU. However, the fragility of this position was rapidly revealed immediately after the polls had closed and even before the official result was announced, as the four-party centre-right government coalition imploded into vicious recrimination and personal abuse. Latvian politics had returned to normality.

Baltic Agenda:

February

- Seminar: Cross-border cooperation between Finland and Russia, Rovaniemi Finland
- *BaltSeaNet* Workshop on Crossborder Cooperation in Tallinn, Estonia

March:

- International conference to mark the 30th anniversary of the Helsinki Convention

April:

- IV Baltic Sea NGO Forum in Pärnu, Estonia
- Application Deadline: Öresund Summer University 2004

Baltic News¹:

October

- Governor's Election in St. Petersburg
- *BaltSeaNet* PhD Conference in Gdansk, Poland
- Baltic Development Forum Summit, Riga
- Adoption of the Second Northern Dimension Action Plan

November

- Lithuanian Domestic Crisis: President Under Pressure

December

- Farewell to the CBSS Commissioner Office

¹ This issue covers events until January 15th

Baltic Publications:

- New *BaltSeaNet* Working Papers



Baltic Agenda:

February

Cross-border cooperation between Finland and Russia, Rovaniemi, Finland

On February 2nd and 3rd, a seminar on cross Border cooperation will take place in Rovaniemi, Finland. The Seminar will deal with cross-border cooperation experiences by Tacis actors in Eastern and Northern Finland, particular in relation to implementation and enhancement of best practices. Moreover, the seminar will discuss the future of cross-border cooperation within the EU New Neighbourhood Instrument. The seminar will include guest speakers from the European Commission. More information and registration form are available at: <http://www.finnbarents.fi>

BaltSeaNet Workshop Cross-border Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region: Euro-Regions and Region Building, Tallinn, Estonia, February 5-8, 2004

The workshop aims at tackling the development of cross-border cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region in an interdisciplinary manner, bringing in presentations from different disciplines and fields such as political science, economics, cultural studies, environmental policy. The event will include a reception at the German Embassy in Tallinn and a visit at the Danish Cultural Institute.

For more information, the workshop program, and call for papers, click on: <http://www2.huberlin.de/BaltSeaNet>.

March 2004

International conference to mark the 30th anniversary of the Helsinki Convention, March 22nd-24th Riga, Latvia.

This event intends to commemorate the 30th year anniversary of the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) and is organised by the Latvian Chairmanship of the Helsinki Commission. The conference will focus on the past, present and future of the organisation. As is explained in the Call for papers: "The Conference should be envisaged as the [...] forum to be used for real, deeper and more comprehensive discussion among all stakeholders concerning the future role of HELCOM". For more information: CBSS homepage <http://www.cbss.st/calendar/dbaFile2835.html>

April 2004

IV Baltic Sea NGO Forum, April 16th and 17th, Pärnu, Estonia

The theme of this year's forum will be: "Challenges for the Baltic Sea Civil Society in a Changing Europe". The topics of the eight workshops will include: private and public sectors; protection of the environment; human rights; integration of immigrants and non-citizens; rural development; civil security and crime prevention; employment, and development cooperation. Website: <http://www.ngonet.ee/forum/>

Application Deadline: Öresund Summer University 2004

For the third year, the Centre for Baltic Studies will organize a course at the Öresund Summer University. This year's theme is *The Baltic Sea Region after the EU Enlargement*. The aim is to provide

participants with an overview of the political, economic and cultural transformations in the Baltic Sea Region, its integration into the European Union and processes of integration into structures of international cooperation generally.

The Deadline for application is April 1 for students requiring a visa, and May 17 for other students

For more info and application form, visit www.balticstudies.org.

Baltic News:

October 2003

Governor's Elections in St. Petersburg

On October 5th Valentina Matvienko won the election for Governor of St. Petersburg, Russia. The turnout was less than 30% in the two rounds. A little less than a fifth of the registered voters picked Ms. Matvienko. Former governor Yakovlev has been appointed Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Housing. Ms. Matvienko is a Ukrainian-born diplomat. Prior to being elected as Governor, she held the position of Presidential representative in the North-West District; Deputy Minister for Social Issues and Russian Ambassador to Malta and Greece (source: *The Economist* October 17th, 2003)

BaltSeaNet Conference "The Challenge of Mobility in the Baltic Sea Area", PhD Conference in Gdansk on October 23rd-26th 2003.

The conference was the third and last event of the project *The Baltic Sea Region 2010*, carried out within the framework of the special research and training programme "Improving Human Research Potential and the Socio-Economic Knowledge Base", High-level Scientific Conferences (HLSC) Series of the European Community (See CEBATS News Volume 1 n.1 and Volume 2 n. 2). The event included four workshops: "Interplay of Cultures and Ideas in Baltic Sea Area: Minds on the Move"; "Spatial Mobility and Community"; "The Baltic Sea Region and/versus "Others": Mobility and the Emergence of New Interaction Patterns"; and "The Mobility of Business in the Baltic Sea Region". For more info: <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/BaltSeaNet>

Baltic Development Forum Summit

On October 5th-7th about 400 top-level politicians, diplomats, journalists and academics gathered for the Annual Baltic Development Forum Summit, which this year was held in Riga, Latvia. This year's theme was: "New Europe-Old Europe: The Baltic Sea Region as a Global Frontrunner". In particular, Presidents Arnold Ruutel (Estonia), Vaira Vike-Freiberga (Latvia), and Rolandas Paksas (Lithuania) attended the forum and issued a joint statement which "called for the implementation of modern infrastructure projects under the Trans-European Network in the Baltic Sea region and the joining of electricity grids in the region with the common European electricity market. It also stressed the need "to pay a special attention to maritime safety and environmental protection to minimize the potential risks of contamination by oil, chemicals, and dangerous substances in the Baltic Sea area." (RFE/RL Volume 4 nr. 34). For more info on the summit: www.bdforum.org

Adoption of the Second Northern Dimension Action Plan

As expected, the European Council on October 16th-17th in Brussels under the Italian EU Presidency endorsed the 2nd Northern Dimension Action Plan. The Plan will run for three from 2004 to 2006, a time when the Northern Dimension initiative itself will have to harmonize with the EU's New Neighborhood Initiative.

November 2003

Lithuania's Domestic Crisis: President Under Pressure

Since November 2003, Lithuania's President Rolandas Paksas has been under parliamentary investigation. The accusation would link some of the President's advisers and officials with Russian organized crime groups. While Mr. Paksas has suspended or fired those around him who have been involved in the investigation, he has so far refused to resign (see *The Economist* November 15th 2003).

December 2003

CBSS Commissioner for Democratic Development

On December 19th 2003, the mandate of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) Commissioner for Democratic Development was terminated and the Copenhagen Headquarters closed. The decision was made official by the CBSS Ministerial meeting in Pori, Finland in June 2003. The post of CBSS Commissioner was established in 1994 mainly as a tool to monitor the treatment of the Russian speaking minorities in the Baltic States. Prior to Ms. Helle Degn of Denmark, the last one to hold the position, the post of Commissioner was held by Law Professor Ole Espersen, also of Denmark. The recommendations issued by the Commissioner on the matters of democracy and human rights shall remain valid for the continued work of the CBSS on these issues.

Baltic Publications:

Three new Publications of the Series *BaltSeaNet Working Papers* are now available at the *BaltSeaNet* homepage (<http://www2.hu-berlin.de/BaltSeaNet>):

- Vol. 7: Andres Juhkam, *Interest Rate Risk Management In Non-Financial Corporations: Estonian Evidence*
- Vol. 8: Fabrizio Tassinari (ed.) *The Baltic Sea Region in the European Union: Reflections on Identity, Soft-Security and Marginality*
- Vol. 9: Indira Dupuis *Journalism in Post-Communist Latvia: A Profession in Transition* One more is forthcoming:

Forthcoming:

Vol. 10: Mindaugas Jurkynas: *Political and Social Conflicts in Lithuania. Searching for the Left/Right Dimension and Cleavages*

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