

REFERENDUM BRIEFING NO 11 THE ESTONIAN EU ACCESSION REFERENDUM, 14 SEPTEMBER 2003

Evald Mikkel
University of Tartu
Email: emikkel@ec.ut.ee

Key points

- Estonian voters proved to be the least enthusiastic about EU membership among those in the post-communist candidates. Nevertheless, Estonians voted overwhelmingly to join the EU by 66.83% to 33.17%.
- The turnout of 64.06% turned out to be higher than the last Estonian elections, despite the fact that, in contrast to some other accession countries, there were no minimum turnout requirements to make the referendum constitutionally valid.
- The fact that president, government and almost all the parliamentary parties together with a wide range of civic organisations, highly recognized key individuals and public opinion framers campaigned for a Yes vote helped to increase pro-EU sympathies among the general public.
- The only mainstream party expressing doubts about EU membership, the Centre Party, was deeply divided and ambivalent on the EU issue.
- The No campaign struggled to present convincing alternatives to the EU and suffered from a lack of access to the public media.
- The most surprising shift in EU positions happened among the Russian-speaking part of the population. This increase in anti-EU feelings among ethnic Russians is primarily linked to the tactical mistakes made by the Yes side during the campaign.

Background

Baltic geopolitical realities in between East and West: a ‘third way’?

In many ways the Baltic states occupy a middle position between the Central and Eastern European countries and the former Soviet republics. In the early 1990s, the EC/EU

followed a policy of differentiation between Central and Eastern European countries and those countries emerging from the former Soviet Union. Differences were apparent from the introduction of the PHARE and TACIS assistance programmes, and later on from the adaptation of the 'Europe Agreements' and 'Partnership and Cooperation Agreements.' For a while the EU was hesitant to classify the Baltic states in one or other group. Hence, the EU signed Europe Agreements with the Baltic states only in June 1995, four years later than it did with Hungary and Poland, and two years later than with Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia. Still, this formal act meant an end to speculation about a possible 'third way' concerning the Baltic states' destiny.

The conclusion of the Europe Agreements implied that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were now to be treated in the same way as the Central and Eastern European countries. On this basis, the Baltic states joined the group of accession countries which allowed them to apply for EU membership a few months later. Nevertheless, the complexities of the historical legacy and geopolitical realities were leaving Baltic states with bleak perspectives to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria in order to be included among the candidates of the next eastward enlargement. Finally, a tough political decision was made and the Commission recommended that accession negotiations would be conducted initially with only one of the Baltic states, Estonia, on the basis of 'objective socio-economic criteria.' Latvia and Lithuania were left out of the first so-called 'Luxembourg group' of countries, only to be then included into the second 'Helsinki group' two years later. Anyway, later on a unified 'Laeken group' of ten candidate countries was formed putting all the Baltic states on the same accession timetable again.

All those subjective and objective elements left their mark on the development of the Baltic states' orientations and attitudes towards the EU issue.

Formation of attitudes towards the EU in Estonia

The logic of transition is different in newly independent states. Incorporation into the Soviet Union produced a specific pattern of transition whereby issues of sovereignty and security played a crucial role in combination with the fact that foreign diplomatic relations had to be developed from scratch. Consequently, the main concern of both the Estonian elites and general public was related to the 'return to the Europe' and search for 'hard security'. On this basis, issues of EU accession lagged far behind membership of the United Nations, the Council of Europe and NATO. Anyway, after achieving membership of the UN and the Council of Europe, and the fading hopes of swift accession to NATO (due to Russian opposition), increasing interest in economic issues and an acknowledgement of possible 'soft security' alternatives, EU accession gained attention gradually and soon moved to the top of the foreign policy agenda.

EU accession has been the highest political priority of every Estonian government since 1995. At first it was seen mainly as a foreign policy issue, but it soon came to be understood as having an all-encompassing nature and being central to internal reforms

and the domestic political process as well. At the same time, the Estonian public has consistently been one of the most Eurosceptic of the candidate countries.¹

Despite a broad elite consensus on EU membership, some parliamentary parties have occasionally tried to play the 'Eurosceptic card' for the strategic reasons of being in parliamentary opposition and/or reacting to rapid and significant shifts in the popular mood. The free market Reform Party contains factions who believe that the EU is over-regulated and that joining it would slow down Estonian economic growth. The People's Union, the main party representing the rural population, insisted that Estonia got a fair deal in the accession negotiations regarding the Common Agricultural Policy and that accession to the EU must guarantee the survival of Estonian culture. However, once in government both parties backed the EU accession process and shifted their focus on to obtaining the best possible benefits for their electorate. Even the catch-all Centre Party shifted from its Eurosceptic rhetoric of the need to put national interests first and its criticism that the government was too compliant to EU demands to a pro-EU position once it entered office in 2002.

Outside parliament, almost all parties have used Euroscepticism at some point in the hope of raising their profiles, particularly in early 2001 when support for EU membership dropped significantly among the general public. Parties with very different backgrounds and orientations - like the right-wing Estonian Future Party, Christian People's Party, Independence Party and Republican Party or the left-wing Russian Party in Estonia and the Estonian Social Democratic Labour Party - have all been united under the anti-EU umbrella at one time or another.

However, traditional domestic issues such as taxation, law and order, corruption, and national values dominated the March 2003 general election. The issue of EU membership did not play a significant role in the campaign.² No mainstream party seriously questioned EU membership; even those parliamentary parties that flirted with Euroscepticism, especially during the period when public opposition to EU membership was growing, soon returned to their previous pro-EU stances. The only media attention on the EU issue focused on the somewhat vague position of the Centre Party. On the one hand, this was a governing party that was fully implementing the EU accession process. On the other hand, it avoided making a clear statement on the EU during the election campaign, presumably angling for potential Eurosceptic voters who had no alternatives among the mainstream parties. It justified this on the grounds that the future perspectives for 'deepening' the EU process were unclear pending the outcome of the Convention on the Future of Europe. This shift back to a broad pro-EU consensus was probably mainly related to the tough competition that existed among accession countries for EU membership and the fear that Estonia would be left behind its close neighbours Latvia

¹ See European Commission. 2003. *Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2003.3*, Brussels: European Commission; and European Commission. 2001. *Applicant Countries Eurobarometer*, Brussels: European Commission.

² EU membership issue was rated only eleventh by the general public (*Postimees*. 2003. Valijad peavad üheks peamureks kuritegevust, 28 February). See: Evald Mikkel. 2003. *Europe and the Estonian Parliamentary Elections of 2 March 2003*, RIIA/OERN Election Briefing Paper No. 11, May 2003.

and Lithuania. Despite their later start in the accession negotiations, these two countries had already caught up with Estonia by late 2001 and were showing very strong intentions to enter the EU as soon as possible.

The anti-EU parties that attempted to focus on this issue played a very marginal role in the 2003 election campaign and performed poorly in terms of votes won: the Christian People's Party (1.1%), Independence Party (0.5%), Social Democratic Labour Party (0.4%) and the Russian Party in Estonia (0.2%).

The reasons for the basically low level of support for EU membership and relatively high level of Euroscepticism among the Estonian general public are complex. It is mainly a consequence of specific historical legacies (the negative experience of being in the Soviet 'Union' and an idealised notion of the independent statehood), proximity and connections with the Nordic countries (which arouses strong anti-EU feelings among certain interest groups) and specific unpopular government policies that were linked to the EU accession process.

Estonia is also characterized by the strong impact that public opinion had on party orientations, illustrated by the fact that a clear pattern of rising public Euroscepticism in the first half of 2001 year led to a corresponding adaptation of party stances. The main explanatory factor in this case is related to the development of a clear connection between the government's performance and EU accession. Growing dissatisfaction with government policies and a general perception that it did not take popular opinion into account forced the public to demonstrate its displeasure using the various means available. A general recognition that EU membership was one of the government's highest priorities might have turned the public against it as a means of castigating the government. As the government's ratings slid during the 2000 and the first half of 2001, so did popular backing for EU accession. When the government improved its standing in the second half of 2001, approval for EU membership also grew.

Interestingly, developments in the second half of 2001 showed an upswing in public support for EU membership. This is related to two political changes: the election of a new president in October 2001 and the formation of a new government coalition in January 2002. The unexpected victor of the presidential election Arnold Rüütel won with the votes of electoral college members representing rural regions and other perceived 'transition losers'; in other words, with the support of the typically more Eurosceptic segments of the population. Having their champion in office made them much more amenable to EU accession, particularly since Rüütel adopted a clearly pro-EU stance. Similarly, the change in government with the previously most vehement opposition party, the Centre Party, coming into office demonstrated that EU integration was not exclusively a project of the dominant elites. The Centre Party's base of support has also been among so-called 'transition losers'. This further confirms the assertion that public opinion on the European issue tended to be related to the popularity of the government³.

³See: Evald Mikkel and Andres Kasekamp. 2002.'Emerging party realignment? Party-based euroscepticism in Estonia,' Paper to be presented at ECPR Joint Workshop on Opposing Europe: Euroscepticism and Political Parties, *ECPR Joint Sessions*, Turin, March 22-27.

Constitutional and legal framework

Estonian post-communist elites have been deeply hesitant about using referendums as an element of the direct democracy. The new 1992 Constitution accepted popular initiatives to initiate referendums only for the first three years after it came into effect. After this the right to initiate referendums was left exclusively to the national parliament. In fact, because of the crucial issues of the nation- and state building that needed to be resolved in the early 1990s, two referendums were held during this period: on state independence and to confirm the new Constitution.

Referendums are not required on matters such as EU accession according to the Estonian Constitution. On the other hand, constitutional amendments had to be introduced to handle the question of EU membership, particularly changes in Article 3, and these required popular approval by referendum. According to the Estonian Constitutional framework, there is no minimum participation requirement for the referendum to be valid and the result is binding upon the government.

Until the 2002 Presidential elections the main public opinion framers were handling the whole mass mobilisation process, being certain about their capacity to frame public opinion in the desired way on this issue. In these circumstances, all the main actors showed a strong interest in holding a referendum on EU membership as a way of minimising the risks associated with this crucial decision. However, the 2002 Presidential and 2003 parliamentary elections, with their unexpected outcomes, introduced a strong element of uncertainty producing doubts and worries among the political elites. However, the promise to hold a referendum had already been given and the only outstanding issues related to the referendum were timing and the wording of the question. The main discussion was focused on the nature of amendments introduced to the Constitution and what should be the proper wording of the question. Finally, after prolonged wrangling in parliament, a complex compromise was reached that the referendum question should consist of two questions, which had to be answered simultaneously: "Are you in favour of accession to the European Union and passage of the Act on Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia?" The voters could either approve or reject both questions together. Significantly, only Estonian citizens could vote, leaving out a significant segment of Russian-speakers.⁴

Key issues surrounding the timing of the referendum were related to the common view among political actors that there should be a 'secure' distance between national elections and referendum and the idea that the referendum should occur after the signing of the EU Accession Treaty. This would give enough time to all sides involved to acquaint themselves with all the elements of the 'deal'. The idea of holding referendums on the same day in all the Baltic states was rejected even without any serious consideration among Estonian political actors.

⁴ According to the 2000 Population and Housing Census, Russian-speakers comprised around 30% of the population but only 15% of citizens.

The Campaign

The official campaign was run by the European Union Information Secretariat (ELIS) of the State Chancellery of Estonia that, from the moment of its formation in 1998, was responsible for the co-ordination and provision of EU-related information. The ‘National Referendum Information Campaign’ was supposed to be neutral, presenting general information about the EU and the referendum and simply encouraging people to vote. Indeed, the impartial informative elements appeared very strong in the general campaigning strategy. However, a clear pro-EU position and strong Yes conviction were easily detectable behind the comments and statements made by leaders and the main government and parliamentary actors.

The official referendum campaign began on June 25 with the Joint Statement ‘Decide the future of Estonia’ by the President, the Chairwoman of the Riigikogu (Estonian parliament) and the prime minister calling for a clear Yes vote. Later on, clear Yes statements followed from the government and all the main parliamentary parties.⁵. The official campaign was planned to last for about 80 days and consisted of three distinct stages: pre-campaign (25.06.03 – 01.08.03); explanatory campaign (01.08.03 – 01.09.03); and main campaign (01.09.03 – 13.09.03).

All the parliamentary parties, except for the Centre Party, displayed strong pro-EU stances during the campaign period. The most enthusiastic separate party campaign was run by leading party of the government, Res Publica, where party leader and prime minister Juhhan Parts openly called for a Yes vote. Only the Centre Party engaged seriously with the Eurosceptic issue, probably calculating that, given that 30-40% of Estonian voters have consistently shown strongly anti-EU views - and being the only parliamentary party to flirt with a Eurosceptic stance, they might thereby attract new supporters to the party. In the event, the Centre Party sent out a controversial message that attempted to appeal to both sides of the argument. On the one hand, the party Congress, held one month before the referendum, advised its followers to vote No. On the other hand, a significant part of the party leadership was strongly campaigning for a Yes vote and the influential party leader Edgar Savisaar left the issue largely open by encouraging voters to vote according to their consciences.

All the peripheral parties tended to be on the anti-EU side. The main party representing Russian-speakers, the United People’s Party of Estonia, shifted to a Eurosceptic position during the campaign. However, these parties tended to play a relatively minor role during the campaign period, apparently due to the extremely weak financial resources that they had left after the recent national elections. Instead various emerging civic action groups, movements and organisations played an increasing role in the No campaign.

The pro-EU side campaign spending amounted to about 16 million kroons, including the supposedly neutral EU and referendum information campaigns organised by ELIS and the Delegation of the European Commission in Estonia. The No campaign managed to

⁵ Except for the Centre Party where only part of its members and leaders joined the public Yes statement.

run on significantly lower costs of about 1.5 million kroons. However, Estonia is one of the few cases among the Central and East European candidate countries where the government gave some, although very limited, support to the campaigning activities of the No camp. Formally, all NGO projects could apply for financial support granted by the State Chancellery and the Open Estonian Foundation. Out of a total of 1.86 million kroons allocated for EU related activities, 1.05 million was given to the information services. On this basis, both the Yes and the No camps each received 525,000 kroons for their campaign activities. The No side's 525,000 kroons were evenly split between two anti-EU groups, the 'No to the EU Movement' and 'Our Own State'. The strongest external support to the No side came from British and Danish Eurosceptics. In this case, probably the most advanced and publicly recognised organisation on the No side, the Research Centre Free Europe, received some financial support from British Eurosceptic circles. Moreover, due to the lack of any significant resources, the No side also had very limited access to the media. Coverage in the most crucial media source, TV, was related only to news broadcasts. In addition Estonian national TV held one general debate of 90 minutes where three key figures from both camps presented their cases.

The main campaign themes were focused on the crucial issues of Estonian independence and sovereignty. Concerns about the impact of EC accession on living standards, particularly relating to the expected changes in prices for basic foods and other goods,⁶ also appeared to become increasingly important for among the general public. Broader issues of Estonian economic development and relations with traditional trading partners also played an important role. Negative historical experiences also focused many citizens' attention to issues related to the survival of the Estonian language and culture. Finally, nobody could escape the importance of the changing relations with Russia that EU accession implied.

The Yes campaign was short on specifics, using general slogans that focused on the economic and security gains of accession and presenting the referendum as a civilisational choice, with EU accession part of an inevitable historical process determining whether Estonia would be part of the West or the East. Probably the main argument or factor that contributed to the strength of the Yes campaign was its ability to collect together a number of widely recognised key organisations,⁷ individuals and public opinion formers whose public pro-EU statements had a strong impact on voters' attitudes. In addition to official efforts, a separate Yes campaign was launched by a number of civil society organizations. The most widely recognized civic initiative, the Estonian European Movement, was supported by a wide variety of leading figures from the intelligentsia and cultural elite.

The No campaign had difficulties convincing the general public with its arguments that related to: the loss of national sovereignty, the similarity of the two Unions (European

⁶ Expected increases in the price of commodities such as sugar, tobacco and petrol were the most widely discussed.

⁷ For example, trade unions, war veterans, the Academy of Science, the National Olympic Committee, the national football team, the employers organizations, the students' union, environmentalists, the Lutheran church, the farmers' union, the journalists union, the roundtable of NGOs, and the pensioners union.

and Soviet), increasing prices, economic slowdown, the unconstitutional nature of EU membership, and various aspects of the Russian issue.⁸ The Yes side was easily dismissing the comparison of the two Unions, claiming EU membership would open new markets and spur growth. They also argued that being inside the EU bloc would deflect economic or political pressure from Russia. Attempts by the No campaign to argue that EU membership would be unconstitutional turned out to be simply too complex for the general public. Probably the main weakness of the No side was its deep focus on the complex issues of sovereignty and legality rather than issues that were more important for most Estonians such as the possible impact of accession on the price of basic commodities.⁹

Earlier referendums held in other accession countries received relatively little coverage. The Lithuanian referendum attracted some attention but given that it was held in early May, after a long and quiet summer season its memory was already too distant to play any significant role in the campaign. The decision to hold the Latvian referendum after the Estonian one also meant that this potentially important result would not have any impact either.

The Results

66.83% of those voters who participated in the referendum voted to support accession and 33.17% were against (Table 1). In fact, those voting in favour represented only 42.60% of the total electorate. The turnout of 64.06% was close to the national average of all elections held after Estonia regained independence, but certainly above expectations in light of low turnouts in the most recent Estonian elections.¹⁰ The main reasons for the increased voter interest related to the crucial issues of national sovereignty and security in combination with sensitive economic problems related to personal well-being that the referendum arose. In addition to that, the nature of the referendum, only the third opportunity (and the first for 11 years) that the voters had to have a direct impact on the nation's future, certainly played an important role.

As in other post-communist accession states, turnout was lower and the share of those voting in favour was higher than pre-referendum forecasts had shown. Lower than expected turnout is explicable because of the massive official campaign pressure for participation (as a civic duty) and, hence, those participating in the pre-referendum polls were certainly eager to fulfill these high expectations of the community by indicating their intention to participate. The higher than expected share of Yes voters is related mainly to the shift of those who were undecided to the pro-EU camp.

⁸ Such as the threat posed to bilateral trade relations with Russia and Russia's successful use of international organizations to further the rights of the Russian-speaking population.

⁹ According to the survey carried by Faktum on June 2003 the top three concerns of Estonians in relation to the EU membership were: higher prices (93%); the sale of land and property to foreigners (77%); and the possible 'brain drain' (77%). (Avalik arvamus Eesti liitumisest Euroopa Liiduga: Ülevaade avaliku arvamuse küsitluse tulemustest, State Chancellery in cooperation with Faktum, June 2003).

¹⁰ ELIS hoped as a minimum to reach the level of turnout in the last national elections of 58.2%.

Table 1. Results of the September 2003 Estonian EU accession referendum

	Total	% of registered voters	% of valid votes
Registered voters	867,714	100	-
Votes cast	555,835	64.06	-
Valid votes	553,111	63.74	100
Yes	369,657	42.60	66.83
No	183,454	21.14	33.17

50%+1 of valid votes are required to make the referendum constitutionally valid.

Source: Estonian National Electoral Committee 2003

As expected, support for EU accession was highest in larger towns, Tartu (72.6%) and Tallinn (68.8%).¹¹ Support for EU membership was lowest in the ‘peripheral regions’ Ida-Virumaa (57.0%) and Võrumaa (58.3%). Both counties are border regions with Russia and characterised by many social and economic problems. In addition, Ida-Virumaa is also the region with the lowest share of ethnic Estonians (20.0%).

Table 2. Voting patterns in the September 2003 Estonian EU accession referendum

Voting by income level (kroons after tax)	Yes %	No %
0-2500	70.1	29.9
2501-7000	67.9	32.0
7001→	77.7	22.3
Voting by age		
below 30	72.3	27.7
31-45	66.4	33.6
46-60	72.4	27.6
above 60	75.1	24.9
Voting by 2003 party		
Centre Party	55.5	44.5
People’s Union	70.2	29.9
Moderates	75.7	24.2
Fatherland Union	80.0	20.0
Res Publica	80.3	19.7
Reform Party	86.0	14.0
Voting by education		
Primary	64.9	35.1
Vocational	69.2	30.8
Middle	72.5	27.5
Higher	76.4	23.6
Voting by place of residence		
Villages	66.6	33.5

¹¹ Tallinn actually came third after Harjumaa (69.9%), the county surrounding the capital.

Small towns	71.9	28.1
Large towns	75.8	24.2
Voting by ethnicity		
Estonian	72.8	27.2
Russian/Belarusian/ Ukrainian	56.2	43.8
Other	75.0	25.0

Source: Exit poll conducted by Department of Political Science, University of Tartu (890 respondents).

Table 2 presents the main voting patterns in the EU accession referendum according to an exit poll conducted by the University of Tartu. Estonia differs from most other post-communist accession countries in its extremely high diversity in terms of social and demographic characteristics. The most Eurosceptic tended to be middle-aged people between 31 and 45 (only 66.4% voted Yes), while older citizens above 60 were the most pro-EU group (75.1%) among all age groups. There was no simple linear relationship between income and support for EU membership, although those with above average incomes¹² were the most positive about EU membership (77.7%). Support for accession was clearly correlated with increasing levels of education, with the lowest support among those with only primary education (64.9%) and the highest for those with higher education (76.4%). Partisan cues appeared to be an important explanatory variable in determining voting patterns. Among parliamentary parties the supporters of the strongly pro-EU Reform Party were the most optimistic with 86.0% voting Yes, while voters of the Soft Eurosceptic Centre Party were the least enthusiastic about the EU membership with only 55.5% on the Yes side.

The most controversial outcome of the referendum was the shift in attitudes towards EU membership among ethnic Russians. For a long period, support for EU accession was greater amongst ethnic Russians than among ethnic Estonians. Because of the different historical backgrounds and their weaker roots in Estonia, most of the ethnic Russians apparently felt less concerned than Estonians about the supposed dangers to national sovereignty of joining the EU. On this basis, they were thought to be even more focused on economic issues, and therefore eager to enjoy the higher living standards that are expected to accompany EU membership. They have also benefited from EU pressure on Estonia to liberalize its language and citizenship policies and, in the same vein, were expected to benefit even more after accession. They were also more likely to make use of the free movement provisions within the EU to settle abroad and thought to prefer being citizens of the EU rather than a minority in a small country¹³.

This division between ethnic Russians and ethnic Estonians EU positions lasted until July 2001 when, following an increase in support for the EU among ethnic Estonians they reached the same levels as those among ethnic Russians. This position lasted more or less until July 2003, after which support for the EU among ethnic Estonians continued to

¹² Average income in Estonia was around 6600 kroons (around 420Euros).

¹³ See: Priit Järvet.. Attitude towards the EU in Estonia, in Helmut Hubel (ed.) with Aino Bannwart and Stefan Gänzle. *EU Enlargement and Beyond: The Baltic States and Russia*. Nordeuropäische Studien 18. 2002. Berlin: Berlin Verlag. p. 252.

increase and, in contrast, went down among ethnic Russians.¹⁴ As Table 2 shows, ethnic Russians' support for EU accession tended to be much lower (56.2%) in comparison with that among ethnic Estonians (72.8%) on referendum day itself.¹⁵

The reasons for the sudden drop in support for the EU among Russian-speakers appear to be complex. The Estonian authorities and mass media tend to blame a single factor, namely a poster issued by the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry reminding Estonians about the dangers coming from Russia by enumerating all the historical conflicts and interventions initiated by Russia on Estonian soil. The local Russian community reacted very sensitively to this poster, claiming that it had strong intentions to provoke inter-ethnic hatred. Apart from that it was felt to be simply unfair towards Russia and the Russians, given Estonia has had a similar (or even worse) historical experiences with most of its other bigger neighbors and rulers. Despite the fact that the posters were soon removed, the issue was taken very seriously by local Russian political actors and heavily expounded in the local Russian media. Even if it is possible to exaggerate the significance of this specific event, the government and pro-EU media's heavy exploitation of the 'Russian card' certainly left its impact on the voting pattern of ethnic Russians.

However, there are other factors playing a role in the formation of negative attitudes among Russian speakers towards European integration. The 'Russian card' might have simply played the role of a 'trigger point' which, in combination with other factors, shifted the position of ethnic Russians in a significant way. As EU accession has been one of the central goals of the government, disappointment with the government's policies towards the Russian minority provided grounds for an anti-EU vote to 'punish' the government. The Estonian nation- and state-building processes have meant a strong Westernisation process and, as an outcome, produced fear against such continuous changes which could (supposedly) disadvantage Russian-speakers. This reasoning is related to the fear of loosing traditional family relations and business connections with Russia. Finally, simple economic considerations related to the sensitive issue of an expected significant rise in prices for some basic commodities were moving to the forefront of many people's minds, and were an especially sensitive issue for ethnic Russians.

The Estonian National Electoral Committee and the Supreme Court of Estonia received 8 and 13 objections respectively as to the validity of the referendum. These were submitted by both private citizens and Eurosceptic organizations. Most individuals' complaints concerned alleged technical irregularities. The anti-EU activists questioned the general principles of holding the referendum in a specific way, claiming that the ballot as well as the questions posed violated Estonian legislation - particularly basic constitutional principles - in both content and form. However, both the Electoral Committee and

¹⁴ Actually, a small gap of 5-10% developed already from the December 2002, but the difference remained stable and was not as drastic as that which emerged in August-September 2003.

¹⁵ According to the pre-referendum polls conducted by EMOR the difference in support for accession between ethnic Estonians and Russians was 7% in August (respectively 62% and 55%) and even 21% in the first week of September (respectively 66% and 45%).

Supreme Court rejected all of these objections as either legally invalid or as simply polemical.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

Estonia is characterized by a large discrepancy in attitudes towards the EU between elite and masses. The high level of elite consensus on the need for EU accession contrasts with one of the lowest levels of support for European integration among all the accession countries. In fact, Estonian elites succeeded in framing the popular mood on the accession referendum in the way that they hoped to. The main argument for the majority of the Estonians was simply choosing ‘the lesser evil’. The level of participation in the referendum and support for accession were above expectations and provided Estonian elites with the confidence (or illusion?) that a strong mandate had been given to the current government and, in broader terms, to the whole political Establishment and its traditional policies.

The European issue gained its salience and moved to the centre of public debate for a few months during the referendum campaign. That does not mean that this interest will last long. During the last parliamentary election that was held six months before the referendum, most Estonians showed very little interest in the European issue when it came to determine their voting preferences. Europe will certainly remain a feature of political discourse, moving from those aspects related to accession to the debate about the EU’s future developments and specific EU-inspired policies. Already, the first Estonian reactions to the issues being raised in the Convention on the Future of Europe illustrate the new tough decisions and choices needed to be taken by Estonian elites. On this basis, on issues related to the further deepening and unification/federalization, Estonia seems to lean largely towards the kind of positions adopted by the United Kingdom. Being one of the tiniest future members of the EU, Estonia is also aligned with the diverse group of the small states, defending their rights to participate and have an impact upon decision-making process in the EU. In this sense we can talk about rising concerns and worries even among Estonian top decision makers, which might lead to further signs of Euroscepticism at the party level. In combination with the lowest level of the voters supporting the EU membership among the post-communist candidate countries in the accession referendum, this leaves still strong grounds for political actors to challenge the elite consensus on EU issues in various ways.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>