

Estonian foreign policy in focus

Introduction

This essay critically analyses the foreign policy of the Republic of Estonia in the most recent years. The fact that Estonia chaired and still coordinates a number of international organisations in 2014 and 2015 provides special relevance for the chosen time scale. Both the Baltic Cooperation and the Nordic-Baltic Cooperation were coordinated by the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Council of Baltic Sea States in presently under the Estonian presidency. These leadership roles give Estonia ample space to unfold its foreign policy plans and to promote the country's values and long term goals at least on the regional level.

The responsible state organ for directing and administering diplomatic and foreign relations in Estonia is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Välisministeerium*). Similarly to most developed countries the Estonian MFA is also divided into geographical and functional departments alike. The more traditional geographical departments concentrate on regions and countries of particular importance to the country concerned. The rather new functional departments deal with high profile general issues crossing over borders, such as climate change. Recently a blend of the two called multilateral departments is also gaining more and more importance as the role of international organisations is increasing (Berridge 2010, 10–12). In the Estonian context the 3rd (Eastern Europe and Central Asia) and 4th (Asia, Africa, Australia and Latin America) Divisions within the Political Department or the 1st (Western Europe and North America) Division within the Department of Europe and Transatlantic Cooperation are examples of the geographical distribution. The divisions of the External Economic and Development Cooperation Department follow the functional approach to global matters such as trade relations or humanitarian aid. The most complex multilateral approach is represented by the 2nd (Northern and Central Europe and Regional Cooperation) and 3rd (South-Eastern Europe and European Union General Affairs) Divisions of the Department of Europe and Transatlantic Cooperation.

A general problem for contemporary foreign policies in their strive to maintain coherence is to coordinate the activity of MFAs and other government departments

(OGDs). Due to the unprecedented complexity and range of international matters *direct dial diplomacy* has become common among various state agencies not necessarily linked to the MFA. In such European countries as Estonia or Hungary for example a coherent foreign policy is granted by the most radical method, which is to house the key functions (including foreign trade and development aid) under the same ministerial roof (Berridge 2010, 15–17).

Theoretical framework

In order to carry out the analysis of the foreign policy of Estonia which sets liberal democratic and liberal economic goals to itself I have chosen the liberal theory of international relations (IR). According to this IR theory, sometimes referred to as idealism, legal norms and moral values should drive foreign policymakers. In this sense it takes the *normative approach* focusing on how things *should be* as opposed to the explanatory approach seeking the answer to the question what it is like and why? Liberal theory also stresses the importance of *nation-states* as main actors in the international arena, yet acknowledging the *interdependency* of the system. The basic assumption is that wars can be avoided by wide-scale cooperation among the nation-states in areas of common interest. (Heywood 2013, 126–127)

Liberal IR theory may prove to be very fruitful in the case of Estonia, as the country's foreign policy is clearly based on such values and goals which are in harmony with the liberal worldview. What are these main objectives reflected by foreign policy documents (MFA of Estonia, 2015)? From the economic point of view Estonia stresses the necessity of premises for a liberal economic system worldwide and considers itself as a promoter of free market (Objectives 2 and 5). Politically speaking Estonia is committed to spread the rule of law, human rights, the freedom of press and democracy within the framework of development cooperation targeting countries lacking some of these liberal democratic values (Objective 5). In its international relations Estonia wishes to be an initiator rather than a passive member and highlights the necessity of a strong NATO and EU and also its ties to the United States of America (Objectives 1 and 4).

Global orientation

Estonia's foreign policy orientation is unequivocally Euro-Atlantic, that is European Union (EU) and United States of America (USA) centred. To some extent this is probably the result of the Cold War mentality gaining more relevance again in the light of recent developments in Ukraine. Due to the perceived military threat from Russia the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the EU's Common Foreign and Defence Policy (CFDP) together with the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) take a prominent place among the priorities (Objective 1). The strong alliance with the USA is mentioned separately as well and the presidential visit of Barack Obama in September 2014 to Tallinn to reassure Estonians about his support especially underpins the importance of these ties. Estonia serves as a strategic partner in exchange in many other aspects of countering new threats posed to the Euro-Atlantic community, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cyberspace threats, or terrorism (Objective 1).

Regarding the EU in addition to a well-developed CFSP and ESDP the undisturbed functioning of the internal market is also a major desire. Despite Estonia's commitment to the free market principle globally, it does not hesitate to approve the EU sanctions on Russia since March 2014 (EU Newsroom, 2015). In response to the travel bans and the freezing of bank accounts owned by certain Russian individuals or businesses Russia also issued sanctions against the European Union manifesting in the embargo on agricultural products in August 2014. Even though dairy farmers are affected very negatively by the embargo Estonia continues to uphold its support for the EU sanctions without doubt. Minister of Foreign Trade and Entrepreneurship, Anne Sulling even warned milk producers and distributors to avoid looking for alternative trade routes to Russia via Belarus, Turkey or Kazakhstan (ERR News, 2014a). In this case we may detect a discrepancy between the promoted value of a liberal economy and the actual decisions grossly limiting free trade and an "environment conducive to" foreign investment (see Objective 2). State controlled economy, though obviously not as extreme as the Marxist model, is a deviation from liberal principles.

Another spectacular example of pragmatic considerations dominating over value-based foreign policy objectives is the statement by the aforementioned Anne

Sulling about the negative economic impact of the Dalai Lama's unofficial visit to Estonia in 2011. The politician argued that Estonian dairy products banned from the Russian market would receive a much warmer welcome in China in case the meeting of the Tibetan leader in exile and Estonian officials would not have caused the freezing of bilateral trade relations between China and Estonia (ERR News, 2014b).

On the world stage Estonia wishes to present itself as an innovative state ready to share its experiences about global matters with others (Objective 4). Indeed we can confirm that Estonia is a forerunner of e-government and other Information Technology (IT) based research. It is not a coincidence that NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence is based in the capital, Tallinn. Similarly, the revolutionary e-citizenship currently under development is also such an innovation which proves the reality content of the positive image projected by the MFA documents. The structure of the MFA also reflects the importance attributed to development cooperation (Objective 5) throughout the Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Division which also serves the purpose of promoting FP objectives.

Regional orientation

Within the European continent Estonia's primary interest lies in Northern Europe as a logical result of its geographic location and historical past. The historical connections to the former Swedish Empire (including Finland) and Danish Realm are echoed by such statements as "Estonians consider themselves Scandinavian and their country a Nordic, not Baltic State" (Estonian Life 2004, 48). Even so, since 2008 Estonia participates in the EU CSDP's Nordic Battlegroup of 2500 soldiers together with Latvia and Lithuania besides Ireland, Norway, Sweden and Finland. The three most important institutions of regional cooperation are the Baltic Cooperation, the Nordic-Baltic Cooperation (NB8) and the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS). As mentioned in the introduction the former two were coordinated by Estonia in 2014 and the latter remained so till June 2015.

As a preliminary point we may state that to a large extent the Baltic Cooperation (comprised of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) is converging towards the NB8 (comprised of Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland in addition to the three Baltic republics). Common features of the priority areas include cooperation in

IT-policy (also cyber defence) and energy policy (development of new gas pipelines). In the case of the former the strengthening cohesion *within* the NB8 format is also desirable. Although primarily a regional institution, NB8 also includes the USA in its cyber defence project by organising an experts' seminar in autumn 2014 jointly. A strong need for common energy policy is manifested in the plans to implement Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan (BEMIP) in order to integrate Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania better into the EU gas pipeline system. Submarine power cable systems for transferring electricity such as Estlink 2 (Finland-Estonia) and NordBalt (Sweden-Lithuania) are relatively well developed (BSY, 2015).

Naturally there are some differences as well in fields of cooperation. NB8 expresses an intense interest in EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) as the meeting of government officials from the prospective member countries in autumn 2014 demonstrates. NB8 is also more open towards global cooperation for the sake of regional integration, as the USA initiated Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (e-PINE) programme suggests. In this respect the USA preceded the EU by launching this project in 2003 together with NB8, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus and South Caucasus (Department of State, 2015). Estonia, in the framework of NB8, also cooperates with the United Kingdom at the Northern Future Forum annually since 2011 and with the Visegrád4 (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) since 2013. In this sense one may argue that Estonia's orientation is not only Nordic, but Central European as well.

However there are some major discrepancies at the regional level also. One of the goals of the Baltic Cooperation in 2014 was to develop transport infrastructure connection among the three member states. In contrast to this objective not much has been done up to recent times regarding the planned Rail Baltica track line connecting Warsaw to Tallinn by rail. So far only Lithuania made substantial efforts for building this high-speed line, while Estonia and Latvia will start constructions on their own sections only in 2017 the earliest (Rail Baltic 2015). It must be noted that this project is funded 85% by the EU and not by members of the Baltic Cooperation solely, but the lasting debates on the track of the rail and the postponing of construction works question the image of Estonia as an innovative state and also its willingness to "take international responsibility and commitment" (Objective 4).

The situation of ethnic-Russians is also a topic worth a paragraph. Interestingly, no mention of Russia can be seen on the webpage of the MFA other

than as a member of CBSS. This seems a bit strange in light of the fact that 24% of the entire population belongs to the Russian minority. As scholarly research points out Estonia is not yet fully synchronised with EU minority rights norms, although partially Russia is also to be blamed for an unsuccessful integration policy (Schulze 2010). Russia seems to be the bugaboo for Estonian foreign affairs, an entity which should be avoided as much as possible. Nevertheless, cross-border cooperation with Russian border guards remains professionally efficient (Objective 3) despite the political tensions according to the field trip of the Euborderregions Conference at the University of Tartu in November 2014 to Koidula border crossing point.

Kinship policy

A crucially important source of identity for most Estonians both on a personal level and on the state level is their Finno-Ugric identity. The Finno-Ugric division of the Uralic language family is home to circa two dozens of peoples of various sizes, ranging from less than one hundred Votes living in Russia to approximately 14 million Hungarians mostly inhabiting the Carpathian Basin. The 1 million Estonians all around the world still belong to the three largest Finno-Ugric nations which by the way poses their own sovereign states (Hungary, Finland, Estonia).

A formal manifestation of the importance of kinship policy is the so called Tribal Day (*hõimupäev*) which is dedicated to cherish Estonia's unique linguistic and cultural identity as well as to think about other Finno-Ugric peoples. Tribal Day is an official flag day celebrated on the third Saturday of October each year. In 1999 the Estonian government launched the Kindred People's Programme which is funded by multiple ministries, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to enhance the flourishing of Uralic peoples lacking an independent nation-state. The programme divided into five year sections is coordinated by the non-profit organisation Fenno-Ugria based in Tallinn. The five main areas of activity are (1) education, (2) research, (3) cultural exchange programmes, (4) healthcare, and (5) environment protection (FU 2015). Originally founded in 1927, Fenno-Ugria continued to function in 1991 after decades of Soviet rule as an umbrella organisation for over fifty institutions from the private and public sphere alike. Chairman of the organisation, Professor of Uralic Languages Tõnu Seilenthal established Lennart Meri "The Waterfowl People" Fund in 2007 with

the purpose of supporting the creative and community-benefiting activities of young individuals for the good of Finno-Ugric peoples.

Estonia was the host country for a number of international youth events thematised by Uralic cultural connections since re-gaining independence from the Soviet Union. The International Finno-Ugric Students' Conference (IFUSCO) took place in Tallinn in 2000 and in the second largest Estonian city Tartu in 1990 and 2012. The Conference of the Youth Association of Finno-Ugric Peoples (MAFUN, Молодежной Ассоциации Финно-Угорских Народов) was also organised in Tartu in July 2015.

Not only through domestic institutions does the Estonian government try to promote the wellbeing of indigenous peoples and be an advocate of their cause, but also at prestigious international forums. Incumbent president, Toomas Hendrik Ilves delivered a speech in the United Nations World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in September 2014 highlighting the deteriorating conditions Votes and Izhorians face in North-Western Russia. While referring to them as "Finno-Ugric cousins" the president stated "that the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples is a form of wealth that clearly outweighs the economic profit gained by extensive and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources" referring to the construction of Ust-Luga seaport in Votland and a chemical plant in Izhoria (President 2014).

Drawing a sharp contrast between the "free world" and the "authoritarian world" is also part of the president's rhetoric when talking about the situation of kindred peoples. In January 2015 at the opening of the Finno-Ugric Capital of Culture event in the South-Estonian village of Obinitsa Mr Ilves compared the favourable situation of the Sami and Liv peoples in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Latvia to the mistreatment of Votes living near the above mentioned Ust-Luga port in Russia adding that "in recent years giving Finno-Ugric people education in their own languages has been terminated or restricted in Russia, which accelerates their assimilation and the disappearance of their culture" (President 2015).

The reason why Estonia's kinship policies may be in conflict with the liberal theory of international relations is that they are essentially ethnic-based. As indicated in the previous paragraphs a number of charitable funds and political speeches see Finno-Ugric nations as partners to Estonians on linguistic and genetic terms. While the liberal theory generally applied by the government indeed stresses the importance of national self-determination (Baylis et al, 109), liberalism prefers the

concept of civic nationalism rather than ethnic nationalism. Estonian foreign policy addresses all these kindred folks on a kinship basis, thus fosters the strengthening of ethnic ties and tribalism as opposed to civic bonds to the respective nation-state, in this case predominantly the Russian Federation. A post-Westphalian element of Estonian foreign policy is that it overlooks existing state borders and ranks national identity issues more important than “entrenched notions of territoriality and sovereignty” (Baylis et al, 85). This might be one key factor why Russia is so hostile towards any kind of external criticism regarding the treatment of its national minorities.

On the other hand it must be acknowledged that by revealing the deficiencies of Russian minority policies and closely related to this the violation of human rights, democratic norms, pluralism, transnational cooperation, natural resources and the right of national self-determination Estonian foreign policy is in-line with its proclaimed liberal values. The basic contradiction lies within the question of loyalty: to whom shall Finno-Ugric nations feel more attached, their kindred peoples or the territorially competent Russian Federation?

Conclusions

Estonian foreign policy is Euro-Atlantic oriented as its emphasis on NATO and the European Union underpin. Not independently from this kind of orientation the country's political and economic outlook is driven by liberal principles, although in some cases these principles are overwritten by other interests as the example of financial sanctions on Russia and the ethnic-based kinship policy demonstrate. Taking this into account we may claim that the joint endeavours of the Baltic States are pragmatic and practical not only when they cooperate with each other at a regional level, but also when it comes to defending the global interests of Estonia as a unitary nation-state actor.

Among all of its international partners Estonia has the most unstable relations with Russia currently, largely as a consequence of the Ukrainian crisis and the kindred peoples' policy primarily targeting Finno-Ugric national minorities living within the Russian Federation. The great uncertainty characterizing the two country's relationship is probably best illustrated by the protracted border treaty negotiations

dating back to 1996. In the past nearly two decades three attempts have been made to ratify the agreements by both parliaments, yet no final approval has been achieved by the Russian Duma since the start of the newest ratification process in April 2015 (ERR News 2015). As things stand presently no major improvement can be expected in the foreseeable future in the two country's diplomatic relations.

Contrary to this, a major redrawing of potential foreign trade partners is already in process. The new tendency of establishing African and South-East Asian trade connections can be interpreted as an attempt to soften the critical damage of the national economy caused by the EU sanctions and the Russian embargo. The policy of "southern opening" is not completely unknown within the wider region, as for instance Hungary also pursues this controversial foreign policy for the time being.

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