



ANALYSIS

NO GAIN WITHOUT PAIN

ESTONIA'S VIEWS ON EU ENLARGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since joining the European Union (EU) in 2004, Estonia has consistently supported further enlargement for two primary reasons: First, the country has had a successful experience of membership, during which the national GDP grew almost fourfold, from 9 800 million euros in 2004 to 36 000 million euros in 2022.¹ Second, while NATO is regarded as the strongest security guarantee for Estonia, EU membership enhances Estonia's relations with other European countries and reinforces an understanding that historically, culturally, and politically, Estonia is a European country. Although security was not the primary motivation for its own EU accession, Estonia treats enlargement as a form of geopolitics. In the words of Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas: "Estonia knows from its own experience that joining the EU is a boost to both prosperity and stability, which in turn strengthens the security of Europe as a whole."²

While there is broad support for enlargement in Estonia, nuances exist regarding the trade-off between the geopolitical argument for enlargement and the potential losses that Estonia might face

While there is broad support for enlargement in Estonia, particularly when it comes to Ukraine, nuances exist among different parties regarding the trade-off between the geopolitical argument for enlargement and

¹ "Sisemajanduse koguprodukt ja kogurahvatulu [Gross domestic product and gross national income]," Statistikaamet, 2023.

² "Prime Minister Kallas: Estonia supports the Western Balkans joining the EU," Government of Estonia, 13 December 2023.

the potential losses that Estonia might face. This analysis focuses on the opportunities and challenges associated with the path to EU enlargement, particularly considering Estonia's viewpoint. Where relevant, it highlights positions and arguments prevalent in the domestic public debate. More specifically, the analysis delves into Estonia's stances regarding the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, potential changes to the EU's budget, the potential expansion of qualified majority voting in specific areas of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the reduction in the size of the European Commission.

The analysis is based on seven interviews conducted in November and December 2023 – six with Estonian MPs and MEPs, including representatives of all parliamentary parties, and one interview with a representative of the Government Office. Documents and media sources relevant to the analysis have also been consulted.

1. BROAD SUPPORT

Estonia currently has six parties represented in its parliament. Of these six, the populist-right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) is the most opposed to further EU enlargement. Rather than discussing potential enlargement in a general sense, they want to approach it on a case-by-case basis, depending on the specific country, its joining circumstances, and the potential impact on the power held by EU institutions and national governments, the economy, and policy. EKRE opposes further transfers of powers to EU institutions,³ viewing enlargement as heightening the risks of such transfers. Consequently, they are not only against changing the EU treaties but oppose any political reforms in the governance of the EU that would deepen integration. They also perceive some actions of the Commission and the European Parliament as exceeding the mandate of the treaties. In the event of the proposal of reforms that might

³ "Eesti Konservatiivse Rahvaerakonna 2023. aasta Riigikogu Valimiste Programm [The 2023 Riigikogu Election Programme of the Estonian Conservative People's Party]," Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, 28 January 2023.

dilute the Member States' powers, EKRE would insist on a national referendum.⁴

In contrast to EKRE, the remaining five parties are in favour of further enlargement, particularly in the case of Ukraine. Nevertheless, they also emphasise that any enlargement must happen in accordance with all the agreed accession criteria – including the candidate countries adopting and implementing all existing EU regulations (the *acquis*)⁵ – rather than as a gesture of political goodwill. The Estonian government does not support amending the EU Treaties.⁶ However, the coalition parties – the Reform Party, Eesti 200, and the Social Democrats – are more inclined towards flexibility and exploring the possibilities for internal reforms under the existing treaties than the opposition parties – namely, EKRE, the Centre Party, and Fatherland (Isamaa).

In general, Estonian politicians and officials believe that the EU can expand to 36 members without undergoing substantial internal reforms

In general, Estonian politicians and officials believe that the EU can expand to 36 members without undergoing substantial internal reforms. They also stress that it is unlikely that the current Member States will reach a consensus on treaty reform that would significantly limit the existing rights and powers of national governments. As argued by senior Estonian and EU diplomat Matti Maasikas, former Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, if expanding the number of club members from 6 to 15 and then 28 did not paralyse the decision-making mechanisms, neither would expanding to 36 members. However, Maasikas also considers it necessary to initiate and participate in the debates on internal reforms in order to proceed with the enlargement process from the EU

⁴ Madis Hindre, Arp Müller and Mait Ots, "[Eesti ei näe vajadust muuta Euroopa Liidu aluslepinguid](#) [Estonia sees no need to change the basic treaties of the European Union]," *ERR*, 23 November 2023.

⁵ "[Conditions for Membership](#)," European Commission, 6 June 2012.

⁶ "[Speech by Prime Minister Kaja Kallas on the Government's EU Policy Priorities](#)," Eesti Vabariigi Valitsus, 12 December 2023.

side.⁷ This reflects the concern of Estonian decision makers that some governments less enthusiastic about EU enlargement might exploit the call for internal reforms to slow down or derail the process of enlargement.

In Estonia, the positive implications of EU enlargement are typically viewed through the lens of security and prosperity: strengthening Europe's security, improving living standards

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within the candidate countries, and providing new impetus to the EU economy while also expanding the community of states governed according to European values.

The securitised view is particularly relevant in the case of Ukraine, as it is a robust military power that, similarly to the Baltic states and Poland, perceives Russia as a long-term direct threat to the security of Europe. Consequently, as an EU member, Ukraine would be expected to align itself with like-minded Eastern Flank countries, placing significant emphasis on defence and security. The Baltics and Poland are the states leading the increase in defence expenditure in Europe. They also advocate for other Member States to step up and explore the possible ways to enhance the European defence industry. At the same time, all the politicians interviewed acknowledged that Ukraine's accession is still a long way off and will be directly influenced by how the war unfolds, with several also warning against sending signals that could be taken as false hope.

The argument for improved economic prospects is based on past experience, where joining the EU unlocked the substantial potential of the new Member States. Elevated living standards across Europe will foster greater unity and prosperity for all. If Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkan countries

⁷ Matti Maasikas, "[TULEVIKU EUROOPA | Matti Maasikas: Euroopa Liidu laienemiseks tasub kaaluda ühehäälisusest loobumist](#) [EUROPE OF THE FUTURE | Matti Maasikas: In order to expand the European Union, it is worth considering giving up unanimity]," *Eesti Päevaleht*, 12 February 2024.

were to join, the EU would acquire an additional 60 million consumers, creating numerous new economic opportunities for the single market. However, concerns persist, particularly in the employment sector. The experience of the Member States that joined in 2004 might offer insights to address this apprehension.

The accession of all candidate countries is seen as being in the EU's geopolitical interests and a means to counter malign Russian influence

The candidacies of Moldova and the Western Balkan countries receive less attention in Estonia than that of Ukraine. However, the accession of all candidate countries is seen as being in the EU's geopolitical interests and a means to counter malign Russian influence. Furthermore, the EU's accession criteria serve as a tool to ensure that European values, such as the protection of human rights and the rule of law, are upheld. Estonia is supporting reform efforts in candidate countries, focusing in particular on digitalisation and cybersecurity. While Ukraine is the most important partner,⁸ Estonia is also contributing to raising the cyber capabilities of Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, which are all EU candidate countries, as well as NATO allies.⁹

2. BUDGETARY REFORMS

The possible negative consequences of enlargement for Estonia are seen as more concrete and direct than the broad positive outcomes. The primary concerns here are that Estonia will receive less money from the EU budget and that the potential reforms within the EU might impact Estonia's decision-making power.

Estonia would be in favour of reforming the Common Agricultural Policy to achieve greater equality among the Member States, as the allocation of direct payments between old

and new EU Member States has not resulted in an up-to-schedule convergence process.¹⁰ However, there is no consensus over whether Ukraine's accession would be a net positive or a net negative event for Estonia's agricultural sector. Some politicians are sceptical that, if eventually agreed upon, reforms in the Common Agricultural Policy would be beneficial to Estonia, as the lobby of Western European farmers is perceived to be capable of overriding the interests of post-2004 Member States. A contrasting view is that Ukraine would be a strong voice next to Poland in demanding more equal opportunities.

Additionally, the easing of access to Ukrainian agricultural products might bring benefits to consumers that outweigh the interests of farmers. Overall, changes to agricultural policy are seen as a low-priority issue in Estonia, as the direct payouts from the Common Agricultural Policy to Estonia are already low. The risk is that debates over reforming the Common Agricultural Policy are stalled as a way to delay the accession of candidate countries.

The notion that Estonia will lose financially if Ukraine and several of the smaller candidate countries were to join is almost universally accepted in Estonia. The shift from being a net beneficiary to a net contributor is anyway likely to occur in the upcoming years as Estonia's economy inches closer to the EU average and surpasses some older Member States.

The notion that Estonia will lose financially if Ukraine and several of the smaller candidate countries were to join is almost universally accepted in Estonia

Ukraine's accession will only accelerate this process, but the government's view is that any financial losses for Estonia would be offset by the security and political benefits that a strengthened EU geopolitical position would entail.

⁸ Merle Maigre, "An E-Integration Marathon: The Potential Impact of Ukrainian Membership on the EU's Digitalisation and Cybersecurity," ICDS, 11 January 2024.

⁹ "Prime Minister Kallas: Estonia supports the Western Balkans joining the EU," Government of Estonia

¹⁰ Artiom Volkov, Tomas Balezentis, Mangirdas Morkunas, and Dalia Streimikiene, "In a Search for Equity: Do Direct Payments under the Common Agricultural Policy Induce Convergence in the European Union?" *Sustainability* 11, no. 12 (24 June 2019): 3462.

The exact numbers would depend on how the budget rules are set. Member States can agree to keep the budget at about 1% of EU-wide GDP and allocate the sum among a greater number of recipients. Alternatively, they may raise the budget to take into account the greater needs of the less-developed candidate countries, particularly Ukraine, whose reconstruction the EU is already financing through several funds.¹¹ Currently, Estonia expects that payments from cohesion funds will be phased out gradually for members who become net contributors due to EU enlargement, allowing time for the states and economies to adjust.¹²

3. REFORMS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Some EU Member States and leaders, such as President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen, are of the view that, in order to improve the efficiency of decision-making with more than 27 Member States, Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) should be expanded into fields where decisions in the Council are currently made unanimously, such as in the common foreign and security policy. This issue has been subject to debate for years, yet as of now, not even a majority of the Member States support the shift, not to mention the unanimous acceptance needed in the European Council to change the practice.¹³

Some Member States are in favour of using a specific CFSP *passerelle* clause (Article 31(3) TEU) to use QMV on a case-by-case basis in certain fields, such as with sanctions policy or human rights protection (the *passerelle* clause does not apply to military or defence policy).¹⁴

¹¹ Karin Kondor-Tabun, "The impact of Ukraine joining the EU on Estonian subsidies from the EU budget and Estonia's contribution to the EU budget," forthcoming publication by ICDS.

¹² Henry Foy and Barney Jopson, "[Estonia Ready to Lose Funding if Ukraine Joins EU, Prime Minister Says](#)," *Financial Times*, 10 October 2023.

¹³ Nicole Koenig, "[Towards QMV in EU Foreign Policy: Different Paths at Multiple Speed](#)," *Jacques Delors Centre for European Affairs at the Hertie School in Berlin*, 14 October 2022: 1-2.

¹⁴ Ramses A. Wessel and Viktor Szép, "[The Implementation of Article 31 of the Treaty on European Union and the Use of Qualified Majority Voting](#)," European Parliament, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, November 2022.

A study conducted by Nicole Koenig in 2020 identified the founding members of Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, as well as Finland, Spain, and Sweden, as being supportive of this idea. Ten Member States either expressed scepticism towards the idea or did not clearly state their opinion, while another ten – primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe – were firmly opposed.¹⁵

Estonia was classified in this study as firmly opposed, and this remains the government's position. However, in light of the Russian war against Ukraine, there is widespread frustration in Estonia over the fact that the EU's response to the war has repeatedly been sabotaged by one Member State. Hungary has delayed the approval of sanctions packages and diluted the sanctions. Furthermore, Hungary only allowed the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine after German Chancellor Olaf Schultz convinced Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban to leave the room when the decision was taken in the European Council so that the latter could save face and avoid endorsing that decision.¹⁶

Foreign policy experts in Estonia are gradually warming up to the idea. In 2022, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of Estonia commissioned a study to assess the implementation of QMV in CFSP based on Estonia's interests and position, considering the arguments and positions of other countries. Following the analysis and interviews with experts, the authors from the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu cautiously expressed their support for the increased use of QMV.¹⁷ However, it is still too early to denote a shift in Estonia's stance, as there is no consensus over the matter between Estonian parties.

¹⁵ Nicole Koenig, "[Qualified Majority Voting in EU Foreign Policy: Mapping Preferences](#)," *Jacques Delors Centre for European Affairs at the Hertie School in Berlin*, 10 February 2020.

¹⁶ "[Germany's Scholz: 'Friendly Union Proposal' for Orban to Leave Room for Ukraine Decision](#)," *Reuters*, 15 December 2023.

¹⁷ Piret Ehin, Birgit Aasa, Maili Vilson and Anna-Lisa Aavik. "[Kvalifitseeritud häälteenamused Euroopa Liidu välis- ja julgeolekupoliitikas: poolt- ja vastuargumendid](#) [Qualified majority in the European Union's foreign and security policy: arguments for and against]," Riigikogu, 30 May 2022.

The government opposes expanding QMV to foreign policy issues, seeing the requirement of unanimous decision-making as an assurance for the smaller states that decisions affecting their vital interests are not made over their heads.¹⁸ Nevertheless, MEPs from the coalition parties have begun to embrace the view that expanding QMV to specific foreign policy issues could be an effective way to circumvent obstruction from one or two governments. For example, this position has been defended by MEP Urmas Paet of the ruling Reform Party.¹⁹

Similarly, MEP Marina Kaljurand from the Social Democrats has cited the example of Hungary as support for the elimination of the unanimity vote in matters like sanctions or the start of accession negotiations. She argues that Estonia has always been able to find coalition partners for its positions, and moving towards QMV in certain foreign policy decisions would empower countries that want to negotiate and find compromises.²⁰ The case for expanding QMV is bolstered by the expectation that Ukraine's accession would protect the security interests of the Baltic states and Poland, making it challenging or even impossible to pass a decision in foreign and security policy that all these countries would oppose.

On the opposing side are MEPs from the conservative parties. MEP Riho Terras from the Fatherland (Isamaa) categorically rejects the expansion of QMV, asserting that the veto right is the only factor that compels major powers in the EU to engage with and consider the opinions of the smaller Member States.²¹ MEP Jaak Madison of the Eurosceptical party EKRE has criticised the calls to depart from the unanimity standard on the grounds

that national sovereignty would be lost and that it would allow Estonia's interests to be steamrolled.²²

Thus far, the view that veto power is the last resort for small states to protect their national interests is the more widely accepted

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one. The topic is likely to be raised in the campaign debates ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, as the contrasting narratives of preventing blackmailing and safeguarding national sovereignty make for a catchy story. However, given that procedural changes also necessitate unanimous adoption, little progress is likely to be achieved anyway.

There is even less appetite for reducing the number of Commissioners. For a small state, a Commissioner, along with the Commissioner's cabinet, serves as a means to gain more presence and visibility in Brussels, as well as a channel of information back to their national government. Additionally, there is a sense among Eastern European countries that they are consistently overlooked for top positions in the EU, which are still predominantly held by Western Europeans, despite "New" Member States celebrating 20 years of membership this year. The Estonian government is open to discussing how tasks can be grouped or differentiated among the commissioners to avoid duplication and improve efficiency. However, Estonia is unlikely to relinquish its claim to a Commissioner's seat. Similarly to ending QMV in CFSP, reaching a unanimous agreement between Member States on this question would be challenging.

¹⁸ ["Eesti toetab jätkuvalt EL välis- ja julgeolekupoliitika otsustusprotsessis ühehäälsust](#) [Estonia continues to support unanimity in the EU foreign and security policy decision-making process]," Eesti Vabariigi Valitsus, 19 January 2023.

¹⁹ Mari Liis-Truusõõt, ["EUROOPA ERISAADE | EL ägab Orbáni väljapressimise all. Mida teha? Paet ja Mikser on eri meelt](#) [EUROPEAN SPECIAL | The EU is groaning under Orbán's blackmail. What to do? Paet and Mikser disagree]" *Delfi*, 14 September 2022.

²⁰ Margitta Otsmaa, ["Estonian MEP on Orban Veto: EU Could Drop Unanimity Principle in Certain Matters"](#), *ERR*, 15 December 2023.

²¹ Riho Terras, ["Euroopa peavoolu "Me saame hakkama" toidab populistide](#) [Europe's mainstream "We can do it" feeds the populists]," *ERR*, 9 December 2023.

²² ["Jaak Madison ühehäälsuse nõude kaotamisest välispoliitikas: see on eelkõige kahjulik väikeriikidele](#) [Jack Madison on the abolition of the requirement of unanimity in foreign policy: it is especially harmful to small countries]," *Uued Uudised*, 14 March 2023.

CONCLUSION

In Estonian politics, there is currently a broad consensus regarding the benefits of EU enlargement and a preparedness to accept some potential negative consequences of adding new members to the club. This consensus is particularly evident in the case of Ukraine, given that the security benefits of Ukraine's accession are widely recognised. However, most parties also express support for other candidate countries joining the EU.

The consensus is reflected in the government's position of strong support for enlargement. In addition to the three coalition parties, enlargement is generally also backed by the Centre Party and Fatherland. The Eurosceptical EKRE party is the least enthusiastic about including new members in the EU. However, it has not yet actively campaigned against enlargement either.

Based on this analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, the government and all parties maintain a preference for a strictly merit-based approach to EU enlargement – even in the case of Ukraine. Estonian politicians warn against giving false hope to Ukrainians that acceptance into the EU will be swift and smooth. Second, the potential budgetary implications of adding eight new, less-developed countries to the EU are not currently a major political concern in Estonia. While this may change as precise figures and losses become clearer, Estonia can draw on its own success story with the 2004 enlargement to emphasise that a credible accession process and EU membership offer numerous economic opportunities, ultimately contributing to the prosperity of the entire EU.

Third, the needle has started to move toward the view that it might be beneficial to decide more issues in CFSP by QMV. However,

acceptance of this idea is not yet widespread enough to signal a significant shift in Estonia's traditional concern that relinquishing the veto power could mean sacrificing the option of last resort for smaller Member States. The government's stance remains unchanged, and the support of the idea among some MEPs is more a reflection of their personal views rather than a party-wide policy choice. Fourth, the government and all parliamentary parties are reluctant to reduce the number of Commissioners in the EU, viewing them as essential for the country's representation in EU policymaking.

Overall, the perceived benefits of EU enlargement, particularly in countering Russian influence and consolidating EU values in other European nations, are considered to far outweigh the potential drawbacks.

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Moreover, the political sensitivities related to enlargement are more limited in Estonia compared to some other Member States. Estonia is not a significant net contributor to the EU budget, lacks direct economic competition with Ukraine, and has a very small agricultural sector. Unlike some Southern European states that have made political demands of the Western Balkan countries – for example, Greece's insistence that North Macedonia change its name – Estonia has voiced no specific demands beyond that the Western Balkan countries transparently adapt to and enforce the *acquis*. It is in Estonia's interest to engage in the discussions on EU enlargement and internal reform actively and constructively.

ANNEX. QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWS

1. Do you agree with the Estonian position of strong support for EU enlargement? Why or why not?
2. What positive consequences would enlargement have for Estonia? E.g. improved regional security, a geopolitically stronger EU, a stronger group of like-minded countries in the EU.
3. Which negative consequences or costs should Estonia expect of enlargement? E.g. receiving less money from the EU budget, tougher economic competition, less influence in EU institutions.
4. Which internal reforms in the EU are necessary?
 - a. Common agricultural policy
 - b. Cohesion funds
 - c. Decision-making procedures, notably increased use of QMV, including in CFSP
 - d. Reducing the number of Commissioners
5. Do you agree with the view that enlargement and deepening of the EU need to proceed hand-in-hand? Why or why not?
6. Enlargement raises several divisive issues on the EU's agenda. Estonia is reluctant to increase QMV voting and wants to keep its own Commissioner while the budgetary cost of enlargement is also a cause of concern. To what extent is Estonia willing to compromise in order to move ahead with enlargement?

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