

# Accidental or Deliberate Failure?

## The Story of Estonia's Defence Concept of 1993

Hain Rebas

### ABSTRACT

One of my more important duties as the first post-war constitutional defence minister of Estonia, was to develop a national defence concept.<sup>1</sup> We prepared this together with Colonel Ants Laaneots, who was then Chief of Staff of Estonian Defence Forces. Once the initial framework was established, a couple of officials of the Ministry of Defence became involved; ultimately a large number of external experts from the Academy of Sciences to the Estonian Maritime Administration contributed to the concept. The result of this broad and creative co-operation, the first defence concept, was strongly influenced by Finnish and Swedish total defence thinking. It was proposed to the Riigikogu and debated in pleno in March 1993. Surprisingly, given a strong government coalition majority, the concept was rejected. The reasons for this most unusual parliamentary outcome may be found in domestic politics. Was the failure accidental? Or may it have been deliberate? As we know, three years later, in 1996, the next Riigikogu approved a concept for the defence policy of Estonia, a document little more than a more verbose development of our concept from 1993.

### Task and preconditions

The first post-war *constitutional* government of Estonia took office on 22 October 1992. I had the honour of serving as its Defence Minister. My duties included the swift development, approval and implementation of

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<sup>1</sup> This manuscript was reviewed by the then Chief of Staff of the Estonian Defence Forces (later General and Commander of the Defence Forces) Colonel Ants Laaneots, Secretary General of the Ministry of Defence (later Captain) Priit Heinsalu, Director General of the Security

the first defence concept.<sup>2</sup> Surely, we all had to know why, how and against whom or what we had to defend our newly restored republic. Unfortunately, there were no plans or preparation on which to draw, as my predecessor had only taken office in June 1992. However, I was accustomed to organize large quantities of qualified text, and since I came with military, academic and public qualifications gained in Sweden, Germany, Canada and Estonia, and had recently published two fundamental articles on the topic in Estonia,<sup>3</sup> I took on the job rather optimistically.

This article is based on the draft of the “Concept of national defence” submitted by the Ministry of Defence to the Riigikogu, records of the Riigikogu debate of 16th of March 1993<sup>4</sup> and my bound diaries in A4 format that I brought from Sweden,<sup>5</sup> which I used to take notes. Also, rather fresh memories of the persons concerned, i.e. the Defence Minister, the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, the Secretary General and the Adviser to the Ministry of Defence contributed strongly to the text.

As our new government, led by Mart Laar, aimed to blend Estonia into the West as quickly and firmly as possible, in essence to make this affiliation permanent, we also had to achieve this via a new, Western-minded national defence concept. Despite a relatively small Ministry of Defence – only 23 employees at the time – I immediately had to fire the Deputy Minister (due to suspicions of serious corruption), the entire

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Police Board (later Minister of Justice) Jüri Pihl and Adviser to the Ministry of Defence (later Defence Minister and Colonel) Enn Tupp. I would like to thank everyone for their generous assistance and help in recalling certain events. The author is responsible for any inaccuracies that may remain in the text. (Author’s comment both here and hereinafter.)

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the defence concept, see Hellar Lill, “The Constitution and interpretation of the authority dilemma for the leadership of national defence after Estonia regained its independence”, see this yearbook p. 175 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Hain Rebas, “Riigile kilp ja mõök! Rahvas relvastada! Veel kord riigikaitse põhialustest,” / Shield and sword for the state! Arm the people! Once more on the fundamentals of national defence/, *Postimees*, 12.8.1992; *idem*, “Eesti riigikaitse suhetest Soome ja Rootsiga,” /Estonia’s national defence relationships with Finland and Sweden/, *Postimees*, 24.9.1992.

<sup>4</sup> Verbatim report of the 2nd Session of the 7th Parliament, 16 March 1993, <http://www.riigikogu.ee/?op=steno&stcommand=stenoqramm&date=732268800> (accessed 5.9.2014).

<sup>5</sup> “Tidkalender” 1992 and 1993, in the author’s archive.

Construction Department<sup>6</sup> and two *polkovniks*, one for having given me politically harmful advice twice and the other for behaving far too passively for a high-ranking officer. And the main concern of the short-skirted secretary seemed to be to ascertain whether the new minister preferred blondes or brunettes... No, our Ministry was not exactly rich in intellectual resources. But I was reassured by the fact that my main cooperation partner in the field of the concept would be the experienced Chief of Staff of the Estonian Defence Forces Colonel Ants Laaneots. Also, as a political back-up, our government coalition, i.e. Pro Patria, the Estonian National Independence Party (ERSP) and the Moderate Party, profited from a considerable majority in the Riigikogu. We were confident that we should carry the floor in any Riigikogu voting.

## Course of work

So we started from scratch, but were highly inspired and full of hope. My next step probably came as a surprise and as a source of dismay to the coalition, and especially to the so-called ‘back room’, the personal think tank of the Prime Minister. To learn more and to protect my own back, I invited three ‘formers’, i.e. former national defence decision makers – Arnold Rüütel, Indrek Toome and Raivo Vare<sup>7</sup> – to discuss national security issues. These meetings were enlightening in many ways.

In the meantime, Colonel Laaneots and myself had already started work on many initiatives, including on the concept. I was pleased to learn that the Colonel had been preparing for this for a long time.<sup>8</sup> Since I came

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<sup>6</sup> Enn Tupp ironically writes about the level of said Construction Department: “Builders of concrete fences for future military units”. (E-mail from Tupp to the author of 10 June 2014.)

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Rüütel was the Chairman of the transition parliament, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Estonia, from 1990–1992; Indrek Toome was the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the ESSR from 1988–1990; Raivo Vare was the Minister of State in the transition government of Edgar Savisaar from 1990–1992. (Editor’s note.)

<sup>8</sup> Ants Laaneots: “The Defence Forces Headquarters did a lot of research in 1992 regarding the selection of the national defence concept. We considered the military systems of large countries unsuitable for Estonia as a small and poor country. We focussed on small European

from Sweden and my father was a proud *Suomen marskin vänrikki*,<sup>9</sup> the direction in which we should take the national defence of Estonia had been clear to me for a long time – we had to aim for the total defence system as implemented by democratic Nordic countries, especially Finland and Sweden. It was a pleasure to realise that Colonel Laaneots, who had made a career in the Soviet army, had come to the same conclusions! We did not have a great deal of time, so we sometimes held work meetings in the evenings. I remember well how the floor of my modest hotel room could be covered in papers and maps even in the night!

Adviser to the Ministry of Defence, Enn Tupp was next to become involved in the process. He had been the Chairman of the National Defence Committee of the former Supreme Council and therefore had considerable experience in national defence planning. We had intense discussions among this inner circle, to which we also added the Ministry's lawyer Tõnu Põder, and we certainly talked to and briefed our coalition MPs on the topic. We wrote, dissected, thought, discussed, wrote again – as is the norm in this kind of work.

On the 14th of December I addressed the Riigikogu and asked all of the groups represented in the parliament to submit their visions and proposals regarding the national defence concept to the Ministry of Defence. On the 17th of December, I wrote to all of the parties represented in the Riigikogu and explained that it was high time for us, dear colleagues,

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countries and Finland, Sweden and Switzerland stood out the most among them. We started to take a closer look at the national defence systems of these countries. As the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, I tried to establish close relationships with my colleagues in these countries, and succeeded. All three of them, and later Denmark as well, were ready to help us as much as they could. I visited all of these countries in 1992 to learn more about their national defence. I found the Finnish system to be the most suitable for Estonia, i.e. the total defence characteristic of Scandinavian countries as an total national defence system and military territorial defence as part of it. I was convinced back then and I still believe that it would be impossible to invest anything better for guaranteeing the primary self-defence of Estonia as a small country and the first state on the border of NATO and the EU. I remember that you agreed with these opinions wholeheartedly." (E-mail from Laaneots to the author of 29 June 2014.)

<sup>9</sup> Ensign to the Finnish Marshal (in Finnish); Robert (Rain) Rebas (1916–2008) graduated from the Estonian Military School in 1936. He served in the Finnish Army in 1943 and 1944, including in the Estonian Regiment of the Finnish Army (JR 200).

to try to find common ground on something as important and expensive as national defence: “Every political party must sport some kind of vision of national defence and how much it would cost”. Not a single party responded to my call, not even Pro Patria, the party of the Prime Minister. Thankfully, one of the members of the Riigikogu, Paul-Olev Mõtsküla, presented to us his personal vision.

## Concept

The first full draft of our concept was completed by the 18th of January 1993. Just a week later, on the 27th of January, we sent this source document to the President of the Republic, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, the National Defence Committee of the Riigikogu, the Defence Forces Headquarters, the Defence League, the Border Guard Board, the Rescue Board, the Estonian Maritime Administration and the Institute of Cybernetics of the Estonian Academy of Sciences with a request to submit their opinions, both positive and negative, and their proposals for amendments by the 9th of February. By then we received responses from the Institute of Cybernetics and the Estonian Maritime Administration, and a few days later also from the Defence Forces Headquarters and the Riigikogu’s National Defence Committee. I also sent these fundamentals to Dr Erik Terk, Director of the Estonian Institute for Future Studies, who was pleased to accept them and promised to work them over with his red pen.

The initial version of the concept emphasised the idea of Scandinavian-style total defence, i.e. military defence together with foreign policy, economic, civil and psychological defence, which seemed to be the only possible model for a poor, small state. We all agreed that conscription would be a perfectly natural, if not welcome, duty for citizens of the restored Estonia. We optimistically suggested that its duration should be 18 months. The idea was that every young citizen, boy and girl, should dedicate a year-and-a-half of service to his/her homeland: some in the Defence Forces and others in the social sphere, such as hospitals, pre-

schools and nursing homes. Comparing our nation to Israel,<sup>10</sup> we thought that this system would gradually help grow, join and blend Estonian society, fragmented during the Soviet era, back into a whole nation.

The peacetime composition of the Defence Forces foresaw an army with three or four regular units and single training units, the nucleus of a navy and a tiny air force. The wartime structure should include army units of general purpose (3–4 divisions as in 1940) and a well organised territorial defence (Defence League). But we also looked to the future. Cautiously, but decisively, we introduced an international dimension in our thinking – “Estonia integrates with Europe and cooperates with the collective security systems that follow the principles of the UN (CSCE, possibly also NATO, WEU), particularly with countries of Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea region”. In this boldly forward-looking spirit, we entered into the first cooperation agreement at the level of defence ministers with Latvia and Lithuania on the anniversary of the Republic of Estonia in 1993. Despite the issuance of a proper press release by the Ministry of Defence, almost all of our media publications missed the event (!).

## **Suurupi on the 27th and 28th of February 1993**

In addition to the names listed above, we sent the draft of the national defence concept to Kalle Eller’s National Centre for Defence Initiative.<sup>11</sup> We invited all addressed institutions to a seminar about this subject, which was held in Suurupi on the northwestern coast of Estonia over the last weekend of February. Once there, we collegially went through our initial text, from start to finish. Together we resolved our disagreements

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<sup>10</sup> The relationship between Estonia and Israel continued to develop well at the time. See: Hain Rebas, “Republic of Estonia on the road back to the West... Background and reality of the Israeli weapons deal 1992/1993”, see this yearbook p. 231 ff.

<sup>11</sup> National Centre for Defence Initiative – the organisation established in autumn 1990 with the resolution of the Estonian government-in-exile on the basis of the members of the Defence League whose duty was to start building Estonian national defence. In early 1990, military ranks were still granted to the leaders of the restored Defence League by the government-in-exile. (Editor’s note.)

and prepared the skeleton of a developed concept. Minister of the Interior Lagle Parek, members of the National Defence Committee Rein Helme and Jüri Pöld and Colonel Kalle Eller attended, as did Colonel Laaneots from the Headquarters, while the Defence League was represented by its Commander Major Johannes Kert, the Border Guard Board by its Commander Major Andrus Öövel, the Rescue Board by Director Ants Hein, the Estonian Maritime Administration by Tarmo Ojamets and the Institute of Cybernetics of the Estonian Academy of Sciences by academician Ülo Jaaksoo. Secretary General of the Ministry Priit Heinsalu sat for two days at his computer and entered all of the amendments as they were made. Today, some twenty years post festum, we might state that this was the highest-level conference in Estonia until then – all of the top players in the area of national defence were present and working together towards a common national goal.

Afterwards, in the Ministry, Enn Tupp once more went through the results of the collective work in great detail and then I did the same, just as thoroughly. I then sent the results to my friend, internationally well-known author and also a MP Jaan Kross for a final polish – he also had a background as a Tartu university lecturer in international law. He undoubtedly “had a pretty good command of Estonian”.<sup>12</sup>

In the meantime Lieutenant Colonel Lembit Tõns, the Chief of Staff of the Centre for Defence Initiative, was asked to prepare his own defence concept. What he delivered was a page-and-a-half of text, more like an essay written by a secondary school student.

The above should show that as far as the Ministry of Defence was concerned, we did all that we could in a very short time to present a concept that was as broad as possible, competent, up-to-date, flexible, and also suitable for further development and legislative approval.

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<sup>12</sup> Jaan Kross (1920–2007), one of the internationally best known Estonian writers, graduated from the Faculty of Law of the University of Tartu in 1945 and was a lecturer in the Chair of National And International Law of the same university from 1944–1946. (Editor’s note.)

## The 16th of March 1993 in the Riigikogu

Well before the relevant session, our draft of the “Concept of national defence”, prepared in the elegantly polished Estonian of Jaan Kross, was distributed to all of the members of the Riigikogu. We wanted to give our honourable MPs, together with their fractions and parties, enough time to pore over the document before the official debate and voting ensued.

What transpired during the sitting of the Riigikogu on the 16th of March could have been comic were it not so appalling; we almost failed to introduce the actual topic!<sup>13</sup> Once again the opposition, true to form, focussed on launching long and detailed personal attacks against the Defence Minister. The Defence League also had to take severe blows. The main attackers were MPs Eero Spriit, Tõnu Kõrda, Olev Anton, Toomas Alatalu, Kalev Kukk and, repeatedly the troika Arvo Junti, Tiit Made and Jüri Toomepuu.<sup>14</sup> Thankfully, there were also some who spoke out in support of the concept – MPs Rein Helme, Jüri Põld and Jaanus Betlem. Indeed, in our clearly open and flexible draft, we could perhaps have dealt with three or four of the 25 ‘shortcomings’ that MP Peeter Lorents listed with great satisfaction. But, as I said at the time: Mr Lorents’s “remaining suggestions were either already included in the concept, offered at a random level or slightly banal, like his own ‘doctrine’ that he launched with great enthusiasm.”<sup>15</sup> Today, some twenty years post factum, I will spare the reader direct quotations of this debate, which degenerated to a remarkable low point in the parliamentary history of Estonia. At the time I even labeled the show ‘grotesque’, in *Rahva Häääl*,<sup>16</sup> the reprise of which

<sup>13</sup> See: Verbatim report of the 2nd Session of the 7th Parliament, 16 March 1993, <http://www.riigikogu.ee/?op=steno&stcommand=stenogramm&date=732268800> (accessed 5.9.2014).

<sup>14</sup> The intellectual level of MP Toomepuu is well characterised by his promise: “I could prepare a better document in three hours than the one Rebas managed in seven months. It’s simple, really.” (Allan Teras, “Tükk paberit Eestit ei kaitse,” /A piece of paper will not defend Estonia/, *Õhtuleht*, 7.5.1993.)

<sup>15</sup> Hain Rebas, “Pokker riigikaitsega – kaardid avatud,” /Playing poker with national defence – cards revealed/, *Rahva Häääl*, 20.3.1993.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



was issued on the 18th of March. In any event, there is no doubt that the final-year students from Tartu Treffner Gymnasium, whom I had just visited, had asked significantly more intelligent and pointed questions than did our MPs that Tuesday. That is what I thought then, and that is what I maintain today.

As we can read in the records of the Riigikogu session in question, we managed to give the opposition responses that were generally polite and factual enough. After being provoked several times by certain MPs with questions like ‘*why* do we even need national defence, *who* must we defend ourselves against, *who* could be our enemy here?’ etc, etc, I sighed, pointed to my forehead and answered: “Our MAIN enemy here is nothing other than the prevailing post-Soviet mentality in your heads”.<sup>17</sup> - So no, that day did not start well. I can only imagine how Herman Simm<sup>18</sup> and his mentors were smirking in the shadows.

As always, I left the Riigikogu with a formal little bow towards its presidium. Knowing that we had a strong majority in the hall, I had no concerns as I walked from Toompea down to the Ministry of Defence, which was located on Pikk Street at the time. However, when I arrived at the Ministry I learned, very much to my surprise, that the Riigikogu had torpedoed our concept! Instead of the expected 51 votes, we acquired only 43. This meant that eight MPs from our own government coalition had either a) deliberately sabotaged the draft prepared by the Minister/coalition of the ERSP or b) simply missed this important vote.<sup>19</sup> I then tried to discuss the events in the Riigikogu constructively and in detail in the media. Once again I emphasised the normal elasticity and openness of our concept. I also recommended that they be published so that readers/citizens/voters could learn first hand what the debate was about,

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<sup>17</sup> The records of the Riigikogu session say ‘neo-Soviet mentality’, but that term was and is unknown to me. It was ‘post-Soviet’ mentality’.

<sup>18</sup> High civil servant of the Estonian Ministry of Defence, who was convicted of espionage for Russia in 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Member of the coalition Kalju Põldvere later apologised in *Postimees* (Kalju Põldvere, “Kelle viimased päevad?” /Whose last days?/, *Postimees*, 23.3.1993), saying that he had accidentally pressed the wrong button when voting!

and to decide for themselves whether or not the blanket criticism was justified.<sup>20</sup> Nothing was published...

## Responsibility

In this situation, I could not help but ask how this blow, how such an outcome, completely unimaginable in Western European parliaments, could have become possible. How could a remarkable majority immediately abandon a professionally prepared draft, presented as a proposition by their own coalition government? Or were there more personal considerations/weaknesses involved? Do we need to ask what our fraction's usually super-effective 'whips' – also the Prime Minister's close allies Illar Hallaste and Indrek Kannik – were doing at the session? Did they simply get themselves into a pickle? I find that impossible to believe about such well informed and capable men...

The result was still clear – our draft failed. But whose failure was it exactly? Was it the Minister's (mine), my party's, our coalition's? Or, did the MPs just use the occasion to sink the entire establishment of the national defence of Estonia as a whole, all of us who we met in Suurupi? Or – and I have to ask this as well – did the Riigikogu just shoot itself in the foot?

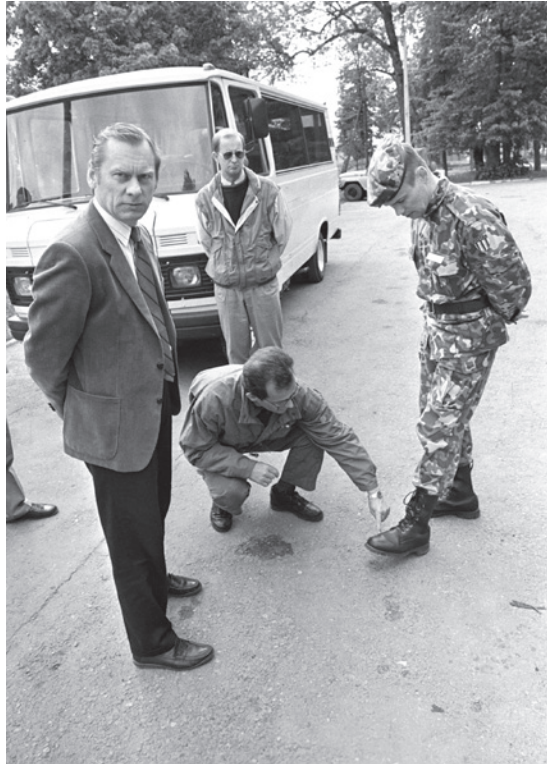
Or – perhaps the failure of the draft was caused *deliberately*? The fact is that it was around this time that the relationship I as an ERSP minister had with the Prime Minister's so-called 'back room' began gradually to deteriorate. So, from the point of view of the pro-active Pro Patria back room, this could well have been presented as the appropriate time and occasion to put this rather self-confident and independent Defence Minister in his place. This more conspirational version, that we have to pick up in another context,<sup>21</sup> helps to explain the obvious and surprising passivity of our Pro Patria fraction leaders in the Riigikogu and the failure of their professionalism.

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<sup>20</sup> Hain Rebas, „Riigikaitse põhialuseid” saab tõepoolest paremaks muuta,” /The Fundamentals of National Defence can be improved/, *Hommikuleht*, 6.4.1993.

<sup>21</sup> In author's memoirs to come.

*Estonian Foreign Minister Trivimi Velliste and Defence Minister Hain Rebas (1st and 2nd from the left) during a visit to the Kalevi Infantry Battalion (May 1993). Peeter Langovits/Estonian Film Archives*



Of course, neither the Ministry nor the Defence Forces Headquarters let the disappointing results of the Riigikogu session bother them. We carried on as we had done before and relied calmly on the same ‘half-witted defence concept’. A couple of weeks later, in the western spirit of the concept, I sought out British General Garry Johnson, the Commander-in-Chief AFNORTH<sup>22</sup> or the NATO Allied Forces Northern Europe. He was residing in Kolsås near Oslo and I brought him to Estonia with his team of NATO generals in the following months.<sup>23</sup> The rest, as the Brits say, as far as Estonia and its ultimate security goal NATO are concerned, is history.

<sup>22</sup> Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces Northern Europe; General Johnson held this office from 1992–1994. He then led the team that gave military advice to the Baltic States and introduced them to NATO high-level thinking.

<sup>23</sup> General Garry Johnson and his team arrived in Estonia on the 12th of July 1993.

## Looking back and recommendations

What became of the concept? All of the defence ministers who came after me – Jüri Luik, Indrek Kannik, Enn Tupp and Andrus Öövel – worked on it for years with their teams.

The Riigikogu finally approved the ‘Main Trends in the Defence Policy of Estonia’, which were submitted by Minister Öövel, in 1996. One of its authors, Enn Tupp, commented that the 1996 document was nothing more than a “more verbose development of our fundamentals of national defence of 1993”. “A modernising extrapolation” would be an even more precise description.

Almost twenty years later, in 2012, former Minister Tupp declared that with our concept of national defence of 1993: “[---] we were a bit ahead of time in developing the idea of our national defence, and our politicians were too blind to see our truths”.<sup>24</sup> Tupp’s poetic assessment ‘blind’ is figuratively correct, but only applies to certain members of the opposition. In addition to this ‘blindness’, some other personal characteristics came through in this transition period, such as meanness, envy, the sheep and widespread mob mentality and many other hereditary or acquired personal qualities that would interest serious social psychologists.<sup>25</sup> Also, the scandal-hungry Estonian media of the time, along with their Soviet era trained editors – who were generally devoid of all editorial ethics – would make interesting subjects for media researchers. And students of political science, with the capacity for reflection, are invited to examine when exactly in spring 1993 the ‘back room’ of Pro Patria/the Prime Minister started to move away from the ERSF and more toward the ‘reasonable wing’ of the Coalition Party of former communist bosses.

Finally, following from the sarcastic definition of a frog,<sup>26</sup> KGBist i.e., by my good old friend Prof Tõnu Parming,<sup>27</sup> a major in the US Green

<sup>24</sup> As stated, my increasing unpopularity in the Prime Minister’s ‘back room’ must be added to the ‘blindness’ of the opposition.

<sup>25</sup> See the chapter about making someone a non-person in 1984 by George Orwell (1984).

<sup>26</sup> “If a man sits like a frog, moves like a frog, croaks like a frog, then he must be a frog!”

<sup>27</sup> Tõnu Parming (1941–1998) was born in Estonia. In 1944 he and his parents escaped to Germany and later to the USA. He studied at Princeton and Yale and became a professor of

Berets, in 1992/1993 we had our own Arne Treholts<sup>28</sup> bossing around in the public life of Estonia. And Herman Simm was gaining momentum. All this to mean that our Security Police would have had a great deal to investigate. In 2014 General Laaneots stated the following about the events that occurred in the March 1993 Riigikogu: “Speaking of the counteraction of the politicians against you as a minister who came from the West, then irrespective of the weakness of the military intelligence of the time, I received several reports in 1991 and 1992 which stated that the KGB had established their agency in the ERSP and Pro Patria in good time, when the parties were still being formed. I informed the Security Policy of these signals. There were probably enough such people in the Riigikogu and the political parties, and in the propaganda that we did not need national defence. And the witch-hunt against you,<sup>29</sup> as someone who had come from the West, was also related to the activities of the special services of our ‘friendly neighbour’”.<sup>30</sup>

And so the Republic of Estonia, like a chess-horse often leaping two steps ahead and one aside, sometimes also taking a step back, like in the case of the 1993 defence concept, struggled successfully on westwards, in the direction of EU and NATO.

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sociology at the University of Maryland in 1981. He served in the US Army from 1962–1967 and fought in the Vietnam War.

<sup>28</sup> Arne Treholt – Norwegian politician (Labour Party), former deputy foreign minister in the bureau of maritime affairs, embassy counsellor of the Norwegian UN delegation and press officer of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, mainly known as a strong “influence agent” for foreign powers. In 1985 he was sentenced to 20 years in prison for high treason and espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union. He was released in 1992, lived in the Soviet Union for some time and then moved to Cyprus. (Editor’s note.)

<sup>29</sup> There even was a *terminus technicus* for this in Mr Savisaar’s Central Party, that I learnt from MP/author Jaan Kaplinski already in 1992/1993: ‘rebasejaht’, i.e. “fox hunting, i.e hunting for Rebas”.

<sup>30</sup> E-mail from Laaneots to the author of 29 June 2014.

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