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Strategic Autonomy and the **DEFENCE OF EUROPE**

On the Road to a
European Army?



Estonia on the Road to a European Army

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Country background and statistics

Estonia has a population of 1.315 million, as of 1 January 2016, about 0.26 per cent of the total population of the EU (Statistics Estonia 2016a). In the past decade, on average, the annual natural birth rate has been negative, at –1,330 people, on average (Statistics Estonia 2016b). Migration involves extensive back-and-forth mobility of Estonian citizens: 52 per cent of immigrants and 69 per cent of emigrants in 2015 were citizens of Estonia. In 2015–2016, emigration stabilised and the number of immigrants increased (Statistics Estonia 2016b).

After the parliamentary elections in March 2015, six political parties exceeded the 5 per cent election threshold. The Estonian Reform Party (RE) won the elections, receiving 30 of the 101 seats in the parliament, followed by the Estonian Centre Party (KE) with 27 seats. The Social Democratic Party (SDE) got 15 seats and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL) got 14 seats. The newcomer, the Estonian Free Party (VE), received eight seats, and the most radical party, the Conservative Peoples Party of Estonia (EKRE), got seven seats. After the elections, the Reform Party, the Social Democrats and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union formed a coalition. A second coalition and government was formed in 23. November 2016, led by Centre Party and Prime Minister Jüri Ratas. The next parliamentary elections in Estonia will take place in 2019.

Estonia introduced fundamental economic reforms in the early 1990s, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The reforms included high-speed privatisation, pro-cyclical economic policies, a liberal trade regime, an annually balanced state budget, a fixed exchange rate and a currency board system. Another set of radical reforms was introduced in 1997–2002 in order to meet the EU accession criteria. Estonia’s efforts in preparation for joining the EU resulted in rapid economic growth in 2000 and an economic »boom« from 2002 to 2006, fuelled mainly by loans from Nordic banks pumped into the Estonia’s real estate sector, finance from the EU pre-accession structural funds and foreign investors buying agricultural enterprises. The economic boom ended with an economic slowdown in 2007 (GDP +7.5 per cent), a modest recession in 2008 (–4.2 per cent) and extreme decline

in 2009 (–14.1 per cent), caused mainly by the real estate bubble and international financial crisis, together with unbalanced labour cost dynamics (Veebel and Loik 2012: 169–172). The economy started to grow again in 2010 (+3.3 per cent) and 2011 (+8.3 per cent), but growth slowed again from 2012 (+3.2 per cent) due to the European economic crisis. In 2014 and 2015 Estonian GDP growth reached only 2.8 per cent and 1.2 per cent, respectively (Eurostat 2016a). Inflation, which reached 11 per cent in 2008, slowed down after Estonia joined the euro zone in 2010, reaching –0.1 per cent in the first half of 2016. Average monthly wages have been rising constantly and have more than tripled since 2000, reaching 1,091 euros in May 2016. Government debt is one of the lowest in European Union, below 5 per cent until 2008, government debt grew to 7.1 per cent in 2009 and to 10.6 per cent in 2014 (Eurostat 2016b).

How are European defence policy and the political objective of a European army discussed in politics?

The idea of setting up a European Army proposed by Jean-Claude Juncker in March 2015 has received a fairly modest response in Estonia. The same applies to the most recent strategy document at the EU level, »Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe/A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy«, presented to the member states on 28 June 2016. The political elite and military circles have treated the idea of a European Army mainly with caution and even pessimism. Media debate has been practically non-existent, limited to several rather sceptical headlines and mostly focused on the question of why Estonia should restrict itself to common European military forces, when there exists a much larger and fully functioning transatlantic security network. Criticism in Estonia is directed mainly towards the unreasonable duplication of military structures and inefficient usage of EU military resources.

Former President of the Republic Toomas Hendrik Ilves touched on the topic in April 2015, during the visit of the Germany's Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen to Estonia. Both leaders admitted that although the Lisbon Treaty provides an opportunity to move towards a European Army, the EU still has a long way to go (Estonian Public Broadcasting 2015). However, earlier Germany clearly expressed support for the Baltic countries, which could be considered moral pressure on Estonia to support Germany's calls to strengthen military cooperation between the EU member states.

At government level, it has been repeated by cabinet ministers – for example, former Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas – that NATO membership and the idea of the collective defence and solidarity of NATO allies should not be questioned and debated. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Keit Pentus-Rosimannus (RE) has stated that European security is based on

transatlantic relations, which cannot be replaced by a European Army. She also outlined that the member states' commitments to NATO should be considered a priority and that duplication of the governance structure of military forces should be avoided, especially considering that financial resources are limited. In this light, the proposal to establish a European Army is impracticable in the short term. However, she also emphasised that the capabilities of national military forces should be strengthened, starting with an increase in military expenditure. At the EU level, the focus should be on finding additional resources for the joint financing of EU operations, which would help to strengthen the EU's military capabilities. She particularly pointed to the problems associated with the EU battle groups, which have not been deployed since their establishment in 2007 (Delfi 2015a). One of the leading local experts in external matters, Estonian MP Marko Mihkelson, shares these views, arguing that Europe's current military structure should not be changed too easily, based only on the argument that Russia's stance seems to require it. He also argued that priority should be given to initiatives and activities that strengthen the role of the European allies in NATO and deepen economic and military cooperation at the transatlantic level; he also referred to the importance of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement (Delfi 2015b). Former Minister of Defence and current Minister of Justice Urmas Reinsalu has clearly stated that Juncker's proposal should be considered only as a political declaration rather than a practical cooperation initiative. He pointed out that the establishment of a European Army requires that the issues of national defence be included in the Treaties, which in turn requires consensus among the EU member states. In practice, this would be difficult to achieve. He also emphasised that in critical situations the EU solidarity clause could be applied already and this could be even more important for Estonia than the possible formation of a European Army. Former Minister of Defence and current minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser has called the initiative »interesting, but with much scope for improvement« (Delfi 2015c).

Former Minister of Defence Hannes Hanso (Estonian Ministry of Defence 2016) has stressed that the EU should continue to strengthen cooperation in the military sphere, that the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSDP) should be an important part of the EU's new global strategy and that the main challenges and risks the EU faces should also be reflected in this new strategy document. Among the opposition parties, Rene Toomse (KE) has admitted that Russia constitutes a threat to security in Europe, but at the same time he strongly questioned the methods used to resolve the situation. He also suggests being more discreet in supporting EU initiatives and questions the reasonableness of »waging a battle with a pocketknife against a heavily armed enemy« (Tigasson 2015).

The view that the formation of a European Army should be considered as an idea rather than as a real initiative that will be implemented in the coming years or decades has also been expressed by Estonian representatives at the EU level. Former Permanent Representative to the EU Matti Maasikas described Jean-Claude Juncker's proposal as part of the current debate on how to strengthen military cooperation in Europe. However, he agrees that the security policy initiatives and concepts should be revised, considering that radical changes have taken place in the security situation in Europe (Maasikas 2015).

Among Estonian MEPs, Urmas Paet (RE; Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) has shared the concerns about the inefficient usage of the EU battle groups and financial issues. However, he also stated that the EU should continue with the plan (Delfi 2015d). Yana Toom (KE; Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) has recognised the role of NATO and the alliance in guaranteeing security in Estonia, but simultaneously questioned whether the risks stemming from Russia could be overestimated by Estonia and NATO (Toom 2016). Tunne Kelam (IRL; European People's Party) has remained relatively non-committal, agreeing to the conclusions of the upcoming EU Global Strategy that the Common Foreign and Security Policy cannot remain the weakest link of EU integration policy, but avoiding taking any sides in the discussion about a European Army (Kelam 2016).

How are European defence policy and the political objective of a European army discussed in the security community?

To discuss the reactions of the Estonian military community to Juncker's proposal to create a European Army it makes sense to distinguish between military circles (members of the Estonian military forces) and academic circles (think tanks and research centres focusing on security and defence). However, it should be stressed that in particular the »line« between the reactions of military circles and those of the political parties is somewhat vague, since several retired high-ranking members of the Estonian military forces – for example, two former Chiefs of Defence (CHOD), Lt Gen Johannes Kert and Gen Ants Laaneots – retain contacts with military structures while participating actively in the political arena (both are members of the national parliament).

Among military experts, former CHOD Lt Gen Johannes Kert has argued that the EU's efforts to consolidate its foreign policy, which among other things includes military forces, seems to be a rational step and that the common military forces combined with EU membership of NATO would boost standardisation, more optimal use of resources in Europe and more effective decision-making. He has suggested that a European Army will be created in the 2030s. However, he calls into question the real ability of a European Army to function as a

tool of collective deterrence because of the geostrategic advantage that NATO has over the EU (Kert 2015). Former CHOD General Ants Laaneots has stated that the idea of setting up an EU Army could get entangled in the demands of the different member states (Laaneots 2015). He used the example of Afghanistan to show that the EU countries have different demands and limits in military action.

As regards academic circles, security and defence policy are debated and analysed mainly by the International Centre for Defence Studies (ICDS), the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute (EVI) and the Estonian National Defence College. The main publications related to European defence and security matters are the Yearbook of Estonian Defence Forces, the peer-reviewed journal of the Estonian Defence College, and publications of the International Centre for Defence and Security. The former focuses on defence management (the country's national security institutional planning and development) and security policy (cyber security and energy security, Russia, Baltic-Nordic security, Eastern Partnership) and the latter focus on EU integration and enlargement, regional security and developments in Russia. Thus, today the topics analysed by think tank experts basically cover the triangle NATO/EU–Estonia–Russia. It is worth remarking that both think tanks are government-financed. To some extent, the foreign policy and security researchers from the institutes of international relations of the Tartu University, Tallinn University and Tallinn University of Technology also contribute to the debate on foreign and security policy in Europe. To sum up, it could even be argued that ten years ago the topics related to foreign and security policy in Europe were more popular and covered at a more advanced level than in 2016. The reasons for that are related to recent developments in cooperation with NATO: progress in terms of defence planning and deploying forces to the Baltic region has lowered Estonian interest in European military cooperation. However, if tensions rise or US foreign policy changes in terms of the Baltic states, European military initiatives will be the best possible option to manage regional risks.

What is public opinion on these issues?

According to national public opinion surveys, the key factor in ensuring Estonia's security and defence is considered to be NATO. A survey conducted in 2009 (Kivirähk 2009) indicated that 61 per cent of respondents (and 78 per cent of respondents with Estonian citizenship) considered NATO the main security guarantee in Estonia, whereas only 44 per cent mentioned the EU and 23 per cent of respondents stated that the Baltic cooperation and Estonia's independent national defence capability are important. The attitude towards NATO has not changed substantially over time: in 2016, 59 per cent of respondents (and 75 per cent of respondents with Estonian citizenship) considered NATO the main security

guarantee in Estonia. However, the share of respondents who also stress the role of Estonia's independent national defence capability has increased, at 41 per cent of respondents (Estonian Ministry of Defence 2016).

According to the Eurobarometer Special Survey from May 2015 (Eurobarometer 2015), about 86 per cent of respondents in Estonia agreed that war or political instability in regions outside the EU could result in a threat to the EU's internal security (the country's most popular choice in this category). In this light, any measures that could help guarantee security in the region should potentially be welcomed in Estonia. (Note, this Eurobarometer Special Survey focuses on overall perceptions of security in the EU, perceived threats and challenges and responses to address security challenges in the Union. Among the responses to address security challenges in the EU, the role of different institutions was covered. The survey does not focus on the CSDP or a European Army.)

However, another Eurobarometer survey from early 2014 (Eurobarometer 2014) indicated that people in Estonia are rather undecided, as 47 per cent of respondents were in favour of and 44 per cent opposed the idea of a European Army (note: this survey focuses directly on attitudes on a European Army, asking, for example: »Thinking about the future of the EU, please tell me whether you are in favour of or opposed to each of the following: The creation of an EU Army«). At the EU level this result is still fairly positive, considering that on average 46 per cent of respondents in the EU28 supported the idea and 47 per cent were against it. In addition, when interpreting this result one should also take into account that this comparative survey was conducted in 2014, before the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and the European refugee crisis erupted. Thus, it can be reasonably expected that today public opinion in Estonia would be even more in favour of setting up a European army than in 2014. It might be mentioned that according to a local survey conducted in 2016 (Estonian Ministry of Defence 2016), 68 per cent of respondents in Estonia more or less supported the creation of European common border guard units and only 16 per cent were, to some extent, against it. (Note: this survey focused on Estonians' attitudes towards the trustworthiness of local institutions, security and security threats, defence capabilities, the country's willingness to defend itself, the organisation of national defence, NATO and international military operations. As regards attitudes towards the creation of European common border guard units, the main theme of the section was attitudes towards participation in NATO, EU and UN joint missions.)

What are the decisive driving forces behind the debates in political and expert circles?

The debate on security interests and guarantees in Estonia is driven mainly by concerns about potential Russian aggression and related options for collective transatlantic deterrence. According to the Eurobarometer survey of 2015, about 86 per cent of respondents in Estonia agreed that war or political instability in regions outside the EU could result in a threat to the EU's internal security (most popular choice in this category) (Eurobarometer 2015). Direct concerns in Estonia are clearly related to the recent events in Ukraine and military conflict in Georgia almost a decade ago. In addition to that, other topics such as the outlook of economic relations between Russia and Estonia as a potential security guarantee in the region, the possible result of the US presidential elections and the future development of NATO are also in the picture, shaping the debate on security matters in Estonia. In 2016 related to the UK's referendum on »Brexit«, additional concerns arose related to transatlantic and European unity and integrity. The desire to keep the United Kingdom in defence partnership with the Baltic states, but also to go on with a European Army initiative increased after Brexit vote.

The success of Donald Trump in US presidential elections has intensified the debates among political leaders of Estonia in terms of defence and security cooperation. All members of Estonian governmental coalition were expecting and preferring the victory of Hillary Clinton, especially concerning her positions in security matters and US-Russia relations (Dennison, Pardijs and Shapiro 2016). Trump victory was however debated in the media but his victory was not seen as very believable. After the surprising results in US elections, the dominating opinion has been, that intense contacts with Trump's associates are needed to clarify his positions in terms of security architecture in the Central and Eastern Europe, but also parallel efforts in terms of European security cooperation must be supported inside the European Union. Estonia is ready to give its full attention and resources to support faster and deeper progress of European defense initiatives. Accordingly, implementation Plan on Security and Defence, introduced by Federica Mogherini in 16. November 2016 is seen as positive and needed step to strengthen security and defence cooperation inside the EU.

How has the defence budget developed over the past five years; what future developments are expected?

Estonia's annual defence budget is 430 million euros in 2016. Although Estonia's contribution to NATO is clearly asymmetrical in absolute terms (approximately 1 per cent of Germany's contribution), the country has taken an active approach in the alliance,

participating actively in international operations and aiming for a leading role in increasing NATO's cyber capabilities. Estonia is also among the countries that are meeting the commitment to spend a minimum of 2 per cent of GDP on defence, in accordance with NATO criteria (NATO 2016). In practice defence spending reached 2.05 per cent in 2014 and continued to grow, reaching 2.1 per cent of GDP in 2016. In the 2017 budget, defence spending is planned to reach 2.19 per cent of GDP (Government of Estonia 2016). Opinions expressed in political debates on defence spending range from voices supporting growth up to 3 per cent (mainly national conservatives) to those wanting to reduce it below 2 per cent (Oppositional Centre Party); the first group has the initiative in public debates because of the Russian threat. Priorities in terms of financing have shifted from mission-related equipment to territorial defence-related weapon systems. The main weapon procurements are 44 CV90 fighting vehicles from the Netherlands and 100 Javelin anti-tank systems with an additional 300 warheads from the United States. The acquisition of modern self-propelled artillery and mid-range air defence systems remains unsolved, however. Estonia has also not acquired its own jet fighters or main battle tanks. Since 2010 the general strategy has also been that at least 30 per cent of the defence budget needs to go for equipment modernisation. Between 2014 and 2018 Estonia plans military procurements in the amount of 685 million euros (Estonian Defence Forces 2016a).

How has the army developed over the past five years; what future developments are foreseeable or under discussion?

Estonia's military forces are a combination of professionals, conscripts and reservists. Each year approximately 6,000 men reach the age of obligatory military service. Estonia's defence forces consist of a naval force, an air force and a ground force. The average size of the Estonian regular armed forces in peacetime is about 7,000 persons, combining professionals and conscripts. The bulk of the Estonian defence forces are ground force units, divided into four defence areas and formed in two brigades. In addition to the regular forces, the defence forces also include the paramilitary Defence League (Kaitseliit), with around 9,000 troops. After adding 1,500 civilian experts, the active personnel of the defence forces total 17,500. The planned size of wartime forces (after mobilisation of reserves) total 60,000, including a high-readiness reserve of 21,000, while the maximum reserve reaches 220,000 men (consisting of all men who have undergone military training, are below 40 years of age and medically fit) (Estonian Defence Forces 2016a). The main part of the defence forces are formed from a ground force divided between four defence areas and formed into two brigades; the defence forces also include a fully professional signals battalion. The Estonian Defence Force also regularly hosts a NATO alliance unit of approximately battalion size

(1,000 men), starting in 2015. Overall, since 2011 the focus has shifted to territorial defence capabilities, while the development of niche capabilities needed in NATO joint campaigns has received fewer resources. The head of the Estonian Defence Force is Lieutenant General Riho Terras and head of General Staff is Colonel Martin Herem.

Has there been experience with bilateral or multilateral cooperation in the past five years, or is such cooperation planned?

Since the restoration of its independence in 1991, Estonia has linked its security to full integration and partnership with European and transatlantic security networks. The country became a member of NATO in March 2004, and joined the EU in May 2004 and the euro zone in January 2010. The transatlantic partnership is considered the key element of Estonia's defence doctrine. This is clearly reflected in the National Security Concept of Estonia for the period 2013–2022, which states that *»Estonia views its national security as an integral part of international security ... NATO, with its transatlantic nature and the principle of collective defence serves as the cornerstone of European security and defence ... Estonia regards its security and the security of its allies as indivisible – the factors affecting the security of its allies also affect Estonia, and vice versa ... Estonia ensures credible deterrence and military defence through NATO's collective defence ... Estonia develops national military defence capabilities, which form a part of NATO's collective defence«* (Riigikogu 2010). At the national level, the statement *»currently Estonia's security is better ensured than ever before«* is often used, which clearly refers to reliable military deterrence and collective defence provided by NATO (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016).

Participation in international peacekeeping or stabilisation operations has been one of the key priorities of Estonian security and defence policy, as well as military developments since the mid-1990s. Despite its small military and limited capabilities, Estonia seeks to be a security contributor, not just a recipient. International operations offer an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the mettle of Estonian troops and that they are on equal terms with the much larger and better equipped Western militaries. The reputation of Estonian troops has been excellent among NATO contingents. This has improved Estonia's stature in NATO and enabled significant qualitative developments in military training, logistics, acquisitions and so on. However, Estonia has deliberately been restrictive in terms of the kind of troops deployed, prioritising combat troops, which tend to be more costly, over larger troop formations in support roles.

To strengthen general stability and security and to develop civil–military relationships, Estonia has concluded protocols or agreements of bilateral cooperation with the United States, Germany, Slovenia, Norway, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Hungary, Poland, Finland,

Ukraine, Denmark, Italy, the Czech Republic, Turkey, France, Canada, Netherlands, Spain, Bulgaria, Georgia and Slovakia. Based on bilateral agreements several joint military exercises are conducted every year in Estonia, most often together with guest troops from the United States, the United Kingdom, Finland and Germany. Also numerous joint exercises take place together with rotating land and air units located in the military bases of Ämari and Tapa in Estonia. Growing joint activities and development of military infrastructure have been mostly welcomed by public opinion (except the oppositional Centre Party), experts and politicians. This support has also been converted into stable additional funding for military procurement and infrastructural development-related joint NATO military activities in Estonia. Joint military infrastructure and joint training are seen positively and as a cornerstone of contemporary and future Estonian security and defence doctrine, based on the idea of NATO collective deterrence. Also public support for growing cooperation with NATO forces is strong (Estonian Ministry of Defence 2016a). Based on positive experiences in terms of joint training and planning, additional activities are foreseen for 2017 as the Estonian defence budget is growing mainly with regard to additional infrastructural investment and joint exercises (Ministry of Defence 2016).

A trilateral cooperation agreement exists with Latvia and Lithuania to ensure regional security. The cooperation is focused mainly on Baltic defence cooperation projects: BALTRON (the Baltic Naval Squadron), BALTNET (the Baltic Air Surveillance Network) and BALTDEFCOL (the Baltic Defence College). Multilateral cooperation projects include BALTSEA (coordination of defence-related support to the Baltic states) and NORBALTPERS (a personnel policy programme initiated by Norway to offer Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania assistance in personnel policy in the defence forces) (Estonian Defence Forces 2016b). Baltic cooperation projects (except BALTDEFCOL), however, are getting less public attention and support, being replaced by similar NATO activities in the region. Even when seen as successful in the past, these initiatives are seen as mostly outdated in 2016 and not sufficient in the context of current threat perceptions (Estonian Ministry of Defence 2016a).

Estonian defence forces are actively participating in EU and NATO missions, focusing in particular on the development of cyber defence capabilities for the transatlantic alliance. Estonian military forces have taken part in international military and civilian missions since 1995, starting with the UN peacekeeping mission in Croatia. From 1997, Estonia participated in the military observing mission with UNTSO (UN Truce Supervision Organisation) in the Middle East (Israel, Lebanon, Syria). The mission includes also patrols, manning observation posts and staff work. As regards military missions, Estonia gained its first experience in 2003 when the country participated in the military mission in Iraq. Since 2013, Estonia has also participated in EU military missions in Mali (EUTM Mali), together with 22 other EU

member states. Jointly with the other EU member states, Estonia has participated in the EU mission EUNAVFOR Med, which aims to curb human trafficking in the Mediterranean. Estonia has also taken part in the EULEX mission in Kosovo (cooperation to enhance the judicial system and law enforcement), together with the other 27 EU member states, as well as Canada, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey and the United States. Estonia has also participated with a civilian component in missions in Georgia (EUMM), Ukraine (EUAM) and EUPOL and RSM (*Resolute Support Mission*) in Afghanistan (Estonian Defence Forces 2016b).

In September 2016 the Estonian parliament authorised the Estonian defence forces to continue their missions in Afghanistan (RSM), Lebanon (UNIFIL), Mali (MINUSMA and EUTM) and Kosovo (KFOR and UNMIK) (Estonian Defence Forces 2016b).

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