



GLOBAL GOVERNANCE INSTITUTE

National Backgrounders – European Foreign Policy

Country Profile

Estonia

Capital:	Tallinn
Geographical Size:	45 227.0 km ²
Population:	1 315 819 (2014)
Population as % of total EU population:	0.3% (2014)
GDP:	€ 18.613 billion (2013)
Defense Expenditure:	€ 361 million (2013)
Official EU language(s):	Estonian
Political System:	Parliamentary republic
EU member country since:	1 May 2004
Seats in European Parliament:	6
Currency:	Eurozone member since 1 January 2011
Schengen area member?	Schengen Area member since 21 December 2007
Presidency of the Council:	First time to be in 2018

Source: Europa.eu

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a. Political System

Estonia is a parliamentary Republic being independent from the Soviet Union since 1991. The country is further divided into 15 counties that enjoy relative autonomy. The President of Estonia has been Toomas Hendrik Ilves since 2006. He acts as the Chief of State as well as the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. The President is elected by the Parliament with the requirement of a two third majority and the possibility to hold the position for a maximum of two consecutive five-year terms. The power of the President is mainly representative, however, he is able to veto a parliamentary bill and send it back for revision.

The Prime Minister (currently Taavi Roivas) acts as the Head of Government. An Estonian citizen is nominated for this position by the President and approved by the Parliament. The Government consists of 15 ministers and holds the executive power. These ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister and approved by the Parliament. Further powers of the Government are implementation of domestic and foreign policies, the direction of government institutions, implementation of resolutions of the parliament, preparing and implementing the state budget as well as managing relations with foreign states. There are two other types of government with autonomy. These are the local government consisting of counties where all permanent citizens regardless of citizenship can vote in local elections as well as cultural self-governments of ethnic minorities.¹

In Estonia, the legislative power lies within the unicameral parliament, holding 101 seats. Politicians are directly elected to this body for a four-year term. Estonia has a clear multiparty system with currently six parties in the parliament, none of which holds the required majority to form a coalition.

The judiciary of Estonia is based on a civil law system closely mirroring the German one, with a Constitution in place since 1992. The court system is divided into three levels beginning with the courts of first instance such as city and administrative courts, followed by courts of appeal and ending with the highest court, the Supreme Court. This Supreme Court is further divided into civil, criminal, administrative law, and constitutional review chambers that are all overseen by one chief justice who is proposed by the President and formally appointed by the Parliament. The other judges are proposed by the Chief Justice and appointed by the Parliament for life.²

b. Foreign Policy

The Estonian foreign policy has a variety of priorities and objectives that it would like to focus on. **Integration** into the Estonian society has been seen as a priority for a long time especially since gaining independence in 1991 when many ethnic Russians remained in Estonia. Further high priority objectives are:

- Achieving national security, stability and predictability of international relations;
- Achieving premises for functioning Estonian economy;
- Protecting Estonians abroad;
- Estonia's influence and good reputation; and
- Promoting the values of human rights, democracy, principles of the rule of law, economic freedom, and development.

¹ "Estonia at a Glance", *Estonia.eu*, 2014. Web. Accessed June 19, 2015. <http://estonia.eu/about-estonia/country/estonia-at-a-glance.html>.

² "Estonia", *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, last update October 28, 2015. Web. Accessed November 14, 2015. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/en.html>

Further topics of interest to Estonia are **climate**, as the country supports a strong global agreement to reduce greenhouse gases and is prepared to finance a future Kyoto agreement. Moreover, **development cooperation** is of high importance, as the country believes that the responsibility to help others lies in the hand of the developed countries. Special support goes to Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Afghanistan with the overall objectives of reducing global poverty, supporting peace and stability, as well as promoting human rights and democracy. In addition, the country is able to share its reform experience through bilateral and trilateral relationships. In case of multilateral development cooperation, Estonia mostly turns towards the UN and the Red Cross Committee.

Estonia takes a hawkish line within the EU on the matter of the sanctions imposed on Russia due to the March 2014 invasion of Ukraine³. Estonia never stopped fearing Russia's behavior, and its **anti-Moscow** sentiment shapes the country's **pro-NATO** foreign policy philosophy. In August 2015, Estonian Interior Minister confirmed that the government plans to build a 70-mile fence on its eastern border with Russia⁴.

European Union (EU)

Estonia submitted its official application to the European Union in 1995 with accession negotiations taking place from 1998 to 2002. In 2003, 66.8% of the Estonian population voted in favour of joining the EU during a national referendum. Since then, Estonian support towards the EU has steadily increased/ Estonia saw it as an important step to raise the economic and political profile of the country.

As typical for the relatively new Eastern European EU countries, Estonia is in favour of further enlarging the EU and is willing to assist those countries that share the same European values. This view is due to the fact that Estonia desires a long-term **stability** in the Balkans. To enable this, the country believes that Turkey should be kept on the reform path and that the Estonian public needs to be further informed about the positive sides of **enlargement**. Estonia believes that the **European Neighbourhood Policy** is an important tool to influence the further development of neighbouring states with the goal of intensifying cooperation and advance economic integration. Estonia supports a flexible approach to the **Eastern Partnership** to adjust to the needs of the member states and to boost its efficiency.

Another EU program of importance to Estonia is the **EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region**, which was demanded by the European Council in 2007. This strategy puts together previous policy areas to especially address regions that impeded further development to increase competitiveness and address the infrastructure in the region. The **Northern Dimension** is another EU regional cooperation including the Nordic countries, the Baltic countries, the Arctic region, and Western Russia. It aims to strengthen cooperation, increase stability and security, and continue democratic reforms in these countries, in collaboration with external actors. Areas of cooperation include economics, business, infrastructure, human capital, education, culture, research, healthcare, environment, nuclear safety, natural resources, cross-border cooperation, regional development, as well as judicial and domestic affairs.⁵

³ Lobjakas A., "Letter from Tallin", *Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, Carnegie Europe, May 15, 2015. Web. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=60096>

⁴ O'Grady S., Standish R., "For Mother Russia's Former States, Good Fences Make Good Neighbors", *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2015. Web. Accessed November 14, 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/27/for-mother-russias-former-states-good-fences-make-good-neighbors/>

⁵ "Northern Dimension", *Republic of Estonia - Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Web. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://vm.ee/en/northern-dimension>

A further priority of Estonia in the EU is to increase European **energy security** by developing functioning internal markets and establishing additional energy connections. Currently, there is a “Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan” with eight EU member states in the area. This issue is of high priority as Estonia is mostly isolated from the EU’s interconnected energy network and has to rely on other partners such as Russia. Thus, Estonia aims to gain more domestic energy independence, mainly from shale oil and renewable energy sources⁶.

Nordic and Baltic Countries

Estonia’s foreign policy is marked by a variety of regional cooperation organizations. Firstly, the **Baltic Cooperation** is made up of the governments of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia countries that share a long relationship with each other. It consists of a Council of Ministers as well as an Assembly for parliamentary cooperation. The most important topics in recent years have been foreign and security policy, defense cooperation, energy, and transport. Secondly, the **Nordic Baltic Cooperation** brings together the five Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland) as well as the three Baltic States since 1992. It was founded in order to have informal open discussions on relevant regional and international issues. Finally, the **Council of the Baltic Sea States** is an even wider organization also including Poland, Germany, Russia, and the European Commission. Its goal is to strengthen and intensify the cooperation among the mentioned countries. Besides these regional cooperation frameworks, the three Baltic countries also have close ties to the US as written down in the **US Baltic Charter** in 1998.⁷

c. Peace & Security Policy

The *National Security Concept of Estonia* outlines its security as well as defence policy constantly adapting to changing circumstances. Estonia believes that national and international securities are closely interlinked. Thus, the country prefers **multilateral approaches**. The main priorities of Estonia’s security policy are to safeguard Estonia’s independence and sovereignty, territorial integrity, constitutional order, and public safety. Its goal is to prevent threats and respond to risks in an efficient manner. The country believes this can be achieved notably by promoting social cohesion within the society.

National security is primarily guarded by the Estonian Defence Forces who are divided into land, navy, air force, and a defence league. Compulsory military service exists ranging from eight to eleven months. Overall military expenses in Estonia are around 2% of its GDP. The main objectives of Estonia’s Defence Forces are to:

- Ensure control over Estonian territory and demonstrate sovereignty of the state;
- Develop the capability to have early warning systems;
- Develop modern, deployable, mobile, sustainable rapid response units with the capability to ensure military defence; and
- Ensure readiness for the launch and execution of collective defence operations.

Estonia is part of the security environment of the **EU and NATO**. The Baltic region remains stable while it is growing in strategic importance. In Estonia, Russia is regarded as an aggressive international actor, thus the country has emphasized its stance with NATO and the EU. Good relations with the US are appreciated on a bilateral as well as multilateral basis; Estonia has sought—with some success—a long-term U.S. military presence on its soil⁸.

⁶ "Estonia in the European Union", *Republic of Estonia - Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, last update November 13, 2015. Web. Accessed November 14, 2015. <http://vm.ee/en/estonia-european-union>

⁷ "Baltic Sea Year 2014", *Baltic Sea Year*, 2015. Web. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://bsy.vm.ee/en/>.

⁸ Lobjakas A., “Letter from Tallin”, *Judy Dempsey’s Strategic Europe*, Carnegie Europe, May 15, 2015. Web. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=60096>

Estonia is trying to prevent **terrorism** at national and international levels through a variety of means. Domestically, it works to avoid radicalization and financing of terrorist activities, and tackles organized crime and corruption. In addition, Estonia believes psychological defence also plays a big role in keeping up common values and strengthening national self-confidence. A big emphasis is laid on tackling **cyber security** internationally, for example through organizations such as NATO.⁹

A **Baltic Defence Cooperation** framework exists as well between Estonia and the other Baltic States Latvia and Lithuania. Its main projects are the Baltic Battalion, the Baltic Naval Squadron, the Baltic Air Surveillance Network, and the Baltic Defence College. Baltic defense cooperation began right after independence from the Soviet Union, with the first joint military exercises in 1994. The “Baltification” of defense, which has gained importance in the past years, strives for autonomy and rapid deployment of military forces in the region.¹⁰

European Union (EU)

Estonia values the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU as it allows the organization to quickly respond to complex global crises as one international actor. This is of importance to the country, which strives for a strong **integrated** European Union. In order to properly address security issues, Estonia believes it is important that the EU and NATO have frequent **dialogues**. As a strong supporter of the CFSP, Estonia has also taken part in several Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions over the years. Currently, three Estonian experts support a civilian mission in Afghanistan, six experts help supervise the situation in Kosovo, three Estonians are supporting a mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and three experts are helping in Georgia. In Iraq two experts help training prison officials. Since 2010, Estonia has also supported the mission ATALANTA in Somalia.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Estonia has been a member of NATO since 2004 and believes that it is an important organization to safeguard security. Furthermore, Estonia believes that the US presence in Europe helps keep stability and order in the region. As a member, Estonia is pushing for internal **cohesion and solidarity** so that the necessary military resources are easily available. Moreover, the country is in favour of further **enlargement** and a flexible approach to partnership with other actors. As a result, it highly values the NATO-Ukraine Commission, the NATO-Georgia Commission as well as the NATO-Russia Council. Estonia having a big focus on electronics, NATO’s **Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence** is located in Tallinn.

As part of NATO’s activities, Estonia has contributed troops in a variety of missions. Since 2002, it has been involved in Afghanistan. ISAF has been the biggest mission so far for Estonia with 160 troops participating in 2011. Since 1999, Estonia has also been involved in the mission KFOR in Kosovo, mainly with staff officers. In addition, Estonia participated in the Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2003 to 2008 and continues to support the Iraqi training mission with two staff officers¹¹. In the period 2014-2015, Estonia contributed to 0.10% of the total NATO Common-Funded Budgets & Programmes (NATO direct funding system)¹².

⁹ "National Security Concept of Estonia", *Republic of Estonia - Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 2010. Web. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://vm.ee/en/national-security-concept-estonia-2010>

¹⁰ "Baltic Defence Co-operation", *Estonian Ministry of Defence*, January 2002. Web. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://vm.ee/en/baltic-defence-co-operation>.

¹¹ "Estonian Security Policy", *Republic of Estonia - Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Web. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://vm.ee/en/estonian-security-policy>

¹² "NATO Common-Funded Budgets & Programmes", *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, Web. Accessed November 12, 2015.

In October 2015, UK Defense Secretary Michael Fallon announced at a NATO defense ministers meeting in Brussels that a small number of British troops would be deployed to the Baltics as part of the alliance's mission in response to what it called "Russia's aggressive foreign policy" in Eastern Europe¹³.

United Nations (UN)

Estonia has been a member of the UN since 1991, with the goal of maintaining peace and security as well as fighting against terrorism. Further, an issue of special interest is improving human rights especially for women, children, and indigenous people. As Estonia believes that security should be guaranteed by adhering to international law, the country contributes to the further development and implementation of international law through the UN.

As a full member, Estonia has taken part in several peacekeeping operations starting with Croatia in 1995. The mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was so far the largest for Estonia, with 136 troops deployed. Since 1997, Estonia has taken part in the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in the Middle East. The country currently takes part in several UN policy missions, and is part of the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination team (UNDAC)¹⁴. In September 2015, Estonia had 51 nationals engaged in peacekeeping missions (10 troops for MINUSMA in Mali, 37 troops for UNIFIL in Lebanon and 4 experts for UNTSO in the Middle East)¹⁵. For the period 2013-2015, Estonia contributed to 0.40% of the UN Peacekeeping budget¹⁶.

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

Having been a member since 1991, Estonia supports this organization as a forum to support wide political dialogue and confidence building measures in Europe in order to ensure security. Also in this organization Estonian experts take part in missions such as in the Western Balkans and the South Caucasus. In 2014, Estonia contributed 0.1% (€ 121,562) to the Organization's budget¹⁷, and 2 nationals were involved in its staff¹⁸.

Council of Europe (CoE)

Estonia became a member of the Council of Europe on 14 May 1993. In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights issued 6 judgments concerning the country, of which 6 were violations and one a non-violations. In 2015, Estonia contributed to 0.12% (€483,047) of the CoE's unified budget¹⁹.

http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2014_06/20140611_20140601_NATO_common_funded_budgets_2014-2015.pdf

¹³ n.a. "Estonian Foreign Ministry Welcomes UK Troop Deployment to Baltic States", *Sputnik International*, October 8, 2015. Web. Accessed November 14, 2015.

<http://sputniknews.com/europe/20151008/1028200918/Estonia-UK-Troops.html>

¹⁴ "Estonia in the United Nations", *Republic of Estonia - Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Web. Accessed June 19, 2015. <http://vm.ee/en/estonia-united-nations>

¹⁵ "UN Mission's Summary detailed by Country", *United Nations Peacekeeping*, September 31, 2015, p. 13. Web. Accessed November 15, 2015. http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2015/sep15_3.pdf

¹⁶ United Nations General Assembly, "Implementation of General Assembly resolutions 55/235 and 55/236", *Report of the Secretary General*, December 27, 2012, p. 2. Web. Accessed November 15, 2015. http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/224/Add.1

¹⁷ The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Annual Report 2014*, July 2015, p. 105. Web. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.osce.org/secretariat/169971?download=true>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109

¹⁹ "Estonia – Member state", *Council of Europe*. Web. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/estonia>

Strategic Culture

Despite its small size, Estonia aspires to play a great role in **global defence**, thus preferring multilateral approaches. Important allies are the other Baltic States as well as the US, especially within NATO. Even though Estonia is clearly a pro-Western country and wishes to further spread democracy, it seems to be willing to easily use force to protect its national sovereignty. This view can be attributed to the fact that Estonia is afraid of what Russia might do. Nonetheless, arms control agreements are still of importance to Estonia as they ensure international security and build confidence.

d. Economic Policy

Estonia is a very free and open market economy with a pro-business agenda and a flat rate income tax of 20%. It is further characterized by a strong electronics and communications sector. Due to the ability to successfully implement tough austerity measures, the country was able to mostly circumvent the global financial crisis and currently has a balanced budget with low public debt further supported by good international credit ratings. Overall, Estonia's fiscal policy can be considered strict to keep the government debt low. Its general goal is to create conditions for sustainable economic growth in order to achieve increased welfare and further converge with developed states.

In terms of trade, Estonia's main export partners are Sweden, Finland and Russia, while its main import partners are Finland, Germany and Sweden. Estonia has liberal trade and investment laws enabling them an investment boom in the 2000s and especially after entry into the EU with GDP growth rates of 7-10%. Thus, most of the foreign investment is from EU member countries especially Finland and Sweden in the field of finance and insurance. Moreover, Estonia is characterized by a strong e-economy having one of the world's fastest broadband networks as well as widespread free wireless network. Technology start-ups are encouraged and almost all of the banking transactions are conducted online. In order to show the advantages of such an e-economy many government services can also be found online such as online voting. In line with this, Estonia is the seat of the **IT agency** of the EU.²⁰

European Union (EU)

As a member of the EU, Estonia highly benefits from a variety of funds. This can be seen in the fact that the country receives five times the amount of EU funds than it contributes to the institutions. Most of this money goes to the European Regional Development, Cohesion and Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, and the European Maritime and Fisheries and Agricultural Funds for Rural Development. Since 2011, Estonia has the Euro as its currency. Entry into the Eurozone was facilitated by a previously fixed exchange rate first to the Deutsche Mark and then to the Euro. Reasons for joining were to boost business and investor confidence as well as achieve economic stability and facilitate trade with other EU countries. This seemed to have worked well as 80% of Estonian trade and foreign investment currently takes place with the EU. So far, Estonia is economically more successful than most other Central European EU countries. Thus, it believes that a further expansion of the Eurozone to other Central and Eastern European Countries will motivate them to implement sustainable fiscal policies.²¹

²⁰ Kaljurand, M., "Estonia – Watchdog of Free Trade", in "Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Yearbook", *Republic of Estonia - Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 2010, p. 45-52. Web. Accessed June 23, 2015. http://vm.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Marina_Kaljurand_0.pdf

²¹ "Welcome to the Euroweb!", *Euroveeb*, 2011. Web. Accessed June 19, 2015. http://euro.eesti.ee/EU/Prod/Euroveeb/Main_Page/index.html

Following the *2015 Council Recommendation*, Estonia took part to the preventive arm of the *Stability and Growth Pact*. Based on the Commission's 2015 spring forecast, the headline surplus recorded in 2014 is projected to turn into a deficit of 0,2 % of GDP in 2015 and 0,1 % of GDP in 2016. The Council is of the opinion that there is a risk that Estonia will not comply with the provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact. Yet, the country's employment rate reached 74,5 % of the working-age population in the third quarter of 2014 and the unemployment rate dropped to 7,6 %, the lowest level since 2009. The proportion of long-term unemployed is well below the EU average in Estonia. However, the shrinking labor force, combined with low labor productivity, is becoming a medium-to-long-term challenge. Moreover, the gender pay gap is one of the widest in the Union, and the lack of childcare facilities makes it more difficult for young parents, in particular mothers, to return to the labor market²².

Economic Diplomacy & Foreign Trade

Estonia has been a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 1999; a big step for further integration into the international trading system. Estonia is a big supporter of free trade and has used this view several times as spokesperson of the WTO. The first step towards the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was taken in 1996 when the three Baltic States brought up a proposal to create the Baltic Regional Program with the eventual goal to gain membership. This was the main point of cooperation between Estonia and the OECD until 2004. However, Estonia did not join the organization until 2010. One of the reasons to form a closer relationship to the OECD was the valuable analytical competence the OECD has to offer.²³

Estonia's main trading partners include Sweden, Finland, Russia, Germany, Latvia, and Lithuania. In 2014 and 2015, Estonia's trade balance has constantly been in deficit. According to *Statistics Estonia*, in September 2015, exports of goods decreased by 10% and imports by 9% in comparison to September of the previous year. Summing up the first three quarters of 2015, exports decreased 3% and imports 5% in comparison to the same period a year ago²⁴. With regard to foreign direct investments, Estonia is among the leading countries in the Eastern and Central Europe in terms of *per capita* investments. As much as 26% of all investments have been made by Swedish companies, 22% by Finnish companies, 10% by Dutch companies and 6% by Norwegian companies²⁵. Estonia also enjoys cordial trade with the US: principal imports from the United States include computer and electronic products; chemicals; machinery; transportation equipment; and wood products. Estonia's exports to the U.S. include computer and electronic products; petroleum products; chemicals; electrical equipment; and optical, medical, or precision instruments²⁶.

²² Council of the European Union, "Council Recommendation on the 2015 National Reform Programme of Estonia and delivering a Council opinion on the 2015 Stability Programme of Bulgaria", *Official Journal of the European Union*, C272/40 (July 14, 2015). Web. Accessed November 15, 2015.

http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2015/csr2015_council_estonia_en.pdf

²³ Saar, K., "Estonia's Road to the OECD", in "Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Yearbook", *Republic of Estonia - Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 2010, p. 58-61. Web. Accessed June 23, 2015.

http://vm.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Kairi_Saar_0.pdf

²⁴ n.a. "In September foreign trade continued to decrease", *Statistics Estonia*, Press release no. 120, November 10, 2015. Web. Accessed November 15, 2015. <https://www.stat.ee/90563>

²⁵ "Economy at a glance", *The Estonian Investment Agency*, last update November 2, 2015. Web. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://www.investinestonia.com/en/about-estonia/economy-at-a-glance>

²⁶ "U.S. Relations With Estonia", *U.S. Department of State*, June 9, 2015. Web. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5377.htm>

e. Other Diplomatic Priorities

Priorities at the Global Level

Relations to **Russia** are of diplomatic importance to Estonia as the country was under Soviet rule until 1991, and until today 25% of the Estonian population is Russian. This was a particular pressing issue after independence, as citizenship was only given to people who were Estonian before the occupation in 1940 and spoke Estonian, making many people stateless. However, the country was mostly able to solve this issue with a steady decrease of stateless people. Border rulers are strictly applied as they also mark the end of the Schengen zone. To further improve this, a border agreement between the two countries was drawn up in 2005 but was not approved by Russia after Estonia added a historical preamble, which made Russia fear the secession of Russian territory to Estonia.

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