

April 2017

# FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

## Estonia

*Stefano Braghioli, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies,  
University of Tartu*

*Maili Vilson, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of  
Tartu*



This project has received funding  
from the European Union's Horizon 2020  
Research and Innovation Programme  
under Grant Agreement No 692976.

## 1. History of EU-Turkey Relations<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Estonia's approach to EU-Turkey relations: pragmatism and realism

Relations between Estonia and Turkey received renewed impetus after 2004, when Estonia joined the European Union (EU) (while Turkey was in the process of securing the official candidate status) and NATO, of which Turkey has been a member since 1952. Since its accession, Estonia has played a generally constructive role at the EU level when it comes to both its institutional future and enlargement policy. Its key tenets, thereby, seem in line with the principled open-door approach advocated by the fellow Nordic countries.

Accordingly, Estonia's official position regarding Turkey has always been supportive of its bid for membership in the EU, conditional upon finalising the negotiations of the *acquis communautaire*. In line with the principle of *pacta sunt servanda*, Estonia supported the unanimous decision of the member states to grant Turkey accession candidate status in 1999 and to open accession negotiations five years later in 2004. The Estonian political elites – with the partial exception of the pro-Russia Centre Party (*Keskerakond*) – have thus been traditionally supportive of further EU enlargement and of a more inclusive approach towards the Eastern neighbourhood (in particular, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). While the support for the latter is also shared by a relevant portion of the population, public support to Turkey's accession specifically has not been very high – according to a Eurobarometer survey, 26 percent of Estonians were in favour of Turkey's accession in 2006 – and has been subjected to a decreasing trend ever since. At the same time, Estonian elites are aware of the existing enlargement fatigue in the old EU member states both at the political and citizen level.

Like many of the small EU member states, Estonia strongly favours a more integrated approach in foreign affairs, as a way to project its key priorities and to maximize its diplomatic voice. It has therefore also largely reflected in its stance and supported through its actions the European Commission's position with respect to the EU-Turkey statement on migration in March 2016, in light of the refugee crisis.

### 1.2. Turkey as a remote friend and useful “other”

Several narratives can be identified in the Estonian official and public discourses regarding Turkey. Traditionally, Estonian official discourse aligns with the Westernization narrative, as Turkey is represented as an example of a modern Muslim country that has gone through a difficult process of democratization, much like Estonia itself, albeit under different conditions. Estonia has been willing to support Turkey regarding sectoral reforms, the modernization of state administration and the negotiation of the EU *acquis*. The official discourse emphasises

---

<sup>1</sup> The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

shared values and historical ties between Estonia and Turkey, e.g. with respect to the non-recognition of the occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union after World War II.

Another prominent narrative in the official discourse is related to Turkey as a geostrategic partner. Above all, this is connected to Turkey's role within NATO structures, the latter perceived by Estonia as the central element to both countries' security. Turkey's military power and its contribution to policing the Baltic airspace are especially emphasized.

In the early stages of Turkey's official candidate status (early 2000s), the public debate in Estonia combined elements both from geostrategic and cultural narratives. Geographically, Turkey was considered distant, so its political influence and role did not receive much attention among the population. Turkey was also perceived as culturally different from Christian Europe (the cultural "Other"), but the prospects of Turkey's accession were not realistic enough for this to constitute a major element of the public debate.

The situation changed, however, due to the growing threat of international terrorism, especially connected to ISIS, and the refugee crisis breaking out in 2015. The debate became increasingly dominated by EU-Turkey relations and its migration dimensions as a result of the opening of the so-called Balkan route and the successive EU-Turkey statement on migration in March 2016 aimed at managing the flows of irregular migration. Discourse on the cultural "Other" has risen to the fore with arguments about Turkey's belonging to a different cultural space and questioning Ankara's "Europeanness", as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his cabinet take steps towards reintroducing religious principles into everyday governance of the country.

### **1.3. Immigration, terrorism, security: Turkey as a gatekeeper**

The official position of Estonia is that Turkey is a partner in relieving the effects of the refugee crisis and in the fight against terrorism. Estonia, which initially strongly opposed the European Commission's compulsory quota system for redistributing refugees inside the EU, is traditionally characterized by a restrictive asylum policy, which is reflected in an extremely limited number of accepted asylum requests, most of which originate from the former Soviet space.

The reasoning behind Estonia's conservative approach can be explained by the historical experience of the country. Due to the Soviet legacy – in particular linked to Soviet Russification policy – Estonia and Latvia have the highest share of third-country nationals among the resident population in the EU. This is often perceived as a threat to the sovereignty of the country by both political parties and the citizenry. Estonian public opinion has been consistently strong in opposing immigrants and refugees (according to both 2016 Eurobarometer surveys, immigration is Estonians' most important concern: for 73 percent of the population in spring and 70 percent in autumn, the highest share in the EU in both cases). Reflecting this, the conditions set by the country for the reallocation of refugees are strict, and Estonia places a high value on the EU-Turkey statement on migration in hopes of limiting immigration.

The Estonian government has repeatedly praised Turkey for curbing the immigration flow. The government has called for increased EU support to frontline states in order to limit irregular migration even further. Estonia itself contributed with EUR 2.79 million (0.14 percent of the total) to the Resettlement Fund created by the European Commission in March 2016.

Turkey, as a heavyweight NATO member state, is also valued as a strong military partner along the South-Eastern flank of the alliance. In a situation where Estonia was until recently one out of only four of NATO's 28 members meeting the defence spending requirement (2 percent of GDP), Estonia places high importance on its partnership within NATO.

In line with principles of mutual responsibility and reciprocity, as well as out of security concerns, Estonia is a member of the coalition against ISIS and supports the fight against terrorism.

## 2. Future of EU-Turkey relations

### 2.1. Elites and the public: pragmatist vs. identity-based approaches

The views on the future of Turkey's relations with the EU can broadly be divided into two contrasting camps throughout both the Estonian elites and the population.

On the one hand, the Estonian government and the mainstream political forces maintain that there is no reason why Turkey could not continue on the path to EU membership if Turkey manages to recover internally from the effects of the failed coup attempt of July 2016, restores constitutional order and fully follows the principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Estonian elites hold the position that the EU should continue to support Turkey, given Ankara's success in controlling refugee flows to the EU.

On the other hand, the more critical camp of mostly right-wing and nationalist forces, led by the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) in the opposition, argue that the country is unsuitable for ever joining the EU and does not meet its standards neither in terms of international law, European norms, values nor human rights. According to the proponents of this view, Turkish Muslim culture is incompatible with the Christian values of classical Europe, and they strongly criticize Western European openness policy and multiculturalism.

On a more diplomatic level, Estonia held the Chairmanship of the Council of Europe in May-November 2016. Although this had little impact on the dealings with Turkey on a societal level, the fact that Ms Marina Kaljurand, Foreign Minister at the time, was in close contact with Turkey's government at the time of the coup attempt, facilitated Estonia's engagement with Turkey more than Estonia's traditional foreign policy would have prescribed.

### 2.2. Full membership? Yes, but...

The Estonian government continues to voice support for Turkey's membership but has so far remained restrained and (possibly intentionally) unclear when it comes to other partnership options. The most common approach by the government has been to rely more on the European

Commission's position and on the member states' consensus on the matter. Generally speaking, Estonia's position on the issue can be defined as more reactive than proactive. This might also reflect, at least until recent times, a low political salience and perceived distance, along with a limited first-hand expertise of the Turkish context. Should Turkey's EU membership become a clear mid-term perspective, it can be expected that the opposition party EKRE as well as the nationalist *Pro Patria and Res Publica Union* (IRL) could rally against this. As outlined above, this would also possibly substantiate into a strong opposition towards Ankara's membership. In this respect, in different European contexts Turkey has represented a practical shortcut to convey popular concerns about immigration and Islam. Therefore, it can be seen how the partnership alternatives to EU membership could also become a preferred option to the Estonian government.

### **2.3. Good mutual relations based on pragmatism, with an eye on the refugee crisis**

In the eyes of Estonians, current EU-Turkey relations are defined through the refugee crisis and its effects, as outlined above. For example, the former Estonian Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas argued that Turkey's pressure for visa freedom on the EU is a legitimate attempt to simply speed up the process that was due to happen anyway, rather than Turkey taking advantage of the EU's unwillingness or inadequacy to deal with the refugees, as has been suggested by critics.

The opposition party EKRE in turn argues that the agreement with Turkey is detrimental for the EU and presents a security threat. This point of view was exacerbated further when Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu expressed, in a short remark, Turkey's willingness to build a mosque in Estonia if deemed acceptable. The Estonian government took a very cautious position when commenting this in public, saying that Estonia's Muslim community was small and already had a prayer house. It raised, however, strong concern among the nationalist and most conservative forces who claimed that a mosque would be a "symbol of cultural invasion". The same forces also oppose the relocation of refugees, in general, and have managed to raise the level of concern among the population capitalizing on voters' fears, while accusing the government of hiding the real numbers.

The failed coup attempt in Turkey was strongly condemned by the Estonian government. Furthermore, only limited issues of ethics impacted the debate on whether cooperation with a regime that was starting to show authoritarian trends was appropriate. The government took a wait-and-see position instead and argued that Turkey was in keeping with its international commitments and the loss of such a partner would be unthinkable. However, some liberal civil groups demanded a more normative policy towards Turkey, calling the elites to recognize that, given the current domestic political situation in Turkey, no concessions or deals should be made as a trade-off for stopping refugee flows. Right-wing nationalists argued that while the human

rights situation was deplorable, it also prevented Turkey from joining the EU in the short term, or receiving visa freedom – two things nationalists would not support.

A central aspect of EU-Turkey relations for Estonia is clearly the various but closely interlinked facets of security. Several dimensions can be outlined here. First, the growing pressure at and within the borders of the EU resulting from the refugee crisis, the effects of the EU-Turkey statement on migration and the resettlement of refugees to EU member states, including Estonia. Second, the EU's internal security challenge in the context of a growing international terrorist threat and Islamic radicalization and the free movement of people within the Schengen area. Third, the external security issues related to international terrorism, above all the civil war in Syria and fight against ISIS in the Middle East. Fourth, the future of EU-Turkey relations in the face of recent domestic developments in Turkey, which might result in destabilising Turkey and its position in the region.

### **3. EU-Turkey relations and the neighbourhood/ global scene**

#### **3.1. Cultivating bilateral relations, with an eye on Russia**

Following Russia's contested annexation of Crimea in spring 2014 many political observers as well as foreign policy circles in Estonia and the Baltics expected a very active role for Turkey in the protection of the Tatar minority in the peninsula. To this end, various contacts were initiated – both bilaterally and within the framework of NATO – to support potential initiatives from the side of Ankara. Such initiatives, along with the global security situation, Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU, and the Estonian-Turkish bilateral relations and cooperation were discussed during President Erdoğan's official visit to Estonia later that year. However, Turkey's already very mild protests concerning the annexation of Crimea and the broader crisis in Ukraine appear rather irrelevant in light of the new rapprochement between Ankara and the Kremlin, especially following the attempted military coup on 15 July 2016.

This growing closeness with Russia and Erdoğan's increasingly deteriorating relations with the Euro-Atlantic community represent clear issues of concerns for Estonia's diplomacy, especially given Turkey's key role as a NATO member. This new trend has been reflected in the bilateral discussions held during the visit of Estonian Foreign Minister Kaljurand. Although good relations between Estonia and Turkey were emphasized, no specific mention of Russia's assertiveness in the neighbourhood was made. The recent ceasefire in Syria based on a Turkish-Russian agreement has also increased the diffidence towards Ankara as a reliable NATO partner. The fears as associated with a rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow, however, have never been expressed directly in order not to disappoint Turkey's diplomacy or to create tensions with the Turkish government.

For Estonia, the conflict in Ukraine and the civil war in Syria are closely interrelated: cooperation with Russia in Syria can have relevant consequences in Ukraine, as it might reduce Moscow's

isolation and strengthen its position in the conflict with Kyiv by reducing the international pressure on the Kremlin for a full compliance with the Minsk agreements.

### **3.2. Turkey as a stabilizer: between security concerns and the refugee crisis**

Beyond the already discussed key relevance of Turkey in the strategy of containment of the ongoing refugee crisis, both the Estonian government and most mainstream political parties have paid a great deal of attention to Turkey's support to the most committed EU neighbours (and some Estonia's closest allies), such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, whose engagement appears to be in line with the containment of Russia's assertiveness. Granting security and stability in the Black Sea region and in the broader Southern Caucasus also seem like fruitful areas of cooperation for the two diplomacies, to be pursued both bilaterally and multilaterally, within the framework of the EU Neighbourhood policy – Black Sea Synergy – and of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). Furthermore, Estonia's key interest, stressed by both partisan and governmental actors and observers, lies in a clear strategy towards energy diversification. In this sense the role played by Turkey over the past years appears highly important, with the finalization of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline.

With regard to the Southern neighbourhood, Turkey is still generally perceived as a stabilizer in the Middle East and North Africa – especially following the revolutions and their failure in the countries of the Arab spring. Such vision seems to be shared not only by the governing parties, but also most of the Estonian political forces. These issues, along with the general developments in Europe and the Middle East were at the centre of the discussions held by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu during his official visit to Estonia in which he stressed that Turkey's improved relations with Russia did not signify a policy shift in the country's foreign policy.

### **3.3. In search of stability and pragmatism in critical times of global changes**

Following the most recent global developments such as the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States or UK's Brexit vote, from Tallinn's perspective the current geopolitical scenario appears increasingly dominated by a high level of unpredictability and insecurity. This represents for Estonia's government and mainstream parties a tight call to close the ranks of allies and secure their reliability in these critical times of global changes, especially vis-à-vis Russia's assertiveness. In this perspective, Estonia's actions towards Ankara are likely to focus on bringing Turkey back to the centre of the North Atlantic Alliance, at the expense of the ongoing Moscow-Ankara rapprochement.

Due to regional security concerns, Estonia has kept a close eye on Turkey's relations with Russia, especially after the downing of the Russian fighter jet by Turkey, and the subsequent freezing of relations. The violation of a sovereign country's airspace by Russia is a practice Estonia is very familiar with and can therefore very well relate to. Turkish air forces have patrolled the Baltic air space in the past and have been invited to do so again.

In this respect, what might be expected is Estonia's growing indulgence towards human and political rights deterioration in Turkey and the growing autocratization of the country. Given the forthcoming Estonian Council presidency, the government and its officials are likely to promote at the EU level – in terms of agenda-setting – a pragmatic approach that substantiates into avoiding touching upon sensitive issues related to the future of Turkey's EU membership, while postponing a decision on visa liberalisation with Ankara. These actions also appear essential to the survival of the refugee deal. From a partisan perspective, we might expect mainstream parties across the political spectrum to favour a pragmatic approach; while niche parties like EKRE base their position on identity factors.

### Links & Further Readings:

- Anghel, Veronica (2016): "It's the Black Sea, «stupid»!", in News.postimees.ee, 25 May 2016, <http://news.postimees.ee/3708075/it-s-the-black-sea-stupid;http://news.err.ee/v/3abe30e2-21ef-4d50-b213-d1ccd3da354b>
- ERR website (2016a): "Ilves: Turkey needs to find democratic solutions that correspond to the rule of law", 10 July 2016, <http://news.err.ee/v/94c3793d-8f29-424e-b44f-972ba9bccc26>
- ERR website (2016b): "Rõivas denounces attempted coup in Turkey", 16 July 2016, <http://news.err.ee/v/63be9e42-9edf-4082-9ec0-841b183af674>
- ERR website (2016c): "Kaljurand: Turkey no longer a candidate if death penalty reintroduced", 19 July 2016, <http://news.err.ee/v/51319135-a140-4f8c-bf7e-6c81f43213cd>
- ERR website (2016d): "Nestor, Helme worried about developments in Turkey", 19 July 2016, <http://news.err.ee/v/91ebbc94-e91a-49c2-90e6-ae8375005627>
- ERR website (2016e): "Kaljurand: Estonia, Turkey share similar views on security situation", 25 August 2016, <http://news.err.ee/v/9f6b9ea2-c926-489f-947a-99ae06852d72>
- ERR website (2016f): "Estonia unable to resettle promised number of refugees by deadline", 20 September 2016, <http://news.err.ee/v/63ac3e9f-e558-4321-9f06-dc7385d9a215>
- ERR website (2016g): "Turkey offers to build mosque in Estonia", 27 October 2016, <http://news.err.ee/v/news/0d6eabea-26c3-4d74-923e-71ba39c7c7ca/turkey-offers-to-build-mosque-in-estonia>
- Estonian Embassy in Ankara (2016): "Turkey – Relations", 4 April 2016, [http://www.estemb.org.tr/estonia\\_and\\_turkey](http://www.estemb.org.tr/estonia_and_turkey)
- Estonian Presidency of the Council of the EU (undated): "The Presidency Programme", <https://www.eesistumine.ee/en/presidency/presidency-programme>



- European Commission (2006): Standard Eurobarometer 66, September 2006, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/584>
- European Commission (2016a): Standard Eurobarometer 85, July 2016, <http://ec.europa.eu/COMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2130>
- European Commission (2016b): “Autumn 2016 Standard Eurobarometer: Immigration and terrorism continue to be seen as the most important issues facing the EU”, press release, 22 December 2016, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-16-4493\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-4493_en.pdf)
- European Commission (2016c): Standard Eurobarometer 86, December 2016, <http://ec.europa.eu/COMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2137>
- Government of the Republic of Estonia (2010): “Prime Minister: Estonia supports the accession of Turkey to the European Union”, 25 February 2010, <https://valitsus.ee/en/news/prime-minister-estonia-supports-accession-turkey-european-union>
- Government of the Republic of Estonia (2016): “Government approved Estonian position for the European Council meeting (17-18 March) concerning the EU-Turkey agreement, 15 March 2016”, <http://valitsus.ee/en/news/government-approved-estonian-position-european-council-meeting-17-18-march-concerning-eu-turkey>
- Kooli, Rain (2016): “Estonian foreign minister to visit Turkey”, in ERR website, 5 August 2016, <http://news.err.ee/v/efc997b2-355e-4b39-a449-e118b8e6ea10>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia (2016a): “Undersecretary Reinart: we have to strengthen collaboration between regions to increase Europe’s competitiveness”, 26 August 2016, <http://www.vm.ee/en/news/undersecretary-reinart-we-have-strengthen-collaboration-between-regions-increase-europes>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia (2016b): “Consultations on migration between Estonian and Turkish Ministries of Foreign Affairs”, 25 November 2016, <http://vm.ee/en/news/consultations-migration-between-estonian-and-turkish-ministries-foreign-affairs>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (undated): “Relations between Turkey and Estonia”, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-estonia.en.mfa>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (2016): “Interview of H.E. Mr. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR)”, 26 October 2016, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-of-h\\_e\\_-mr\\_-mevlut-cavusoglu-to-estonian-public-broadcasting\\_err\\_en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-of-h_e_-mr_-mevlut-cavusoglu-to-estonian-public-broadcasting_err_en.mfa)

- Radio Free Europe (2016): “Estonia Says Russian Aircraft Violated Airspace Again”, 6 September 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-estonia-airspace-violated/27970888.html>
- The Economist (online edition) (2016): “Estonia counts on NATO, but worries about Donald Trump”, 26 November 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21710862-militia-moms-are-practising-their-marksmanship-just-case-estonia-counts-nato-worries>
- Viirand, Laur (2016): “Turkish foreign minister to ERR: Better relations with Russia not influencing relations with NATO allies”, in ERR.eu, 26 October 2016, <http://news.err.ee/v/f6104cfe-9687-4e22-b03f-c8cf93f63172>