



Weekly Briefing

Estonia Social briefing:

**Free language classes for prospective citizens, the attitude towards
the EU, and a ‘wake-up’ call on gender equality**

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Free language classes for prospective citizens, the attitude towards the EU, and a ‘wake-up’ call on gender equality

In October 2018, there was a diverse range of society development-related topics, which got plenty of attention within Estonia. As usual for the pre-elections period, a political context was always there, but a particular initiative had a very concrete connotation – the idea-converted-into-law was about a significant societal segment of prospective citizens who can qualify for free Estonian language classes in the country.

An amendment to the *Citizenship Act*

Conceptually (and from 2019 – normatively), a person, who legally lived in the Republic of Estonia for 5 years, meets the requirements for applying for the country’s citizenship and would like to apply for it, can be offered a citizen contract to take a single Estonian language course that should get him/her from zero language proficiency to the B1 level. In respect of the aforementioned amendments to the *Citizenship Act*, Andres Anvelt, the country’s Minister of the Interior, noted:

The ability to speak Estonian is a prerequisite for Estonian citizenship. It is also a precondition for better social integration. [...] When a person has decided to tie themselves to Estonia and apply for citizenship, the state can offer them free language classes and necessary study leave.¹

As reported, the amendment was supported by 62 MPs out of the 101 strong *Riigikogu* – intriguingly, 30 MPs decided to not take part in the vote at all, while an oppositional representative from the Estonian Reform Party (*Eesti Reformierakond*), Hanno Pevkur, underscored before the vote that “We do not need to create norms for the sake of creating norms”². In a debate, Jevgeni

¹ Andres Anvelt in Anna Põld ‘Prospective citizens to qualify for free language classes’. 13 September 2018. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/6404801/prospective-citizens-to-qualify-for-free-language-classes>].

² Hanno Pevkur in Anna Põld ‘Prospective citizens to qualify for free language classes’.

Ossinovski, the chairman of the Social Democratic Party (*Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond*) that is a member of the current governmental coalition, argued that

People, who have not been able to learn the Estonian language to date, as a rule, are in a socially weaker position. Where will a single mother from Kohtla-Järve³, who works in a store, find the time and money to learn Estonian? In my opinion, it is quite natural that the state should create additional opportunities to help people in the process of mastering the [Estonian] language.⁴

In any case, since the idea has now become the law, the state budget will need to be prepared to allocate €3.7 million for the project's implementation within the next 3-year period. This development distinctly resonates with a discussion on the level of the Estonian capital city's Council where a call on assigning €200,000 from the city budget for teaching the Estonian language to teachers of schools and kindergartens, however, the city government did not support the initiative⁵. Even though the idea did not generate any positive outcome, it was backed up by the argument – expressed by Riina Solman from the Pro Patria (*Isamaa*) – that “297 teachers from the capital city's kindergartens and 112 teachers from Tallinn-based schools did not speak Estonian at the level required by law”⁶.

The country's attitude towards the EU

Since its accession to the EU in 2004, Estonia has always been perceived as one of the most pro-EU nations within the entity. Evidently, such a perception has been ‘enjoying’ a solid endorsement in reality. However, from time to time,

³ Kohtla-Järve an industrial city in north-eastern Estonia, where only 21% of the population are ethnic Estonians.

⁴ Jevgeni Ossinovski in ‘Осиновский: откуда возьмет время и деньги на изучение эстонского мать-одиночка из Кохтла-Ярве, работающая в магазине?’. 13 September 2018. Available from [<https://rus.postimees.ee/6404087/osinovskiy-otkuda-vozmety-vremya-i-dengi-na-izuchenie-estonskogo-mat-odinochka-iz-kohtla-yarve-rabotayushchaya-v-magazine>]. Translated from Russian by E-MAP Foundation MTÜ (non-official translation).

⁵ ‘Сотни учителей в Таллинне не владеют эстонским языком на должном уровне’. 16 September 2018. Available from [<https://rus.postimees.ee/6406643/sotni-uchiteley-v-tallinne-ne-vladeyut-estonskim-yazykom-na-dolznom-urovne>].

⁶ Riina Solman in ‘Сотни учителей в Таллинне не владеют эстонским языком на должном уровне’.

a decent ‘check-up’ on the issue should be considered highly beneficial – the EU is in constant reforming mode, and its Member States are not merely a number, but also a not always increasing number. To give a general example, despite the fact that the European Parliament’s role in the EU was dramatically enhanced by the *Lisbon Treaty*, the results of 2014 European elections were featured by the voters turnout of 42.62% across the EU, with Estonian and British figures showing correspondingly 36.52% and 35.60% of voters casting their ballots for the European Parliament candidates⁷. Arguably, these results were not taken seriously by a number of high-profile decision-makers on the EU level and in the UK – the process had eventuated with the so-called Brexit referendum in 2016, and the latter’s outcome ‘guided’ a great deal of adjustments made to the EU’s strategic narrative.

On a concrete note, since the next elections to the European Parliament are planned to be held in 23–26 May 2019 (about three months after the Estonian parliamentary elections), the country’s current attitude towards the EU represents a substantial bit of information for all key stakeholders to be aware of. As reported on a survey conducted in Estonia by *Kantar Emor* on request from the European Commission and presented on 28 September in Tallinn (1,003 of the EU citizens, residing in the country, aged 15 and above were interviewed), “69% of Estonian citizens considered the country’s membership of the EU to be good, which is the highest [...] indicator in the past 11 years [especially if compared with] such answers across the EU [where the recorded result] was 60%”⁸. At the same time, an alarming result for the EU as an international actor, “49% of Estonian citizens are unable to say whether things are moving in the right or wrong direction in the EU in general”, while only 38% “consider voting in the European Parliament elections as very important”⁹. The “not important” theme in the context of voting on the European Parliament was supported by

⁷ ‘Results by country’. European Parliament. Available from [<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-introduction-2014.html>].

⁸ ‘Survey: Estonians’ attitude towards EU positive but passive’. 29 September 2018. Available from [https://www.baltictimes.com/survey__estonians__attitude_towards_eu_positive_but_passive/].

⁹ ‘Survey: Estonians’ attitude towards EU positive but passive’.

26% of Estonians, and this result ‘ranked’ Estonia as the fifth most passive country in the EU¹⁰. Clearly, a certain lack of effective communication between the EU and the entity’s citizens in different Member States (including Estonia) is a reflection of reality. Keeping in mind the rise of political populism in Europe, the importance of a right-n-timely strategic message sent by the EU to its citizens has never been greater.

A room for improvement on gender equality

While visibly enjoying its geographical ‘presence’ in the Baltics, both Estonian political and business elites have been repeatedly pushing the case for recognising the country’s location in the Nordic side of the European continent. Not to mention about Estonia’s strong historic and business linkages with Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, this claim is not baseless, especially when one considers the fact that the Estonian and the Finnish languages are from the same linguistic family of the Baltic Finnic tongues. However, in order to be treated as or considered a true Nordic nation (not only by the virtue of historic, business or geographic proximity to the region), the country’s record on gender equality has to be exceptional. In that context, the latest message sent to Estonia from the Council of Europe was framed by a range of recommendations on improvements.

In June 2018, about two months after she was appointed as the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović visited Estonia. In her report, which was issued in September, the country’s “significant progress in gender equality and adoption of legislation and policies” was noted, but “the need for greater efforts in addressing gender stereotypes and prejudices”¹¹ was also specified. In details, the Council of Europe’s high-profile official stated:

The authorities should strengthen efforts to raise awareness about the negative impact of structural inequality between men and women, and support

¹⁰ ‘Survey: Estonians’ attitude towards EU positive but passive’.

¹¹ ‘Council of Europe: Gender, older persons’ rights need improving in Estonia’. 28 September 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/864999/council-of-europe-gender-older-persons-rights-need-improving-in-estonia>].

an education system able to promote gender equality throughout the country. [...] I am particularly concerned about the very high rate of poverty among older persons in Estonia. [...] The authorities must ensure that older persons can live in dignity and enjoy their human rights to health, food and an adequate standard of living, including by raising social protection floors, which are currently inadequate.¹²

Even though, Estonia takes pride in having a high percentage of women as members of the *Riigikogu*¹³, the country's record on the gender wage gap¹⁴ is the worst among the EU's Member States. As reported by the OECD, the gender wage gap in Estonia is at the level of 28.3%, followed by Latvia (21.1%) and the UK (16.8%). Thus, it was a good timing for the Estonian Government to receive such a 'wake-up' call on improvement in the sphere that makes a decisive difference on where the country would like to see itself.

¹² Dunja Mijatović in 'Council of Europe: Gender, older persons' rights need improving in Estonia'.

¹³ Currently, the Estonian Parliament has 29 women MPs out of the total of 101 members. 'Statistics on the members of the 13th Riigikogu'. Available from [<https://www.riigikogu.ee/en/parliament-of-estonia/composition/numbers-talk/>].

¹⁴ The gender wage gap is defined as the difference between median earnings of men and women relative to median earnings of men. Data refer to full-time employees and to self-employed. Available from [<https://data.oecd.org/earnwage/gender-wage-gap.htm>].