

Partners in the European Union – What the Finns and the Estonians Think of Each Other?



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Introduction

The proximity of relations between Finland and Estonia has varied greatly over the decades. The inter-war period was characterised by lively economic, tourist, and cultural relations. During the Soviet occupation of Estonia there were few contacts across the Gulf of Finland until the Soviet perestroika period from the mid 1980s onwards. As Estonia regained her independence in 1991, a major revival of relations occurred. A new level will again be reached on May 1st, 2004 as Estonia joins Finland as a member of the European Union.

Now, on the eve of Estonian EU membership, the Centre for Finnish Business and Policy Studies EVA decided to find out what the Finns and the Estonians think of each other. What are attitudes towards each other's country and its people like, how interested are Finns and Estonians in moving to each other's country, do the citizens of the two countries wish to maintain and develop political, economic and cultural ties, and what kind of co-operation could the two countries pursue as members of the European Union?

This article is based on the EVA report 'Partners in the European Union'. The full text of the report is available on EVA's website www.eva.fi. Details on the way the survey was carried out can be found in the appendix.

General View of the Neighbour Is Positive

The Finns have a positive attitude towards Estonians. More than 70 per cent of Finns have a very or fairly positive attitude towards Estonian tourists visiting Finland. Close to six out of ten share a similar view of Estonians as partners in work or business. Negative attitudes towards Estonian in tourists in Finland are virtually non-existent. Only six per cent of Finns see Estonians in a negative light even as work or business partners. (Figure 1)

The Estonians' opinion of Finnish tourists is somewhat more negative than the corresponding Finnish view. The Estonians' view of Finns as work or business partners is roughly the same as the one in Finland towards Estonians. It should be noted that the share of 'Don't know' answers is relatively high in this question, probably because a large number of people in each country do not have any first-hand experience of this kind of co-operation with citizens of the neighbouring country. (Figure 1)

Moving across the Gulf Is Not Tempting

There has been a lively debate in Finland on what the liberalisation of labour markets between Finland and Estonia will mean in practice, as Estonia's EU membership takes full effect after the transition period. The results of this survey do not support expectations of large-scale migration across the Gulf of Finland.

Figure 1. "Finns' Attitudes Towards Estonians and Estonians' Attitudes Towards Finns"

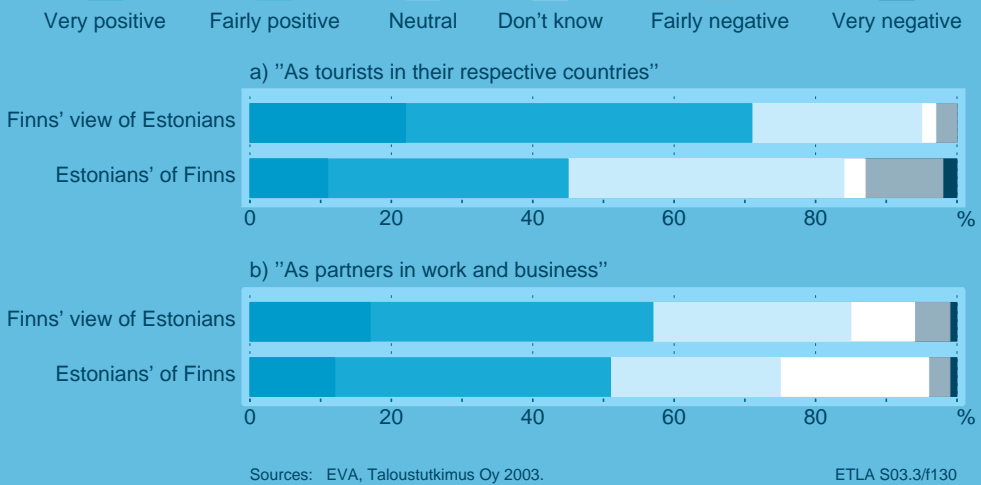
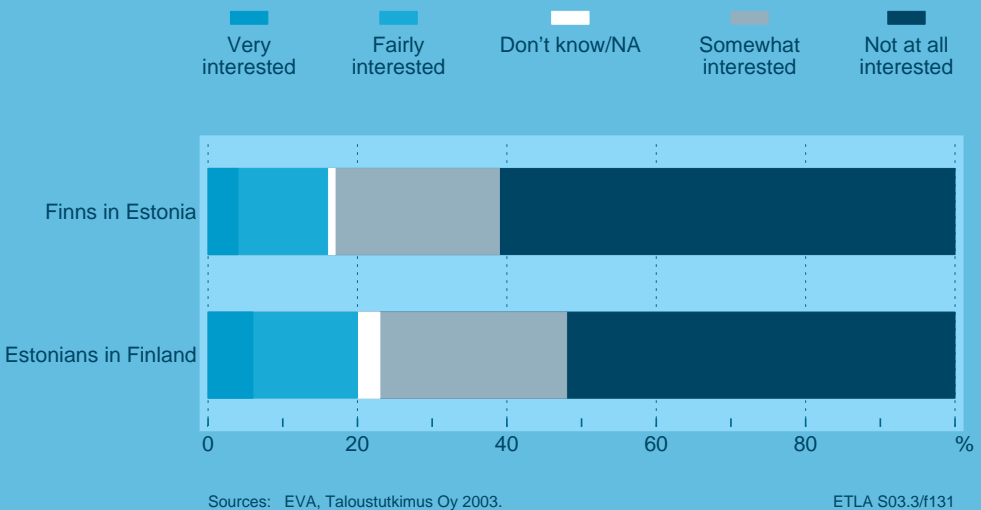


Figure 2. "Degree of Interest to Live and Study or Work..."



Only about a fifth of Estonians are very or fairly interested in living and studying or working in Finland, and more than half of them are not at all interested in this alternative. Interest in moving to the neighbouring country is even somewhat less keen in Finland, although the difference between the two countries is not very large. (Figure 2)

Great Expectations of Co-operation between the Two Countries

Attitudes towards the future level co-operation between Finland and Estonia are quite positive in both countries. This is borne out by answers to questions that put the matter in more concrete terms in certain fields of activity.

About two-thirds of the Finns consider economic integration between the two countries beneficial to both parties, while just over a tenth disagree. Almost three-quarters of the Estonians agree with the notion, and only a handful beg to differ. (Figure 3)

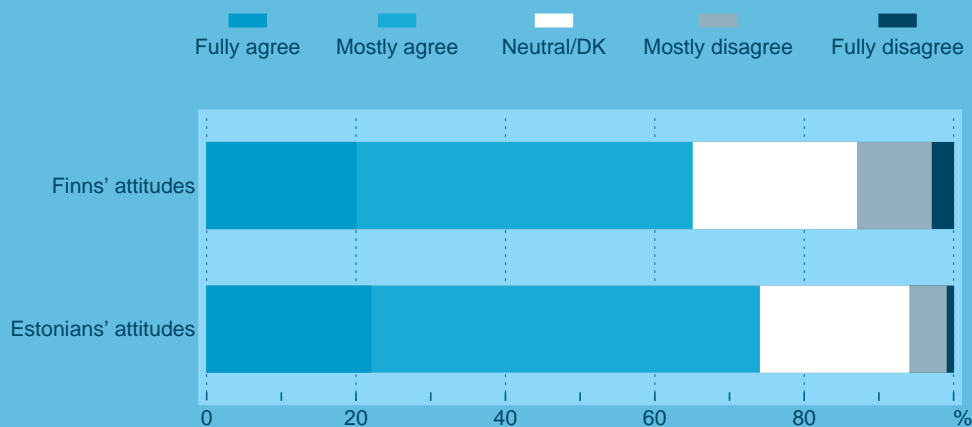
Prospects for political co-operation are also viewed positively. The proposition 'Finland and

Estonia are so different that their co-operation within the EU will not work' is clearly rejected in both countries. Faith in co-operation is especially strong on the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland, less than one tenth doubt its success. Almost a fifth of respondents in Finland are sceptical. (Figure 4)

Trust in Finnish-Estonian co-operation within the confines of the European Union is significant for the simple reason that, e.g., the role of the public sector and the welfare state has been seen very differently in these countries. It is possible that the debate on conflicts of interest between the large and small member countries of the EU has influenced the result - the citizens of the two countries may see the partner as a potential ally. We should also keep in mind that despite their many differences the two countries are united by, i.a., their solidly Lutheran cultural heritage.

The Finns' impression of Estonia as a close country is corroborated by the fact that comparing the closeness of ties with Estonia to those with Sweden, the respondents are almost evenly split, with Estonia carrying the day by a small margin. The result is significant consider-

Figure 3. "Close Economic Integration of Southern Finland and Estonia Would be Beneficial to Both Countries"



Sources: EVA, Taloustutkimus Oy 2003.

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ing that the common history of Finland and Sweden spans centuries, and that these two countries have long co-operated in, i.a., the Nordic Council, EFTA and more recently the EU. It also seems that the decades of few contacts between Finland and Estonia have not taken a heavy toll in the Finns' feelings towards their linguistic cousins. (Figure 5)

The Finns are Pleased with Estonia's EU Membership

A majority of respondents in Finland consider Estonia's membership to be beneficial for Finland as well. Only a fifth remain doubtful. The most positive are those with a university degree. They seem to have a more favourable attitude than the rest of the Finnish population towards relations between Finland and Estonia in most respects. (Figure 6)

There are also negative aspects associated with Estonia's EU membership, as there are bound to be with any major change. Almost 60 per cent of Finns are afraid that drugs, crime and other unwanted phenomena will increase as

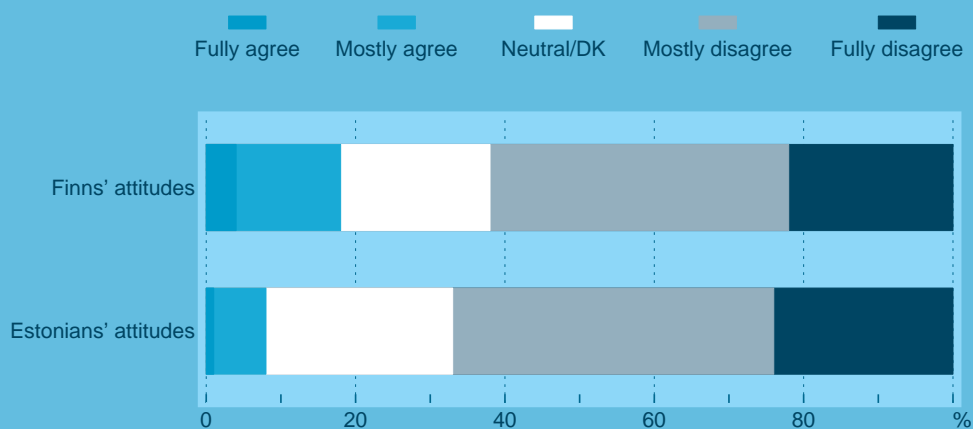
Estonia enters the Union and the free movement of people between the two countries becomes a reality. (Figure 7)

Developing Relations with Finland Is not on Top of the Agenda

The Estonians were also asked to which countries or groups of countries Estonia should primarily develop her relations. Separate assessments were requested on political, economic and cultural relations, and in each case the respondents were asked to name the most important and the second most important alternative.

The most important country (measured by the proportion naming her either the most or second most important country) with respect to political relations was Russia, a somewhat surprising result. The EU finished second, albeit by a narrow margin. One explanation for the importance of Russia is that political relations with Russia are felt to be problematic. Estonia has e.g. border disputes with Russia, and thus a lot of effort needs to be put on improving the relations. (Figure 8a)

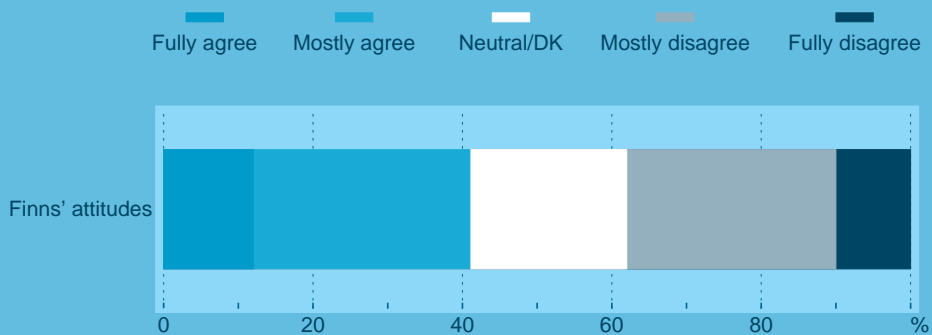
Figure 4. "Finland and Estonia Are So Different That Their Co-operation Within the EU Will Not Work"



Sources: EVA, Taloustutkimus Oy 2003.

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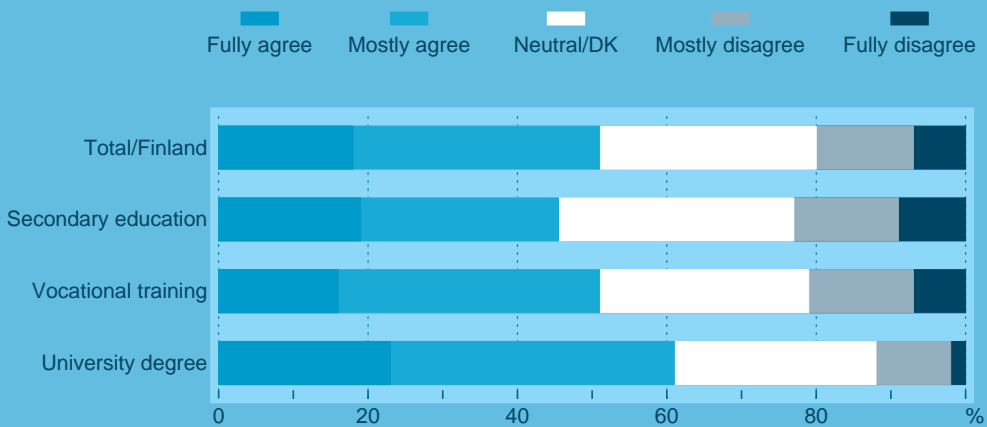
Figure 5. "Finns Feel Estonia to be Closer to Them Than Sweden"



Sources: EVA, Taloustutkimus Oy 2003.

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Figure 6. "Estonia's EU Membership is in Finland's Interest (Finns' attitudes)"



Sources: EVA, Taloustutkimus Oy 2003.

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Finland was at the bottom of the list of specified countries and country groups in this assessment. This is probably to a large extent explained by the fact Finland is also an EU member and a Nordic country, both of which groups are near the top of the list. 'Support' for good relations with Finland has most likely been partly channelled through them. A positive interpretation would also be that, as the Finno-Estonian relations are unproblematic, there is little need to develop them in any particular way. (Figure 8a)

When the matter is looked at from an economic angle, the results are very much the same as with political relations, the European Union and Russia top the list (figure 8b). The picture is rather different with respect to cultural relations. The Nordic countries are given first place in the ranking with the EU countries a close second. Estonia's immediate neighbours are found towards the middle of the list in the order Latvia and Lithuania, Finland, and Russia. (Figure 8c)

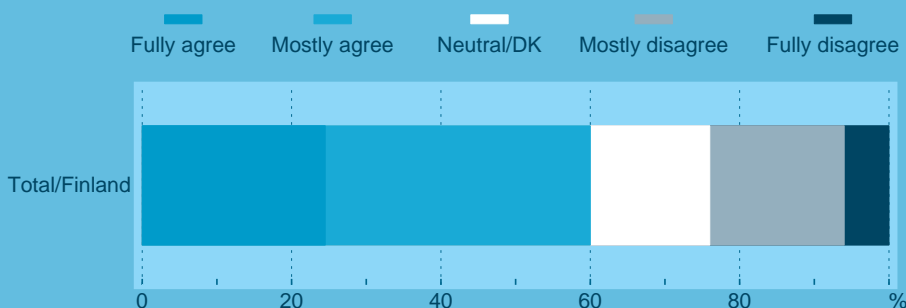
Finnish Companies are Good Employers, but...

Finnish companies have invested a great deal in Estonia over the past decade or so, and many of the leading companies in Estonia are now under Finnish ownership. The Estonians' image of Finland is thus probably also influenced by the way that these companies are seen: Are they good employers and good corporate citizens?

Finnish-owned companies are generally considered to be good employers, almost half of all respondents agree with this proposition and only about one sixth disagree. The share of the 'don't know' answers is quite large. This is natural, as many Estonians have neither worked in such a company, nor have any of their relatives or acquaintances done so. (Figure 9a)

Finnish companies are not, however, seen as disinterested benefactors. Almost two-thirds of Estonians think that they invest in Estonia only to take advantage of the country's low wage level and other labour market characteristics

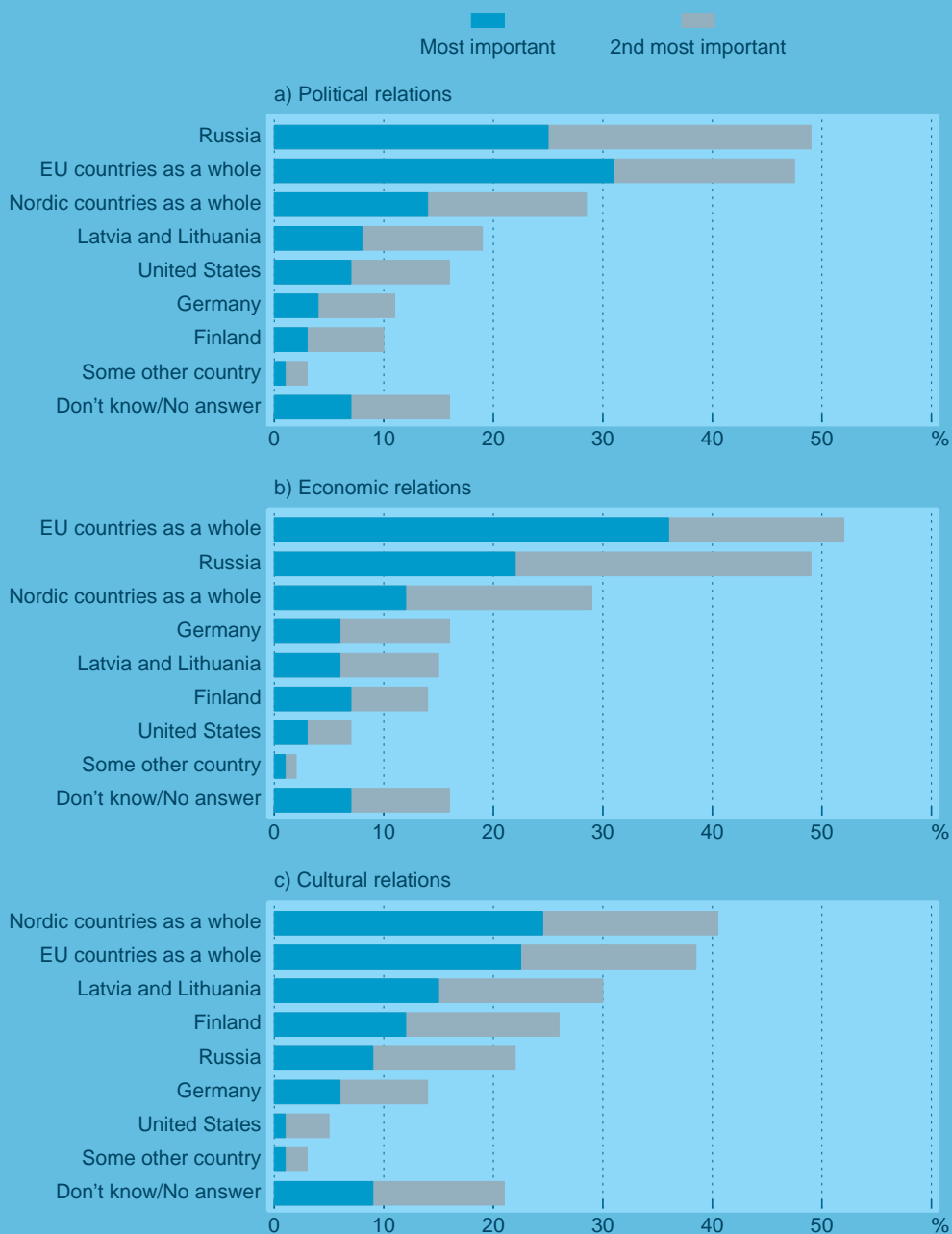
Figure 7. "The Free Movement of People Enabled by Estonia's EU Membership Will Bring Us Many Unwanted Phenomena, Including Drugs and Crime (Finns' attitudes)"



Sources: EVA, Taloustutkimus Oy 2003.

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Figure 8. "Which Countries or Groups of Countries Should Estonia Develop Its Relations with in Particular (Estonians)"



Sources: EVA, Taloustutkimus Oy 2003.

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that favour the employer. (Figure 9b) This is a very plausible argument: The markets of small and poor Estonia hardly loom large as motives for investment for manufacturing companies.

Final Remarks

The survey shows that the Finns and Estonians share rather similar views of each other. The Finns view Estonians and their country's EU membership positively. The Estonian view of Finns is somewhat more reserved, but in no sense negative.

Estonia's imminent EU membership will further promote the opportunities for mutual co-operation. Great hopes are placed on this possibility in both countries, in Estonia one could even describe the attitude as enthusiastic. People would like to increase interaction between the two countries. Future co-operation is viewed with anticipation, both in the sense of economic integration and political co-operation within the EU. This does not, however, preclude problems.

The Estonians do not, however, only look north. They want to develop their country's re-

lations chiefly to countries other than Finland. This is only natural for a newly independent country that is just about to enter both the EU and NATO.

Appendix

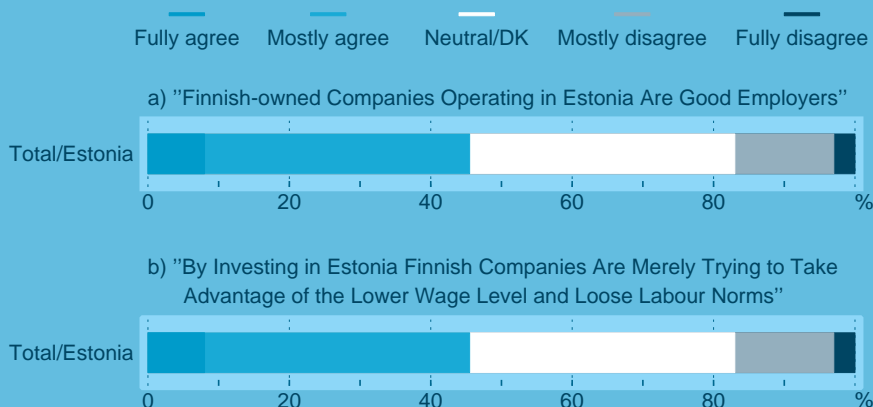
How the Survey was Carried out

The survey was commissioned by EVA and conducted in Finland by Taloustutkimus Oy and in Estonia by its daughter company ES Turu-uuringute AS employing the same methodology. The survey was carried out as part of the Omnibus round using personal interviews. In Finland the interviews were performed between August 4th and 17th, 2003, and in Estonia between June 6th and July 20th, 2003.

The target group was, in both countries, the population between 15 and 74 years of age, in Finland excluding the Åland Islands. The sample was compiled by quota sampling, and there were 985 interviewees in Finland and 980 in Estonia. The sample has been weighted to correspond to the target group.

The confidence interval (at 95 % level) is 1.4 percentage points in either direction.

Figure 9. "Views on Finnish Companies Active in Estonia (Estonians)"



Sources: EVA, Taloustutkimus Oy 2003.

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