EUROPE, A VALUES-BASED POWER

6 MARCH 2019

#PUBLIC OPINIONS

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A SHARED EUROPEAN FUTURE, BUT CONTRASTING ATTITUDES

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE EU IN ESTONIA, LATVIA AND LITHUANIA

■ **DANIEL DEBOMY**
Associate research fellow, Jacques Delors Institute, founder of OPTEM and European Qualitative Network

■ In collaboration with :

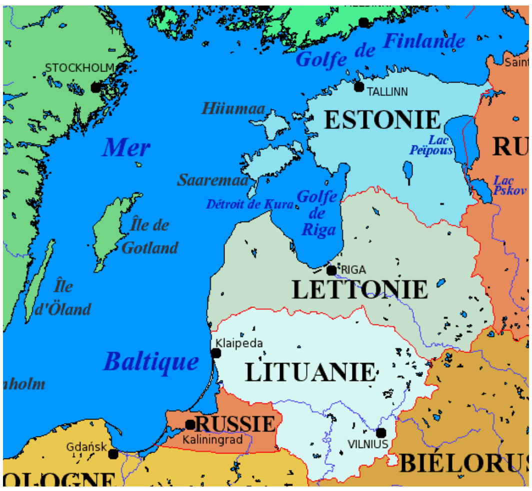
Irina Strapatsuk, Research analyst, Saar Poll and Turu-uuringute AS (Tallinn)

Aigars Freimanis, Managing director, Oksana Kurcalte, Senior project manager, Oskars Zalans, Researcher, Latvian Facts (Riga)

Rasa Alisauskiene, Managing director, Elena Liubsiene, Research director, Baltic Surveys (Vilnius)

The end of the First World War led to the independence of the three Baltic countries, which had been annexed by the Russian Empire since the 18th century. Its fall, followed by the defeat of Germany, were the triggering factors.

For Estonia and Latvia, it was their first time being independent after centuries of successive interference and domination, either total or partial. From the 12th century onwards, this domination was firstly by Germanic knights, perpetrators of a brutal conversion to Christianity (incidentally, the German 'Baltic Barons' remained powerful thereafter), followed by the Swedes, more briefly the Danes, and the Russians, always seeking to exercise their influence, etc. In the other Baltic country, history had taken another course from the 13th century, with the creation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea by bringing together small Slavic principalities, before uniting with Poland from the end of the 14th century, and forming with it a "Republic of the Two Nations". It then became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until this was dismantled.



The process of gaining independence for the Baltic countries, which started in 1918 towards the end of the First World War, was completed over the two years that followed.

A century later, once again independent of Russia after the collapse of the USSR, the three Baltic states have been experiencing full and complete membership of the European Union for nearly fifteen years. The three countries have adopted the euro, they are part of the Schengen Area and are also members of NATO. Estonia held the presidency of the EU Council for the first time in 2017, after Lithuania (2013) and Latvia (2015), moments that are always conducive to promoting the EU in the country.

BOX 1 ■ Population and turnout in European elections

Estonia: 1 315 635 inhabitants, turnout of 36,52% in the 2014 elections

Latvia: 1 928 600 inhabitants, turnout of 30,24% in the 2014 elections

Lithuania: 2 823 859 inhabitants, turnout of 47,35% in the 2014 elections

What is the status of their public opinion concerning the EU and how has this evolved since their accession? Such is the aim of this document.

It is based firstly on the semi-annual results of the European Commission's Standard Eurobarometer polls, supplemented in some cases[1] by data from the most recent Parlemeter of the European Parliament, and secondly, on qualitative investigations that help to clarify the meaning of the figures. This includes reanalysis of several pan-European qualitative studies conducted since 2001 by the research institute OPTEM and its partners in the European Qualitative Network, and observations made by these partners in the evolution of their respective public opinion.

1. Question on membership, asked in the Commission's surveys until spring 2011, except in the fall of 2010, included in Parliament's in spring in 2012 and 2013, in autumn in 2014, 2015 and 2016, and every six months thereafter. Question on the benefits of belonging, asked in the Commission's surveys until spring 2011, included in those of the Parliament in spring 2013, in autumn in 2015 and 2016, and every semester thereafter. Survey results are based on samples of around 1,000 respondents, interviewed face to face in each country.

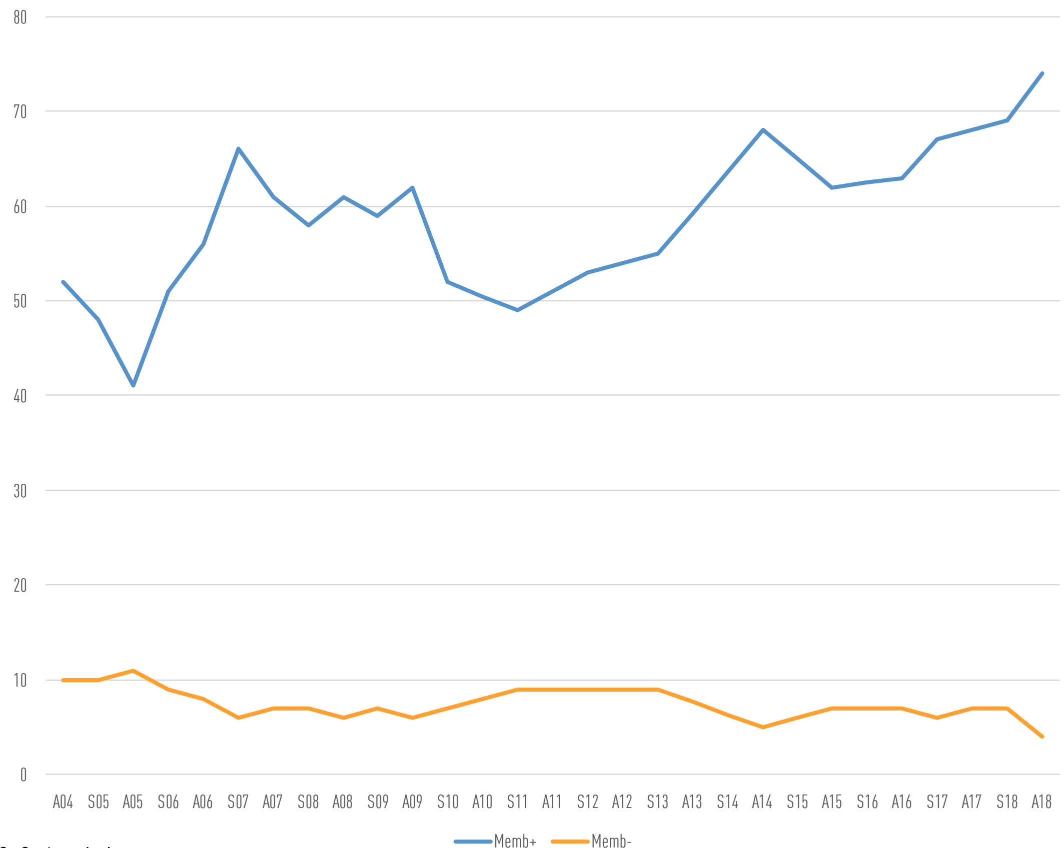
1. In Estonia, subdued Eurofavour

1.1 EU membership: after the crisis, membership now massively approved

In Estonia, a majority of 52% of citizens (versus: 10%, and 36% of neutral responses) were in favour of their country's EU membership at the time of accession (autumn 2004), a score close to the European average. This score, after a temporary dip of about 10 points one year later, increased to reach 66% in spring 2007. The financial crisis led to a significant decrease in relation to this peak, but moderate in relation to the original level: at 49% in the spring 2011 measurement. Subsequently, **the progression of positive opinion was particularly strong:** 69% in the spring of 2018, **74% (against 4%) last autumn.**

The **benefit of membership**, recognised by 56% (versus 31%) in autumn 2004, increasing to 80% in spring 2007, then dropping again somewhat over the following years (68% in autumn 2010), **has progressed once again to reach a very high level of 88% (against 7%) in autumn 2018.**

FIGURE 1 ■ Estonia: opinions on EU membership



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In 2005, a minority of 40% of Estonians, versus 48% considered that the country's interests were given proper consideration within the EU. These rates have fluctuated since then, with negative opinions being higher than positive ones in most survey waves (most clearly in autumn 2011, with 58% for the first and 36% for the second). In autumn 2018, 50% as opposed to 40%, considered that their country's interests were given proper consideration, thus reflecting a significant improvement.

In any event, the idea that the country would be in a better position to face the future outside the EU is very much a minority view, and the proportion of people who believe this is decreasing rather than increasing: 24%, versus 67%, were of this opinion in autumn 2012. In autumn 2018 they were 17% versus 73% (after limited fluctuations between these two dates).

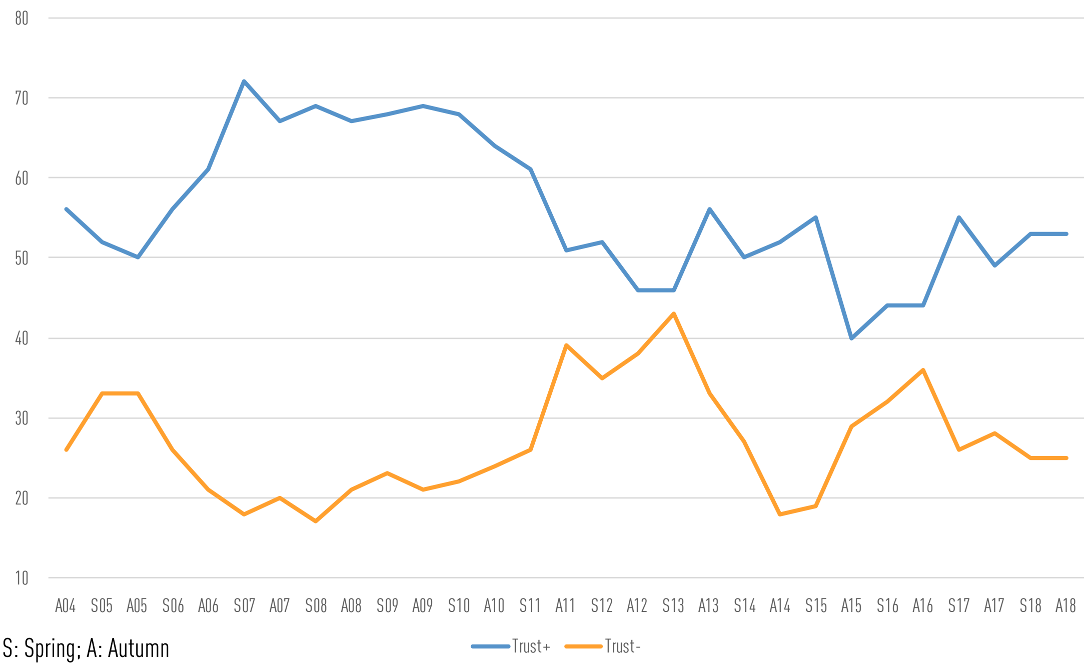
1.2 Image of the EU and degree of trust: a partial rebound but persistent uncertainty on current trends

The image of the EU among Estonians was less positive at the outset (38%, versus 12%) and more uncertain (48%) than the EU average. It rapidly and considerably improved until spring 2007 (56% versus 6%). With the crisis, it then declined, with positive opinions however remaining more frequent than negative ones (low points reached in autumn 2011 and that of 2012: 29% versus 15%). The rebound observed since then brings the Estonians' image of the EU to a level which is relatively better than that of the average European opinion (45% positive, 9% negative, 45% neutral in autumn 2018).

The **trust** initially expressed in the EU was greater among the Estonians than among Europeans in general: 56% versus 26% in autumn 2004. After some fluctuations, it rose to 72% in spring 2007, then was substantially hit by the effects of the crisis, especially from 2011, by decreasing to an all-time low of 46% (versus 43%) in spring 2013. At the end of the period, it **had almost reattained its clearly positive starting level** (53%, versus 25%, in the last wave of polls), **nevertheless far from the peak of 2007.**

Initial views on **the direction being taken in the EU** were extremely positive, 63% (versus 8%) regarding it as good. These decreased significantly, with some fits and starts, to the point where the negative and positive opinions were equal (29% and 29%, with 32% of neutral opinions in autumn 2012). A slight re-

FIGURE 2 ■ Estonia: degree of trust in the EU



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bound then occurred, interrupted by another sharp fall in autumn 2015 and in spring 2016 (16%, versus 34% of people then considering that the direction of policies was good). **Positive opinions have only balanced out negative ones in the past two years:** 28%, versus 32% (and 22% neutral) at the end of 2018 – **far from the starting point**.

1.3 Degree of optimism concerning the future of the EU: return to a clear positive majority after significant fluctuations

The optimism initially measured appeared to be particularly significant, at 77%. This decreased, as it did in Europe as a whole, in 2010 and in 2011, falling in autumn of the latter year to 50% (versus 46%). A rapid recovery took place to reach a score of 71% in autumn 2014, which was followed by another sharp drop (51% in spring 2016), with finally a marked recovery in the past 24 months to reach 65%, versus 28%, in autumn 2018.

1.4 Inclination towards joint European action: reservations, just like the Nordic countries

It was observed that the Estonian citizens were clearly more reserved (42% versus 40%) than the European average in terms of the principle of more shared decision-making. Concerning most EU policy proposals on which people were polled, they appear however to be rather more in favour than the average, but not in the case of a common migration policy which is only desired by a relative majority.

Furthermore, misgivings on the part of the Estonians also appear in another question (asked in spring 2018) regarding the idea of joint decisions in several domains for which their positive opinion is particularly low: management of health and social security issues (low relative majority of 45%, versus 36%, whereas figures close to the higher EU average are noted in the other two Baltic countries), the promotion of gender equality (minority of agreement of 32%, versus 37%; majority scores were observed in the other two countries, albeit lower than the EU average), as well as the stimulation of investment and employment (low relative majority of 44% versus 37%, in contrast with the around average majorities in Latvia and Lithuania). This undoubtedly conveys a fear of interference for topics of a societal nature largely considered as something that should remain in national hands. It was also noted that these misgivings are of the same nature in the Western European Nordic countries: very strong – the strongest of all EU countries – in Sweden, Finland and Denmark, for the first domain; significant for the third domain in these three countries, and more frequent than elsewhere also for the second, in Denmark.

1.5 The origins of Estonian attitudes: Europfavour tempered by maintaining a certain distance

The qualitative studies conducted in the early 2000s, just before and just after the country entered the EU, showed Estonians characterised both **by a clear awareness of the need for accession and by somewhat distant attitudes in relation to the EU**. Undoubtedly feeling European, they however expressed an unequal affinity with the different Member States; it is obviously those in the northern part of the continent (serious, orderly, etc.) to whom they feel closest. **Their vision of the EU is in fact close to that of the Scandinavians** in several regards: pragmatic expectations of the advantages in the economic domain and recognition of the success achieved in this area but cautious regarding joint actions in other domains, and critical of the supposedly 'bureaucratic' and overly interventionist nature of the EU are the noteworthy elements. Views concerning the EU partly vary however according to social category, as do views on the country's situation (the most fragile can fear being left behind).

These attitudes have seen cyclical developments in the years following accession, without fundamentally changing. The advantages of membership were widely recognised (in particular financial aid for economic development, freedom of movement creating opportunities for studies or employment especially for the younger population). From another viewpoint, one could see in the sanctions imposed in terms of sugar production, or in the standards that would be likely to undermine local agricultural production that provides 'authentic' foodstuffs, an illustration of the EU's incriminated over-regulation; more broadly, there was a tendency to attribute the EU's lack of economic dynamism to a bureaucratic and timorous European mentality – in contrast to the country's resolute commitment to new technologies and innovation (just like the Finnish neighbour and cousin).

Before the financial crisis began, improved perceptions of the EU were visible. Within the middle to upper socioeconomic classes, the situation was considered very positively on the whole (rapid economic growth, opportunities linked to the prospect of adopting the euro, etc.). The less well-off categories were more positive than negative but significantly less (references to difficulties in everyday life, accommodation issues, fears of price increases with the euro, etc.). The Estonians tended to see themselves in an intermediate situation between the old and the new Member States, or as the most advanced among the new ones. Concerning other topics, attitudes remained cautious and ambivalent: concern to a greater or lesser extent about preserving the national sovereignty and identity of a small country just free from the clutches of another 'Union' within the vast whole that is the EU; at the same time security provided by membership of this whole against the large neighbour (references, among other things, to Russian threats about gas supply), but also interrogations about its role in relation to that of NATO; questions about the possibility of further enlargements (that would apply to even less advanced countries, which would therefore require provision of aid).

After the crisis, this dominant positive feeling returned and even grew. The economic benefits were confirmed. The contribution of Community funds helped to rehabilitate and improve infrastructure as well as developments in other domains (including cultural) which would not have occurred without it; even during the crisis this contribution remained visible. Fears linked to the adoption of the euro lessened and this was symbolically important for the country. Furthermore, Russia's operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, after Georgia some years earlier, reinforced awareness of the need to avoid being isolated and the value of the protection provided by both the EU and NATO. The main outstanding **reservations** concern societal issues (such as the status of homosexuality, adoption by homosexual couples, juvenile justice, among others) for which Estonian society has remained more traditional than the European average, which, it feels, is heading in the wrong direction. On immigration, there is strong resistance to having migrant quotas imposed in a very small country with a still vivid memory of the forced introduction of non-native populations at the time of the USSR.

On this subject, besides the differences in perception of the EU stemming from the social level (which perhaps have a tendency to diminish), **a division has been noted between native Estonians and the large community of Russian origin** (a quarter of the population), which remains very focused its country of origin and remains much more reserved regarding the EU.

BOX 2

The deterioration and then the rebound in attitudes relative to membership of the EU went hand in hand with trends in the same direction as views concerning the economic situation.

European citizens considered the economic situation of their own country good in spring 2007, for 52% (versus bad for 44%), then again for 48% in the autumn. This score plummeted with the crisis, falling rapidly below 25%. In autumn 2018, the situation was relatively close to that of 2007: 49%, versus 48%.

In Estonia, views of the situation, which were extremely positive in 2007 (81%, versus 15% in the spring and again at 67% in the autumn) dropped very quickly, also falling to below 25%, before progressively climbing from 2010 onwards to reach 66% (versus 27%) in autumn 2018. In Latvia, where spirits were already quite morose in 2007 (22%, versus 76% in the spring, and 16% in the autumn), the crisis brought positive opinions to below 5% from the following years onwards. In late 2018, 32% of Latvians, versus 63%, considered their economy's situation good: negative views were therefore still predominant, although to a lesser extent than at the start of the period. In Lithuania, 33% (versus 64%) had a positive opinion in spring 2007, and again 31% in the autumn. As in Latvia, this score quickly dropped very low, to around 5%, before climbing in a similar way: 40%, versus 56%, in autumn 2018.

Regarding opinions on the state of the European economy, these underwent trends of the same nature. In 2007, 58% of Europeans versus 27%, considered it good. This percentage, which had fallen below 25% with the crisis, has since increased (but without totally recovering): in late 2018 it was at 49%, versus 38%.

In Estonia, positive opinion which was dominant in 2007 (77%, versus 6 %) decreased to a large extent, as it did elsewhere, remaining nevertheless more moderate in its pessimism (in spring 2010, it was 38%, versus 52%). Although lower than the initial score, this once again became clearly predominant: 59%, versus 17%, in autumn 2018. In Latvia, 62% (versus 17 %) of people were optimistic on this topic in late 2007. This percentage dropped about 20 points with the crisis before increasing again to reach more or less the initial level: 64%, versus 17%, in late 2018. In Lithuania, positive views were shared by 75% (versus 10 %) in 2017. The crisis led to a fall of about 30 points, which was followed by a recovery to reach nearly the initial score of 73%, versus 14%, in autumn 2018.

2. In Latvia, doubts about Europe slowly and variously resorbed

2.1 EU Membership: from widespread concern to broad recognition of the merits of membership

In Latvia initially, the average opinion was perceptibly more reserved than elsewhere: positive at 40%, (versus 14% negative, and 43% undecided). After having fluctuated around this score over the following three years, but already less positive in 2007 (37% in the spring), it became morose (and even more uncertain), to the point where positive and negative responses were at the same level: 23%, versus 24% (and 51% of neutral responses) in autumn 2009. Subsequently, there was a **regular rise** to reach 52% observed in spring 2018, then 56% (versus 6%) in the autumn.

Concerning the idea that the country **benefited** from its membership, opinion was split, with 51% of positive opinions (versus 36%) in autumn 2004. This score subsequently evolved upwards rather than downwards, to reach 57% (versus 32%) in autumn 2007, before decreasing to a point where the positive opinions were sharply exceeded by the negative ones; 37% and 55% respectively in autumn 2009. But from that point there was **a very strong progression in positive opinions**, which reached 70% in spring 2018 and **73%** (versus 20% of negative opinions) **last autumn**.

Latvians' appraisals on how the country's interests are given proper consideration were clearly negative in 2005: 35% positive, 53% negative. They deteriorated even further over the following years, falling to 18% (versus 75%) in spring 2009. They subsequently recovered progressively but without quite reaching the nevertheless mediocre score of the start: 32%, versus 60%, in autumn 2018 (after a brief increase five points higher in the spring).

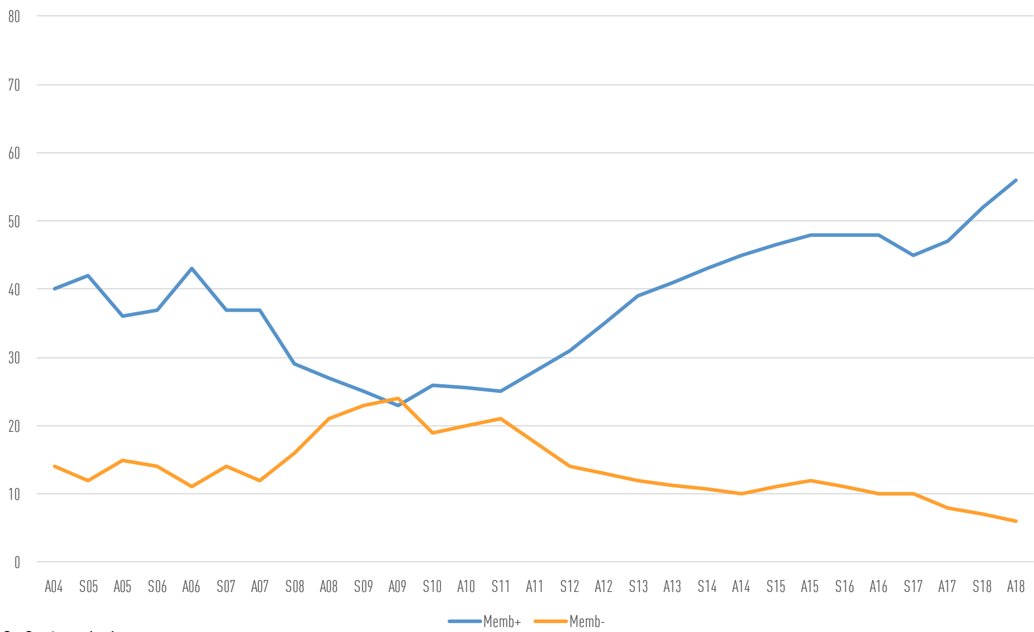
Nevertheless, the idea of better ability to face the future outside the EU only represented around 30% of citizens in each of the waves of polls conducted since autumn 2012: 30%, versus 54% at that time, a few points more or less in the subsequent waves, to finish at 25% versus 62% in autumn 2018.

2.2 Image of the EU and degree of trust: a noticeable improvement after the crisis

In Latvia, at the time of its accession in 2004, the image of the EU was similar to that in Estonia: positive for 40%, negative for 15% (and neutral for 43%). Since then it declined incrementally to reach 21% positive versus 18% negative in autumn 2011, before an irregular increase to reach a slightly better level than at the start (42%, versus 9% in autumn 2018).

Trust in the EU was initially comparable to the European average, at 47% versus 32%. In spring 2007 it was slightly higher (50% versus 32%), before declining relatively regularly to become negative (36% trust the EU versus 51%, reaching the lowest point in spring 2013). **In autumn 2018**, it reached almost the same score as that of 2004, with **a positive balance of 49% versus 32%, perceptibly more positive than the average EU score.**

FIGURE 3 ■ Latvia: opinions on EU membership



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The feeling that things were moving **in the right direction** in the EU was shared in autumn 2007 by a clear relative majority; 48% versus 15%. The positive score then dropped in fits and starts without however losing out to the negative score until spring 2015, a situation that prevailed, rather, for the following five waves of polls, the lowest point being that of spring 2016 (21% versus 39%). **In spring 2018 the positive slightly overtook the negative** and even more in the autumn (41% versus 26%), **but a slightly lower level than at the start.**

2.3 Degree of optimism in the future of the EU: mainly positive views once again

In Latvia in spring 2007, optimism reigned, although to a lesser extent than in the neighbouring country: 60%, versus 35%. As elsewhere, this score dropped, to reach an almost equal footing between optimism and pessimism: 49%, versus 48%, in spring 2011. It subsequently recovered quite quickly (despite some fits and starts); at the end of 2018 it was slightly higher than the initial pre-crisis score: 64%, versus 32%.

2.4 Inclination towards joint European action: agreement in principle in several domains

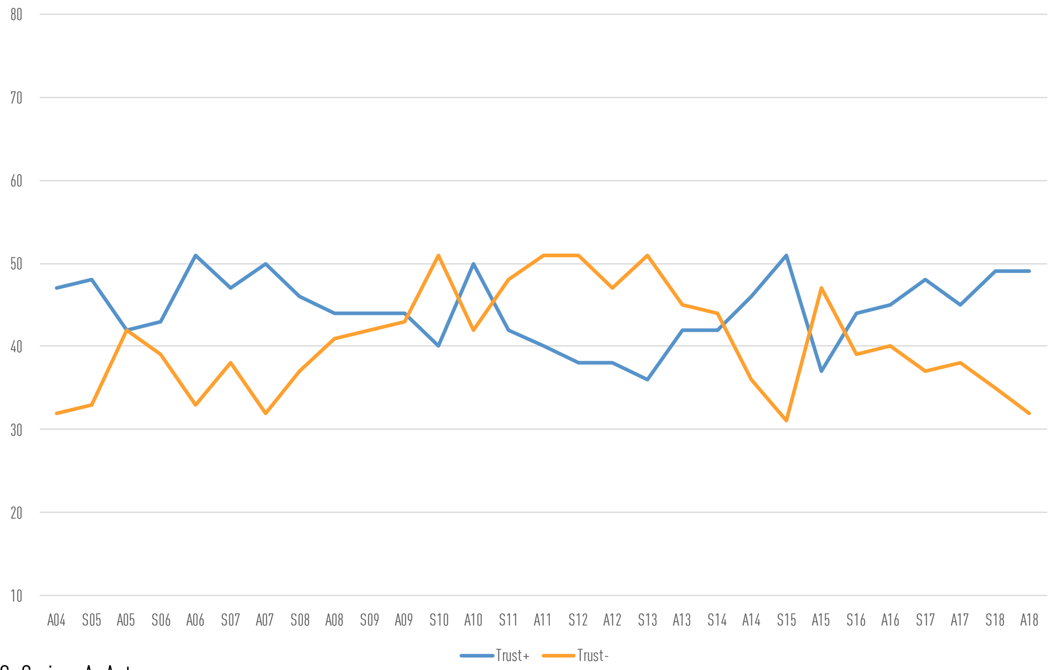
The Latvians are close to the European average in terms of being in favour of extending shared decision-making within the EU (57%, versus 30%). They are more supportive than the average (often clearly) of most policies on which their opinion was asked, with the exception of a common migration policy which is only desired by a weak majority.

2.5 The origins of Latvian attitudes: existential concerns gradually reduced

Qualitative investigations conducted at the time of Latvia's accession to the EU in fact brought to light **certain attitudes marked by major uncertainty and concern**, in a context of widespread pessimism about the state of the country: fears of disintegration of a national economy considered extremely fragile, dreaded social implications, somewhat disillusioned attitudes concerning the 'materialistic' nature of a European project that had been idealised at the time of Soviet domination. Furthermore, the perceived risk of the weak influence and dilution of this small country in an extremely vast Union with interventionist tendencies.

At the same time, hopes were emerging: for the development and improvement with time of the standard of living, for the consolidation of justice and democracy, for enhanced security provided by membership of a large whole. These hopes however were often quite timidly expressed.

FIGURE 4 ■ Latvia: degree of trust in the EU



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Over the course of the following years these attitudes were confirmed on the whole, some of them becoming more defined.

From a positive viewpoint, the advantages of membership started to become visible: an improvement in infrastructures; signs of economic development; free movement creating employment opportunities in particular (but with the trade-off of a possible 'brain drain' and a shortage of qualified labour, or even the opening of floodgates to undesired immigration); the prospect of entering into the euro zone with the associated advantages of the end of currency exchange and low interest rates, despite fears of inflationary effects; protection against the large neighbour (even though this was first and foremost expected from NATO).

At the same time, very real fears remained about how the country would adapt to the new situation, on the continuing major disparities with the older Member States, on their domination of the Community playing field in which little Latvia bears very little clout, with, in addition, the cracks that have appeared in the cohesion of this whole (illustrated for example in the Iraqi conflict). The constraints inherent in the Single Market or in trade policy and the cumbersome nature of EU legislative and regulatory procedures were still called into question, with concrete examples of negative consequences: trade restrictions with Russia (including the importation of cheap Russian medicines); very restrictive standards applying to agriculture, leading to fears for the disappearance of small farms or local providers of quality products; restrictions imposed on sugar production, etc.

After the crisis (which had the effect, as it did elsewhere, of increasing gloom and casting a dark shadow on citizens' perceptions) **average attitudes towards the EU are now perceptibly more positive.** While concerns remain on the ability of the country to hold its own, there seems to be pretty broad consensus to consider that positive factors outweigh negative ones: the contribution of European funds to rapid economic growth, with the development of highly visible and concrete projects; positive free movement (despite a certain 'brain drain'); rewarding membership of the euro zone and even an evolution in the view of Community standards imposed, which are now seen more as 'modern standards' (even though criticism of excessive red-tape remains). In addition, the protection offered by the weight of the EU against an aggressive Russia is increasingly recognised. However, frustrations remain about the continuing wide gap in living standards between old and new Member States, about the 'unequal' treatment between them (cf. extent of aid devoted to saving Greece), or the risk of losing sovereignty when the country is subjected to EU policies and decisions (including, a relatively new theme in recent years, the risk of unfettered immigration; the doubts that are coming to light on current policy directions in the EU may be linked to this).

In these various investigations, **a clear-cut division appeared according to the social level**, the more well-off being more Europhile, the less well-off being more likely to have reservations, fearing an increase in the gap. Furthermore, the younger population was more open (and more likely to benefit from new opportunities). These differences are still present.

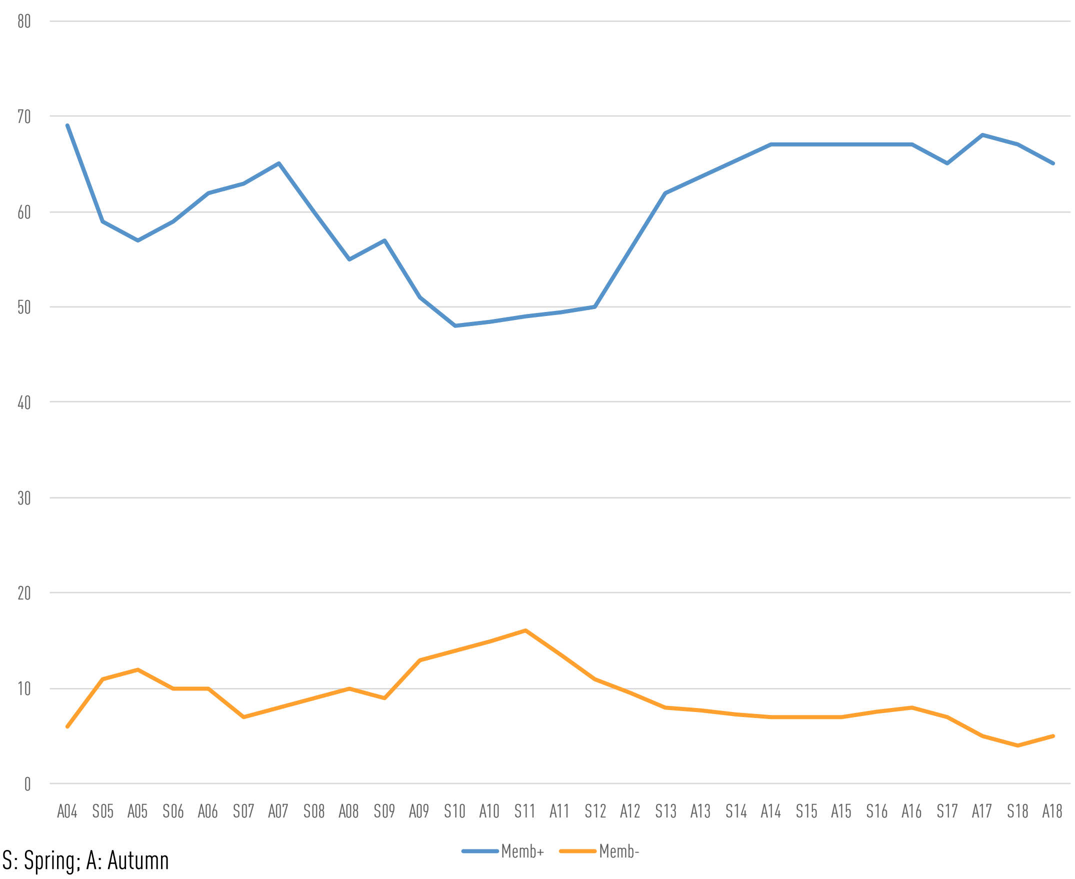
Another prevailing divergence is that which opposes the Latvian majority and the (strong) Russian-speaking minority (a quarter of the population, as in Estonia). The latter, the constant subject of attentions from the Russian power, mainly follows Russian-speaking media including the television channels of the Russian Federation, which, on the whole, are highly critical of the EU and its policy, supposedly subordinate to American pressure and unfavourable to Russia (sanctions, in one sense or another, being considered by their negative effects for exchanges with Latvia). The rigid structure of the political situation between Latvian and Russian-speaking parties benefiting from an 'ethnic' vote but maintained in opposition, does not help these attitudes to evolve.

3. Lithuania, the most Europhile Baltic

3.1 EU Membership: a highly positive opinion base

In autumn 2004, Lithuanian citizens were the best disposed of all the Baltic nations to EU membership, which was judged positively by 69% (versus 6% negatively with 22% being neutral). After a decline that lasted for several subsequent waves of polls, positive opinions

FIGURE 5 ■ Lithuania: opinions on EU membership



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were at 65% in spring 2007. They then dropped to reach around 50% between late 2009 and 2012 (lowest point at 48%, versus 14%, in spring 2010). **The subsequent rebound that occurred tended towards an upper ceiling** from 2014 onwards, the highest point being reached in autumn 2017, at 68%. The scores of the last two waves were 67% in spring 2018 and **65% (versus 5%) last autumn.**

It was also the Lithuanians who most valued **the benefits of EU membership for their country**, in 2004 (78%, versus 9%), and again in 2007 (at 81% in both spring and autumn, versus 9% and 10% respectively). As was the case elsewhere, a drop occurred with the financial crisis, positive opinions however remained ahead with 66% being the lowest point in autumn 2009 (versus 20%). The **levels** reached since then have been **extremely high**: 90% of positive opinions in spring 2018, 88% (versus 8%) in the autumn.

The fact that the country's interests are given proper consideration within the EU was more commonly thought among the Lithuanians than the opposite in 2005: 44% versus 34%. This decreased in the subsequent years, dropping to 33%, versus 55%, in autumn 2009. It then increased again to become predominant from spring 2013, to reach 60%, in autumn 2018.

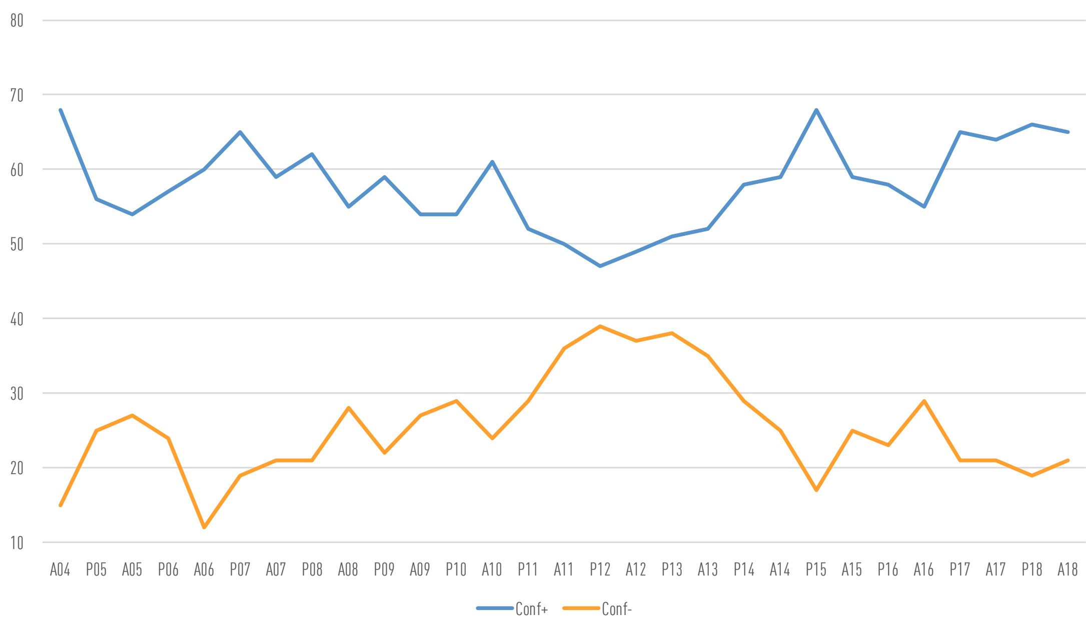
Concerning the scenario of a better future outside the EU, only 20% of Lithuanians, versus 66%, believed this possibility in autumn 2012. This percentage then increased by several points, dropped below 20% and increased slightly once again, to reach 21%, versus 71% of contrary opinions in autumn 2018.

3.2 Image of the EU and degree of trust: a partial post-crisis recovery

From the outset, the image of the EU was better in Lithuania than in the two neighbouring countries (and than the European average): good for 60%, bad for 5%. It dropped over the following two years, and then recovered to reach a similar level in 2007 (59% in spring, versus 5%), before progressively losing almost 30 points (late 2011, 31%, versus 9%, with a strong increase in uncertainty: 58%). It then recovered and even reached positive scores of 50% or more on several occasions from 2014 onwards, only to once again decline somewhat in the latest measurements taken, at 48%, versus 6%, in autumn 2018, a result that is admittedly higher than that in many other countries, but significantly lower than that of 2004.

Initial **trust** in the EU was also particularly strong: 68%, versus 15%, in autumn 2004.

FIGURE 6 ■ Lithuania: degree of trust in the EU



After a significant fall following accession to the Union, it once again reached a level close to that in spring 2007 (65% versus 19%), before following a downward trend, with ups and downs, an all-time low being recorded in spring 2012 (47% versus 39%). **In autumn 2018, it had almost reached its original level with 65% of positive opinions versus 21% of negative ones.**

Concerning opinions on the direction of things in the EU, at the start, Lithuanians were situated between the more positive Estonians and the Latvians who were more reserved in their positive opinion: right direction for 58%, wrong for 8%. A sharp decline (of almost 30 points) occurred one year later, followed by a recovery (to 54%, versus 16%, in spring 2011), then a further, even sharper drop (26%, versus 43%, in autumn of the same year). From there, positive views evolved upwards until early 2015 where the threshold of 50% was once again reached, then downwards (33%, versus 27%, in spring 2016), before edging towards 50% (46%, versus 21%, in autumn 2018). This situation was more satisfactory than in other countries, but was still about a dozen points lower than when the country joined the EU.

3.3 Degree of optimism about the future of the EU: highly predominant optimism

In Lithuania, initial optimism was virtually at the same high level as in Estonia: 74%, versus 18% in spring 2007. It dropped, particularly in 2011, but remained clearly predominant (at the lowest 57%, versus 36%, in autumn that year). The upturn (quite irregular but clear) that followed brought it in autumn 2018 close to its initial level: 71%, versus 24%.

3.4 Inclination towards joint European action: broad consensus

In late 2018, the Lithuanians were more in favour than the European average of joint decisions being taken at EU level (at 60%, versus 31%).

This approval in principle goes hand in hand with support expressed for the different EU policies that were presented to those interviewed, all of which were considered more positively than the European average. In particular a proportion higher than this average is noted (and higher than that of the other Baltic countries) concerning the joint migration policy and also possible future enlargements. On the other hand, positive assessments of the EMU and the euro, while stemming from two thirds of citizens, are significantly lower than in the two neighbouring countries where they represent over 80% of opinions.

3.5 The origins of Lithuanian attitudes: a fundamentally Europhile country

Qualitative studies conducted in the years 2003-2005 helped qualify Lithuania as the **Baltic nation the most spontaneously turned towards Europe**. While attitudes towards the EU in the two neighbouring countries were marked with a certain distance or fear, for Lithuanians, the coexistence of their national identity with a European identity was quite natural. Their vision of the Community project appeared broader and not just limited to the economy. From an economic standpoint, views on the country's situation were mixed, but cautious optimism prevailed for the future. The economic unification of the EU, prospects of mutual opening and cooperation with other Member States and freedom of movement were seen as contributing to economic development and job creation.

In addition, on the whole they appeared to expect positive effects from European policies and actions in several other domains: in terms of democratic guarantees, social rights, consolidation of justice (while deploring a deterioration in values and rising delinquency), the environment (cooperation already underway with Scandinavian countries), security and foreign policy with regard to major powers.

At the same time, certain concerns and reservations were noted. Fears were noted of the insufficient ability of the country to take advantage of opportunities, growing differences between old and new Member States instead of the expected redress, leaving the Lithuanians in a situation of being the poor relative of the EU. And from another viewpoint, concerns linked to the small size and minimal influence of a country that could see its own culture and traditions 'drown' in a 'centralised' EU. Fears, stemming more so from people at the bottom of the social ladder, were however less present than the positive expectations.

Over the following years particular concerns were noted among the Lithuanians concerning the prospect of introducing the euro: feared price increases to the detriment of purchasing power, fears of foul play, also of difficulties in handling the new currency; more pronounced concerns than in the other two Baltic States, and quite widespread, even though these were balanced by positive expectations in particular among the more well-off.

More generally, **even before the start of the crisis, optimism seemed to have dipped somewhat**; growing global competition was mentioned more often, as was the scenario of economic stagnation or of macroeconomic effects that were probably positive but without repercussions on the lives of citizens, or even the deteriorated state of the health care system. Regarding possible future enlargements, the Lithuanians were ambivalent (more in favour undoubtedly if it concerned neighbouring Ukraine than other countries), this prospect awakening fears of being drowned in an even larger whole.

The economic crisis was logically the cause of more morose opinions in all respects, without however blaming the EU in this matter: the actors primarily accused were the Scandinavian banks (that dominate the Lithuanian financial services market) as well as national authorities, considered with defiance (the EU may even have played a useful role of 'safeguard').

Since then, **attitudes towards the EU have again become quite similar to what they were one decade earlier**: in this country, attitudes towards the EU seem quite stable: **globally positive**, despite some prevailing reservations concerning the euro, which is considered to be responsible for the high price increases over the past years, especially by people of low social class and among the elderly. Lastly, another factor that could dampen the Lithuanians' pro-European enthusiasm (and cause resentment towards a Member State such as Germany) is immigration, to which many are opposed.

BOX 3

Trust in the EU can be compared to that expressed towards the national government. Europeans on the whole show less trust in their government than in the EU: 35% trust versus 59%.

This is true in two of the Baltic States, Latvia (31% versus 58%) and Lithuania (28% versus 66%). In Estonia, on the other hand, a clear majority of people trust the government (54% versus 32%). This majority is in fact slightly lower than that expressed for the EU.

Conclusion

In addition to their level of economic development, like that of other new entrants, much below that of the western Member States, the three Baltic countries share several characteristics, including their geographic situation, a partly shared history marked by very long periods of imperial and then Soviet domination, and **a small size that makes the durability of the national identity a highly sensitive issue** even at the end of these periods of domination.

Their attitudes towards the European Union comprise a certain number of similar elements but are not identical. At the time of accession, beside the affirmed Europhile that was Lithuania, Estonia appeared resolved to necessary membership of the EU rather than being a Euroenthusiast, whereas neighbouring Latvia approached this new phase of its existence with major concern.

These differences undoubtedly stem partly from historic factors. For Lithuania, the fact of having been in the past a major regional power with neighbouring Poland may give it a level of assurance against the geopolitical change represented by its entering the EU. For Estonia, the physical, cultural and linguistic proximity with Finland, and the economic links forged with it very quickly after the fall of the USSR, helped to produce a degree of its self-confidence, allowing it to express its reservations about certain aspects of the EU. Latvian fears however went hand in hand with their greater isolation in this part of the continent.

Expectations and concerns co-existed to varying degrees in the three countries. In Estonia, concerns quickly diminished until the financial crisis erupted, while pro-EU opinion was growing strongly from most standpoints. In the other two countries, the state of opinions in early 2007 was not fundamentally different to that of 2004 (after experiencing a dip in the meantime): largely positive in Lithuania and uncertain in Latvia.

With the crisis, views relative to the EU seriously deteriorated in the three countries, to a greater extent than the European average. As in the EU as a whole, they have recovered since then to varying degrees.

In Estonia, opinions about membership of the EU and the benefits for the country are at their highest level, significantly greater than their already high level of 2007. However, as was the case for the European average, the image of the EU and the trust it inspires have only been partly restored, and opinions on the directions taken in the Union remain very negative.

In Latvia, a clear improvement of the indicators concerning membership and benefits has been noted, while other indicators overall are at scores similar to pre-crisis levels.

In Lithuania, the on-the-whole positive pre-crisis views are found more or less (those concerning advantages for the country are even more positive) – a restored image of the EU and of positive opinion on current directions is only partial however.

Globally, the evolution of public opinion in the Baltic States bears witness to the growing integration of these countries into the European environment.

L'Europe pour les citoyens

PREMIER MINISTRE

18 rue de Londres, 75009 Paris
Office in Brussels: rue du duc 139, 1200 Brussels
info@delorsinstitute.eu
www.institutdelors.eu