

**TOWARD ESTONIAN INDEPENDENCE:
WITH MIXED FEELINGS OF HOPE AND
INSECURITY**

**By Andrus Saar, with the collaboration
of Liivi Joe**

For the nations of eastern Europe and the Baltics, *perestroika* permitted some very important social changes to occur. Wholesale democratization took place, and governments began to assert their independence from Moscow's influence. In the Baltic Republics these changes manifested themselves in new national awakenings. The people of these three countries began discussing all the ramifications of the Soviet occupation era. For Estonians and Latvians, it had meant the very real possibility of becoming minorities in their own lands, owing to tremendous in-migrations of Russian workers. Discrimination based on the imposition of the Russian language had become a daily reminder of this.

In Estonia, acceptance of becoming a sovereign state within a new Soviet confederation was recorded in public opinion polls only through 1988-89. With continued Soviet inflexibility and reactionary political traditions, persistent pressure from the centralized power structure, and general weariness of the old order, public opinion quickly came to insist that Estonia again become an independent nation among other European nations. By March 1990, backing for Estonian independence ran so high, it carried along a substantial slice of the non-Estonian minority (Table 1). Three-quarters of the population of Estonia saw their future as an independent nation outside the Soviet Union, but with a neutral political status (which the country's geographical location demands as the only reasonable strategy).

Tanks and Public Opinion

On March 11, 1990, the declaration of independence issued by the Lithuanian parliament put Estonian readiness for independence to the test (Table 2). In order to understand the dramatic shift in opinion that took place during March, one must remember that Soviet tanks appeared on the streets of Vilnius, Lithuania's capital, on the night of March 23rd. Support for going the same route as Lithuania dropped sharply, and inclinations to look for a different way rose. There was, then, a sudden clash between hopes and dreams, and political reality. Until late March there was strong support for the supposition that the first democratically elected representative body — that is, the first during the Soviet era — could decide, in its first session, to declare independence much the same as Lithuania was doing. The tanks taught otherwise. Having witnessed that not a single foreign government took steps to recognize the legitimacy of Lithuania's declaration, Estonians have rededicated their resolve to consolidate their forces and maintain a united front in their fight for independence.

Economic Uncertainty

There is growing uncertainty about Estonia's economic future, particularly as involves its complex ties to the central Soviet economic power structure. In 1989 Estonians drafted a program of economic reforms called IME (Estonian Economic Self- Management). This program was approved by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, but never implemented — due to pressure from opposing forces high in the centralized system. Evidently it was only in the writing of the IME program that the enormous practical barriers to a market economy in Estonia were really considered. For instance, there is no system of finance, there are no economists specializing in marketing, no experts with these requisite analytical skills, no proper system of maintaining economic statistics, no method for calculating inflation. Ninety-five percent of the inhabitants of Estonia report that they deal with the shortage of money or goods on a daily basis. Three quarters of the population say they can buy less for their money now than they could a year ago. The first experiments with a market economy, the establishment of cooperatives, showed that they contributed little to the marketplace but did produce a dramatic rise in prices. This widened the gap in buying power between people with small and large incomes. In 1989, three-quarters of the population thought these initial forays into a market economy had not been beneficial for themselves.

Economic analysts have arrived at the realization that economic reforms must be introduced based on three key principles: that the only reasonable alternative to a planned economy is a market economy; that the cross-over must be radical — all sectors have to work under the same economic conditions; and that without its own currency, its own financial system, Estonia can't realize meaningful economic change.

The fact that 50 years ago pre-war Estonia had a thriving market economy provides some basis for optimism about the future. Most Estonians express their optimism in terms of the possibility that in as short a time as a decade economic priorities can again be put in order so that a program of economic reclamation can succeed. Polls show that two-thirds of the public realize that for things to get better in the long run, they must get worse in the short run.

[Note that the surveys reported on here were done by telephone. The authors acknowledge that telephone ownership in Estonia is low, but for reasons of cost and speed, telephone interviewing is the only practical way to gauge the country's opinions.]

Andrus Saar is director, and Liivi Joe, consultant, Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, Tallinn, Estonia

Table 1

“What is your view of Estonia’s political future?”

	Estonians %	Non- Estonians %	Total Sample %
As an independent, neutral nation	66	8	47
As an independent republic outside the Soviet Union, with a basic orientation to the West	17	10	14
As an independent republic outside the Soviet Union, with a basic orientation of cooperation with the Soviet Union	11	17	13
Politically and economically an independent republic within the Soviet Union	3	30	12
Economically independent but as a Soviet republic in the Soviet Union	2	23	9
No changes are needed.	—	4	1
Undecided	1	8	4
	N=623	N=381	N=1004

Based on telephone interviews on March 13, 1990. The sampling is stratified by region of the country, a random sample is drawn within the region, and then a quota sample of completed interviews is used.

Table 2

“Should the Estonian Supreme Soviet take up the question of independence the same way the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet did?”

	Estonians %			Non- Estonians %			Total Sample %		
	March			March			March		
	12	14	27	12	14	27	12	14	27
Absolutely	43	36	29	12	12	6	32	28	21
We should look for a different way	41	44	56	42	40	51	41	42	54
Under no circumstances	5	11	8	28	36	34	13	20	17
Undecided	11	9	7	18	12	9	14	10	8
	N= 623	631	616	381	387	378	1004	1018	994

The table represents the results of three telephone interviews on the dates shown. Lithuania’s declaration re-establishing its independence came 3/11/90; Soviet tanks appeared in the streets of Vilnius, Lithuania, 3/23/90.