

## Five minutes with Estonia's Foreign Minister Urmas Paet: "I think Europe should start voting online"

*Estonia was the first nation in the world to hold legally binding general elections over the Internet. In an interview with EUOPP editors Chris Gilson and Julian Kirchherr Estonia's Foreign Minister [Urmas Paet](#) recommends e-voting to other Member States of the European Union as well, arguing that it is convenient and increases turnout, particularly among the young.*



### **How would you describe Estonia's relationship with your largest neighbor, Russia?**

Our economic relations are strong. Russia is our country's third largest trade partner and there is a clear trend to further intensify this relationship. Many tourists come from Russia to Estonia; in the past year, there has been a 50 per cent increase in tourist numbers from Russia. The border management with Russia is also highly cooperative.

Only our political relations leave room for improvement. In the past twenty years, no Russian president, no Russian prime minister and even no Russian foreign minister has visited Estonia. This is unfortunate.

### **Is Estonia in favor of further EU enlargement and should Croatia join the European Union as soon as possible?**

Yes and yes. We believe that every European country which wants to and which fulfills the [Copenhagen criteria](#) should be able to join the EU. We hope that Croatia will join as soon as possible and we also hope that the negotiations with Iceland will be efficient and quick so that Iceland can join as the EU as the 29<sup>th</sup> Member State. Any country with a desire and capable of fulfilling the criteria should be admitted.

### **Is Russia also a country that should be granted membership to the European Union in the future?**

I do not think Russia will ever join the EU because Russia is not interested in joining. But if they were interested, why not discuss it? However, this would imply that the country would need to undertake a wide range of reforms to combat corruption and make its political system more accountable. If the country then met our criteria, and if Russia were interested in joining, I would not veto it.

### **Estonia's credit rating was raised by Standard & Poor's Ratings to the second-highest level in Eastern Europe only recently because of the country's strong economic growth and solid public finances. Why does Estonia's economic and fiscal situation look so "[exceptionally good](#)"?**

Estonia undertook many reforms after we restored our independence in 1991. We have always pursued a rather conservative approach to budget, economic and fiscal policy. Almost all governments in the past twenty years balanced the national budget, and in some cases were able to build up reserves because of budget surpluses, which have now helped us to combat the economic crisis.

Furthermore, this is a question of mentality; Estonians never spend more than they earn, which is why

the debt level per capita in Estonia is the lowest in Europe. And again, low debt levels lead to low interest rates for your loans. Everybody profits if you balance your budget.

### **What do you think can Europe learn from Estonia's famous 'e-mindedness'?**

Indeed, Estonia is promoting e-solutions everywhere. We have experimented with e-administration, e-governance and I simply think such solutions are very practical and make life a lot easier. For example, it took me 12 minutes this year to complete my tax declaration online which is great. And I even got money back because I paid too much tax last year. A well-developed e-administration really works to the benefit of the people.

Nowadays, 95% of Estonians complete their tax declarations online and 98% of all bank transmissions and bank activities are also conducted via the Internet. Our most innovative e-solution is e-voting. We have had four e-elections now: On the local level, national e-elections, and even European Parliament elections. E-voting is great. You can cast your vote from home or from work – whatever is most convenient to you.

### **Would you recommend e-voting to other Member States of the European Union?**

Yes, absolutely. Our experience with e-voting is very positive. And the popularity of e-voting has increased in every election we held so far, and it increases the turnout.

### **Do you think it particularly increases the turnout among the young?**

Yes, it does. During the last parliamentary elections we have had an increased turnout, particularly among the young. E-voting is something new, fast and convenient and young people are particularly eager to try out something new.

**One last question from one of our readers: "After Estonia's recent bid for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, and with plans in motion to shut down the Estonian Embassy in Bulgaria by the end of 2012, is Estonia looking to place greater emphasis on its relations beyond Europe? Where will that emphasis be concentrated: serving as a model to the countries of the Eastern Partnership, or elsewhere?"**

We are very flexible with regard to our embassies and consulates. Once a year, we analyze their work and their networks and then discuss if we need to open more embassies or maybe even close some. This year we decided to open a new embassy in New Delhi. Last year we opened an embassy in Kazakhstan, which also covers three other Central Asian countries, and we established a consulate in Sydney because of the large Estonian population in Australia. Concerning our Eastern European partnerships, our embassies in Georgia and in Kiev in the Ukraine have worked very well, not only in developing our relations, but also with neighboring countries.

A key consideration with regard to our embassies is to take into account the interests of the Estonian business community. We now look more closely towards Asia, and we may be doing more there in the future.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

### **Urmas Paet** – *Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia*

Urmas Paet has been Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia since 2005. Paet graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in political science from the University of Tartu in 1996. He served as the Deputy Mayor of Nõmme, a district of Estonia's capital Tallinn, from 1999 to 2003. In 2003, he was appointed as Estonia's Minister of Culture. Paet is a polyglot and speaks Estonian, Russian, German, Finnish and English.



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