

VISIT UNDER EU PRESIDENCY

VISIT TO ESTONIA

Besides Estonia's defence priorities, the country's leading defence MP Marianne Mikko is determined to promote its cultural heritage and digital expertise.

Estonia is the most northerly of the three Baltic states, the country shares a border with Russia, and it has linguistic ties with Finland. And since independence in 1991 membership of the EU has been one of the main objectives of Estonian foreign policy. The country has a history of being occupied so many times during its history including by both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in recent times and is extremely sensitive to being a small and fairly remote country on the edge of the EU.

And sharing a border with Russia and the annexation of The Crimea by Russia has not lessened the country's anxiety.

The country was ruled at various times during the middle ages by Denmark, the German knights of the Livonian Order, and Sweden, and ended up as part of the Russian Empire in the 18th century. It experienced its first period of independence in 1918, following the

end of the First World War and the collapse of the Russian empire. In 1920 a peace treaty was signed with Russia, in 1939 the Soviet Union compelled Estonia to accept Soviet military bases, and in 1940 Soviet troops marched in 1940 into Estonia which was incorporated into the Soviet Union.

German troops invaded Estonia in 1941 and the country was annexed again in 1944 by the Soviet Union when tens of thousands of Estonians were deported to Siberia and Central China.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country has become one of the most economically successful of the EU's newer eastern member states.

The recent former EU Moscow envoy Vygaudas Usackas has said that he does not think Russia under Putin will change its attitude to the Baltic states but that he 'believes in dialogue and it is important not to label Russia and its people as a terrorist state'.

The leading Estonian defence MP, Marianne Mikko, also shares the view that despite the potential threat to her country from Russia under Putin, dialogue is important however sensitive or difficult.

Marianne Mikko is a member of the Estonia Parliament, she heads the Estonian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and is a former Socialist MEP.

As an experienced journalist, a member of the Women for Defence group in Estonia, and having served as an MEP on the Culture and Media committee of the parliament, she is extremely important in Estonian and European defence politics.

Marianne Mikko said it is important for Europe to take its own defence and security needs seriously and for both NATO and non NATO countries within the EU to work together for their common defence.

A fascinating aspect of Estonia's history and culture especially music is its tradition of choral singing with the amazing success of the 'Singing Revolution' in helping to achieve independence from the mighty Soviet Union by the use of its voice and choral singing.

The country has long experience of mobilising the creative talents and collective voices of its people and perhaps more than any other country in the world the history of Estonia is a story set to a song.

And besides its concentration on defence and security Estonia is a world leader in digital technology and this small Baltic county of 1.3 million people it is determined to enhance further the profile of its digital voice during its current EU presidency.



FMA Delegation in Tallinn with Marianne Mikko, member of the Riigikogu in the National Defence and European Union Affairs Committee

Michael McGowan

PES, United Kingdom

(1984 - 1999)

mcgowan.michael@ntlworld.com

TOWARDS E-EUROPE?

Estonia has chosen an original initiative to focus on during its EU Presidency: it will be promoting what its government calls 'digital Europe', pushing for the more widespread use of electronic communication technologies in administration and commerce. The aim is to facilitate access to all types of data for everyone, to reduce the time taken to perform transactions of all kinds and to make all administrative exchanges completely transparent. In presenting the initiative to its 27 partners, Estonia coined the slogan 'More transparency, less bureaucracy'. It called on the European Union to take the immediate step of declaring 'the free movement of data' a fifth freedom. The country's dream is for our union of nations to become a world leader in internet use.

In a bid to win over the other governments, Tallinn decided to lead by example. The government proudly announced that 95% of Estonians now use an electronic identity card. These cards enable people to carry out every administrative task imaginable using just their computer or mobile phone. There

are only two exceptions, ministers joked: marriages and divorces. Prescriptions no longer need to be written out and kept; information on the treatments prescribed to patients is stored online and can be accessed by any pharmacy. Individual medical records are stored in electronic folders and can be consulted by medical professionals in any hospital. Elections are heading the same way; Estonians now have the option of voting at home from their computers. Setting up a business also takes just few clicks: the administrative process can be completed in a few minutes, without even leaving the house. The Estonians recounted these achievements with great enthusiasm. They offered reassuring responses to the concerns we raised regarding the reliability and confidentiality of such a broad-based system: we were assured that every precaution had been taken to prevent data from being hacked and to deter cybercriminals. We were not in any position to dispute these claims. Not all Member States share the Estonian Government's enthusiasm, however. Even in Estonia itself, the



Online Security Technology background
©European Union



FMA delegation during the guided walking tour in Tallinn Old Town

digitalisation of public activities has met resistance and problems have arisen. At the last general election, more than 70% of voters preferred to cast their ballot in the traditional at a polling station, rather than voting electronically. What is more, the official information on the procedure for voting was, oddly, provided first in Estonian, then in English: no thought had been given to the Russian speakers who make up over 30% of the population. Digitalisation may not solve political problems, but it can make them worse.



FMA Delegation in front of the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds.

Michel Pinton

NI, France(1993 - 1994)
m.pinton@wanadoo.fr