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What is This?
EU Accession of Central and Eastern European Countries: Democracy and Integration as Conflicting Logics

Kristi Raik

Although the European Union (EU) has in many ways supported democratization in Central and Eastern Europe, it has also imposed new constraints on the functioning of democracy. The article explores the indirect impact of EU integration on the Eastern applicant countries by exposing the underlying logic of enlargement and analyzing the implications of that logic for democratic politics. The empirical analysis focuses on the preaccession process of one of the new member states, Estonia, but it also examines the overall EU policy toward Eastern candidates, pointing to the limits of enlargement as a form of democracy promotion. It highlights that the principles and norms that dominated enlargement—most notably inevitability, speed, efficiency, and expertise—constrained democratic politics in the applicant countries and limited their EU accession to a narrow sphere of elites and experts. The author links the findings with the democratic deficit in the EU and draws some conclusions concerning future prospects of democracy in and democracy promotion by the enlarged EU.

Keywords: European Union; enlargement; democracy; discourse analysis; Estonia; Central and Eastern Europe

As eight post-communist countries joined the European Union (EU) on 1 May 2004, the contribution of this achievement to democratic consolidation was one of the major reasons for celebration. Throughout the preaccession period, it was widely taken for granted that preparations for EU membership promoted the democratization of candidate countries. Yet in the 1990s, EU enlargement as a form of democracy promotion remained strikingly undertheorized and understudied. Research on the democratization of post-communist countries built on the tradition of comparative democratization studies that used to focus almost

exclusively on domestic factors. Nonetheless, democratization scholars now generally acknowledged that international dimensions played a more significant role in the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) than in any previous cases of transition and that the EU was the most influential external actor in the region. In recent years, several new studies dealing specifically with the international aspects of transition have been published. As a result of closer scrutiny, assessments of the EU’s role have become more critical. The EU has applied a range of instruments of democracy promotion—most important, the conditions for membership and financial assistance—but the impact of these tends to be overestimated. In the 1990s, an average of only 1 percent of the total EU aid to the CEECs was directed toward democracy. Furthermore, several studies bring into question the effectiveness of democratic conditionality. The EU has only been able to exert a considerable influence on those transition countries that have been committed to democracy and integration in any

3. By “CEECs” (Central and Eastern European countries), I refer to the post-communist Eastern EU applicant countries. Eight of these countries—the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia—became full members of the EU on 1 May 2004.
case and where the priorities of the domestic leaders have, by and large, overlapped with Western expectations.\(^8\)

Indirect and unintended impacts of integration have been more pervasive than the EU’s policies of democracy promotion. By penetrating the domestic politics of applicant countries, integration into the EU becomes an inseparable part of (re)producing their democracy. Earlier conceptualizations of the international dimensions of democratization\(^9\) offer limited help for studying these dynamics, for several reasons. First, they focus on earlier stages of regime change and, hence, on questions related to bringing about democracy and supporting the establishment of a new political system. Integration into the EU of the CEECs, by contrast, could only properly start after these countries had passed the transition phase or, in other words, satisfied the Copenhagen political criteria\(^10\) and started to consolidate.\(^11\) Second, the impact of EU integration differs from that of other external factors because applicant countries gradually become part of the EU—an organisation with extensive competencies and strong elements of supranationality.

This article examines the indirect impact of EU integration on CEE democracies through exposing the underlying logic of Eastern enlargement and analysing the implications of that logic for democratic politics. It focuses on the case of Estonia—one of the new member states since May 2004 and one of the most success-

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10. As decided by the Copenhagen European Council of June 1993, the first criterion for EU membership is “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities” (European Council, Presidency Conclusions, Copenhagen, Denmark, 21-22 June 1993).

ful transition countries that used to be a “model pupil” among the applicants. However, the article also has broader relevance, as it entails a systematic analysis of the EU’s enlargement policy on the whole. Furthermore, there are obviously many similarities between Estonia and the other Eastern applicants. In terms of time, my study focuses on the years 1997 to 2002, which constituted the most intensive period of preparations for membership. The contribution of this piece to earlier critical accounts of the topic is twofold. First, on the theoretical plane, it provides a specific conceptualization of the construction of democracy as part of the candidate countries’ integration into the EU. My approach integrates the “internal” and the “external” into a single conceptual framework, with an aim to grasp the “internalisation of the external” that takes place in the course of integration. Second, I have applied the theoretical framework to an extensive empirical study, which due to the limited scope of this article is reviewed only partly here.

I will first outline the theoretical and methodological framework of the study, which makes use of discourse theory and discourse analysis. The empirical analysis that follows is divided into two parts: the first extracts the norms and principles that constitute the core of the discourse of enlargement in EU documents, and the second uncovers the reproduction of that discourse in Estonia. The analysis highlights that the key elements of the discourse of enlargement/integration—most notably inevitability, speed, efficiency, and expertise—imposed several constraints on democratic politics in the applicant countries. In conclusion, I will draw parallels between the limitations of democracy that we find in the context of enlargement, on one hand, and the democratic deficit in the EU, on the other, and reflect upon future prospects of democracy in and democracy promotion by the enlarged EU.

A discourse-theoretical approach

Unlike most of the existing studies on democracy in the CEECs or eastern enlargement of the EU, my approach is inspired by discourse theory and discourse analysis. In spite of the considerable niche currently occupied by discourse analysis in political science and international relations, there have been few attempts to apply the concept of discourse to the study of democracy in the post-communist countries or the integration of these countries with the West. Yet discourse theory can offer valuable insights into the ways in which new (Western) sets of rules and norms are appropriated in the post-communist social context and construct new political realities. European integration may be viewed as one of the powerful discourses, originating in the West, that has been adopted in the Eastern applicant countries.

Discourses are understood here as systems of meaning that are embedded in social practices, institutions, and organizations. They uphold sets of norms, rules, and shared truths that preexist and condition our ways to think and act, often in an unconscious manner. On the other hand, discourses are contingent; meanings are never fixed and hence can be transformed through social action. Discourses are on a constant move, and the very existence of sets of meaning hinges on whether they are “used” in practice and thus reproduced. One of the purposes of discourse analysis is to manifest constraints imposed on our thinking and acting by discourses that we often take for granted and to explore possibilities to alter constraining sets of meaning. This approach

13. The categories of ‘discourse theory’ and ‘discourse analysis’ include, of course, a wide variety of approaches (see, e.g., Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland, “Introduction: Perspectives on Discourse Analysis,” in Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland, eds., The Discourse Reader [London: Routledge, 1999], 1-44).

14. For one of the most notable examples, see John S. Dryzek and Leslie Holmes, Post-Communist Democratization: Political Discourses across Thirteen Countries (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

15. This approach comes close to analyses of enlargement as a form of EU governance over the CEECs—the concept of governance referring to the ways and means in which society is steered without a central authority or a government. See Lykke Friis and Anna Murphy, “The European Union and Central and Eastern Europe: Governance and Boundaries,” Journal of Common Market Studies 37:2 (1999): 211-32; and Antoaneta Dimitrova, “Governance by Enlargement? The Case of the Administrative Capacity Requirement in the EU’s Eastern Enlargement” (Paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research [ECPR] General Conference, 6-8 September 2001, University of Kent at Canterbury, UK).
enables us to study the ideas and assumptions that underpin political action and analysis related to the democratic aspect of EU enlargement and to question the existing frameworks and conditions.\textsuperscript{16}

Discourses are inseparable from power—their impersonal, all-encompassing power to construct reality but also the power exercised by subjects in (re)producing meanings. Discourses both restrict and enable: they determine reality and offer us tools for shaping it. Discursive power is not to be understood as power that one can possess, transfer, and exchange but as a relation of force that only exists in action.\textsuperscript{17} Within this framework, politics can be conceptualised broadly as a “practice of creation, reproduction and transformation of social relations,"\textsuperscript{18} which can always be seen as an expression of the power of discourses. Democracy is an example of a powerful and unquestioned discourse that conditions and frames political practices, for instance in the context of EU enlargement—to quote Laclau and Mouffe, the democratic discourse is “the fundamental instrument of production of the social” in modern Western societies.\textsuperscript{19}

Although an established and powerful discourse, democracy is also an abstract concept that needs to be “lived out” in practice and acquire concrete meanings in daily life to be maintained. A discourse-theoretical approach to democracy implies going beyond minimal conditions as defined, for example, by Robert Dahl,\textsuperscript{20} and directs attention to the continuous reproduction of democracy in daily politics. The legitimacy of a political system


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 155.


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and the authenticity of democracy require substantive control of citizens over political processes, that is, control over the content of politics. This cannot be guaranteed by only minimal participation in the form of elections; an active public sphere and civil society are needed to offer a critical counterbalance to the state. What is decisive for the quality of democracy is the extent to which the formal rules and principles are put into practice by various political and social actors. From this analytical perspective, one of the essential forms of democratic practice is “contestation of discourses in the public sphere,” which allows the engagement of citizens through control that is “substantive rather than symbolic.” Democracy can thus be understood as democratic politics where the problems and choices that are considered important for society are formulated and discussed in public. In that process, democratic principles and institutional arrangements acquire practical meaning and content.

If democracy is seen as discursively constructed and reproduced, any political process involves an aspect of democratic politics or reproducing democracy. In other words, all political practices—including those related to EU integration—that take place within a democratic system inevitably reproduce the system. Candidate countries’ integration into the EU can be viewed as a discourse that makes possible and produces a certain kind of democracy, and it needs to be assessed from the viewpoint of democratic politics. From that perspective, the plurality, contingency, and openness of the discursive struggles related to integration, as well as the question of who determines the agenda and decisions in that process, are of central importance.

The following analysis of what I call the “discourse of enlargement/integration”—enlargement referring to the perspective of the EU and integration to that of an applicant country—is based on a systematic reading of official documents concerning the EU’s policy of enlargement and Estonia’s integration into the EU, focusing on the years 1997 to 2002. In addition, it examines

22. Ibid., 79, 1.
the incorporation and appropriation of the official discourse to Estonian public discussion. The discourse of enlargement/integration is a broad and diverse set of meanings that includes these elements in the same framework (as is inevitable in discourse analysis, here the researcher draws the borders of the system of meaning that she studies and constructs a representation of that system). The analysis explores how Estonia's democracy was constructed and reproduced in and by texts concerning the country's integration into the EU. Text and talk are understood here as important forms of social action and the main activities in politics that confer meaning on the surrounding world and thus construct social reality. Looking at texts as discursive practices provides a way of getting to grips with the underlying discourses and mechanisms of power that were at play in the integration process.

**The logic of inevitability-speed-efficiency-expertise**

The preaccession period of the current new member states was governed, first of all, by the keywords of *inevitability, speed, efficiency,* and *expertise*. Together with these four, one should also mention *objectivity, conditionality,* and *competition*. These keywords came up time and again in the official documents throughout the enlargement process, constituting the core of the official discourse of enlargement/integration. That discourse guided, often in an unquestioned manner, any official activities related to the process, on the side of both the candidate countries and the EU—quoting Foucault on mechanisms of power in modern societies, “It’s a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised.” Based on the underlying discourse, enlargement tended

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23. As for EU discourse, the main materials were documents of the European Commission (especially yearly progress reports). The analysis also included documents of the European Parliament and Council and Presidency Conclusions of the European Council. The case study of Estonia examined documents of the Estonian Government, Foreign Ministry, and the Office of European Integration; speeches by leading politicians; stenograms of EU debates held in Parliament (the Riigikogu); EU-related articles published in *Postimees*, the largest Estonian daily; and interviews with politicians and civil servants.

to follow a logic of its own. The power of the discourse of enlargement/integration lay in the set of norms and ideas that it established, a set of ways to think and act that were mostly taken for granted. This power included making claims about what was good and right for the applicant countries, defining “objective” criteria for evaluating these countries, presenting “true” descriptions of the state of democracy or any other sphere of life on the basis of these criteria, and suggesting improvements to be made. Hence, the EU was “present,” through numerous criteria, recommendations, and norms, in the domestic decision making of the applicants.

The keywords of inevitability, speed, efficiency, and expertise might be downplayed as merely ideals and norms that were not necessarily always followed or achieved in practice. Nevertheless, they underlay the assessments given to enlargement, constructed visions of how it should proceed, and thus conditioned political thought and action related to it. At first sight, it might appear as solely positive that enlargement was considered inevitable; that speed, efficiency, expertise, and objectivity were aimed at; that the candidate countries had to satisfy strict membership conditions; and that they competed with each other, seeking to do their best. When it comes to democracy, the way we assess the implications of these norms and aims depends on the meanings that we attach to the concept. If we confine ourselves to a minimal, procedural conception, there is no reason for concern—in the time of accession negotiations, the applicants were already functioning democracies with relatively stable institutions, and EU membership was to give an additional guarantee of the maintenance of the new regimes. However, if we understand democracy as a constant process of daily politics characterized by broader criteria such as plurality, choice, inclusion, and public debate, we find that the principles and ideals that governed enlargement are contradictory to, or at least in a tense relation with, a number of central features of democratic politics. Let us now take a closer look at the construction of the logic of enlargement in EU documents.

Enlargement carried the hallmark of inevitability in many respects. Most important, inevitability had a strong position in the
application of conditionality by the EU: it was an absolute requirement that the applicants implement the membership criteria, including the adoption and implementation of the approximately eighty thousand pages of EU legislation. There was less room for manoeuvre and negotiation than in previous enlargements. This is partly because the acquis communautaire had grown much larger and more detailed in the meantime. In addition, the EU’s approach was different this time—a “reciprocal relationship” was replaced by treating the applicants as “clients.”

The Commission was constantly reviewing their progress in the preparations for membership. The detailed recommendations presented in the Commission reports were specified further in the Accession Partnerships (APs), which laid down short- and medium-term priorities in each issue area, and in the National Programmes for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAAs) prepared by each CEE government, following the request of the Commission. Progress in negotiations and the granting of assistance were tied to the implementation of these work programmes. However, the strict conditionality mostly concerned other than democracy criteria, since the applicants had to satisfy the Copenhagen political criteria before the opening of accession negotiations.

Beneath the EU’s strict requirements lay a more idealistic form of inevitability that grew out of a sense of historical responsibility. It was repeatedly emphasized by EU leaders that enlargement was an historic challenge that had to be met, a unique opportunity to unite Europe in peace and freedom and to extend the “zone of stability and prosperity” to new members. Behind that rhetoric, there was serious concern about insufficient commitment in the EU, the lack of political will, low public support for enlargement, and a fear that national interests would override the aim to create a “new European order” encompassing the former communist countries. The EU had to balance between fulfilling

26. The idea of Accession Partnerships (APs) was introduced in 1997, and the first versions that were designed individually for each applicant country were presented in March 1998.
27. The only notable case of applying democratic conditionality was the exclusion of Slovakia from the first group of enlargement in 1997 because it did not satisfy the political criteria.
the task of enlargement and dealing with internal reforms and keeping the costs of enlargement on an acceptable level. The discourse of historic responsibility called for EU leaders to take the position of enlightened rulers who had a mission to carry out, regardless of all the difficulties.

The problem with inevitability is that it is always in principle contradictory to democratic politics—the former denies the possibility of choice, whereas the latter is essentially about making choices. Politics ends at the moment when inevitability becomes established. The unconditional implementation of strict membership criteria left little space for choice in domestic politics of the applicant countries and therefore raised little political interest. Daily work with the “grand historical project” became reduced to the transmission of preset rules, the adoption of technical details, and surveillance over bureaucratic efforts.

Closely related to inevitability, the importance of the speed, dynamics, and pace of the process was mentioned time and again in the key official texts—although the EU refused for years to specify any timetables or target dates. (Keeping up the pace became a more tangible challenge after it was agreed in the Gothenburg European Council in June 2001 that those candidate countries that were ready could join the EU before the European Parliament elections of 2004.) Like the emphasis on historic responsibility, the rhetoric of speed was probably needed first and foremost for keeping the EU committed to the project. EU leaders were caught in the trap they had themselves been creating—each statement stressing the necessity of fast enlargement enhanced their commitment and made it more difficult to retreat without risking a serious blow to the reputation of the EU. The discourse of speed effectively made itself inevitable.

The rhetoric of speed buttressed itself by constructing an understanding that a slower pace could be highly dangerous—an understanding that laid on shaky grounds but belonged to the “irrefutable” core of the official discourse. It was feared that unless the “window of opportunity” was used at once, it might not be open later. One of the main arguments for fast enlargement was that slowing down could have endangered the overall reform process in the CEECs, whereas fast EU accession helped

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to “maintain the momentum for reform.” However, as pointed out above, EU impact has been confirmative rather than decisive. The CEECs that have been successful in EU integration have not gone through the transition to please the West; they have done it for their own sakes, and that is why they could start accession negotiations with the EU to begin with. The overall direction of reforms did not hang on the prospect of EU membership, even though EU demands speeded them up and had a positive impact in several specific areas, such as the protection of minorities and administrative reform. Moreover, it is important to note that a great many EU norms—such as product standards of the single market and the Common Agricultural Policy—are not at all necessary for a democracy or a market economy but imposed an extra burden on the transition countries.

Another important argument presented in EU texts for enlargement “as fast as possible” was the need to respond to the expectations of the candidate states. Speedy EU accession was indeed persistently demanded by CEE political leaders, although their state machineries had considerable difficulties in coping with the pace of the accession preparations. The more the applicant states insisted on speed, the more committed they became to maintaining the pace of their preparations for membership. The Commission was strict in demanding fast and efficient work. The logic of enlargement did not allow for slowdowns, and in cases in which these occurred, they were rapidly pointed out by the Commission as failures and damaged the reputation of the country in question.²⁸ The rhetoric of speed was reproduced over and over by sometimes rather meaningless statements in which speed became its own justification: “Speed is of the essence because there is a window of opportunity for enhanced momentum in the preparations for enlargement.”²⁹

²⁸ For example, in the presentation of the 1998 Regular Reports, Commissioner van den Broek stated, “We issue a stern reminder to the negotiating countries, and in particular the Czech Republic and Slovenia, that they need to speed up their adoption and implementation of the acquis. The slowdown we have observed since the Opinions is a cause for concern. It needs to be very clear that delays in transposition or implementation of the acquis cannot simply be resolved through transitional periods” (Presentation on Regular Reports to the European Parliament, Hans van den Broek, Member of the European Commission, SPEECH/98/256, European Parliament, Brussels, 4 November 1998).

As a natural companion of speed, competition between the applicants was an essential component of the logic of enlargement, even though the opposite was often ensured—the need to deny the importance of competition reveals its pervasiveness rather than its demise. Competition was encouraged by the constant ranking of the CEECs in the reports and other documents and the principle of differentiation according to which each country proceeded “as quickly as is warranted by its own efforts to prepare for accession.” As each country was “judged on its own merits,” its success depended on its “actual achievements.” The ranking of the countries was up-dated according to their relative success, so that anyone had a possibility of “catching-up” with the top candidates.30

The emphasis on speed created several problems, not least for democracy in the CEECs, which will be examined in more detail below. The Commission itself was worried about the quality of work done in the applicant states, emphasising that “While speed is desirable, quality is essential.”31 Although acknowledging that speed and quality were “two potentially conflicting objectives,” the Commission attempted to remain committed to both.32 It therefore paid increasing attention to administrative and judicial capacity in the applicant states, as well as to the implementation and enforcement of the acquis, as opposed to the mere adoption of new legislation. To enhance the efficiency of institutions and to “speed up their efforts” in this field, the Commission adopted specific action plans for each country in 2002.33 This further increased the detail of EU requirements and the extent to which integration determined the work of CEE governments.

The discourse of enlargement was primarily produced by the European Commission, which had a vital role in designing the

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30. Ibid.

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enlargement strategy and creating and maintaining the EU’s commitment. As evidenced by the following quote from a presentation of progress reports, the Commission outlined its own role as that of a nonpolitical expert:

Compiling the reports has been a huge task. Last year’s opinions were recognized as high-quality work. I am convinced that, in today’s reports, we have taken our analysis to an even higher plane. . . . Our assessment was conducted on the basis of the same Copenhagen criteria as the opinions last year. The goalposts have not been shifted. The work of our officials was expert, objective, impartial, and free of political prejudice.

The Commission was thus an authority that told the truth about the applicants’ present state on the basis of “objective measurement of progress” and gave guidance on how to improve it in the future. It was “critical and fair” in pointing out both achievements and weaknesses. Even though presenting long lists of detailed requirements, it did not wish to give an impression of dictating what had to be done in the candidate countries but stressed cooperation—for example, in preparing the APs, it claimed to have “conducted intensive discussions with each country” and “aimed to build a broad consensus on the priorities.” However, regardless of the rhetoric of partnership and dialogue, it is obvious that the EU set the criteria, and the Commission “put flesh on the bones” by determining their more precise content. While being portrayed as objective expert work, the aspects of politics and power inherent in the Commission’s activities were denied or played down. The reports and recommendations were not meant to be subject to political disputes, and yet, the whole process hung on these. The Commission interpreted the vague accession criteria, gave a content to such obscure expressions as

34. See, e.g., Graham Avery and Fraser Cameron, The Enlargement of the European Union (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
35. Presentation on Regular Reports, Hans van den Broek, SPEECH/98/236.
“progress” or “readiness to join,” and ranked the criteria and the applicants, drawing on its “objective” authority.

The Commission’s expertise and impartiality regarding national interests were largely acknowledged in the context of enlargement, and the quality of its reports was assessed positively in both the EU and the applicant countries. Nevertheless, given the vagueness of the accession criteria and the great historical importance attached to enlargement, it was inevitable that political considerations and judgements played an important part behind the Commission proposals. It had to consider the security and geopolitical implications of its proposals as well as the financial and institutional aspects of enlargement, which made the process ultimately hang on political will. Furthermore, the factual detail of the reports may be objective as such, but the Commission made crucial and politically relevant choices as to which factors it included or excluded and to the weight and precise content it gave to different criteria. Thus, for instance, it is questionable to what extent the proposal made in 1997 to include Estonia in the first enlargement group was objective. Estonia was slightly better than Latvia and Lithuania according to “objective assessment” on several criteria, but the differences between the three countries were small, especially compared with differences between Estonia and the rest of the “first wave” countries. Hence, it would have been more objectively defencable to include none of the three Baltic countries, or all of them. However, political and security considerations spoke for the inclusion of at least one of them, whereas starting negotiations simultaneously with all three was considered too big a challenge for the EU’s institutions.

As an essentially bureaucratic institution, the Commission did not carry political responsibility for its work but in principle merely implemented the tasks assigned to it by the European Council and the Council of Ministers. In the end, other EU institutions and member states relied on the authority of the Commission and accepted most of its proposals when taking political decisions on enlargement. The rhetoric of objective criteria and expertise offered a way for both the EU and the CEECs to avoid

37. See, e.g., Avery and Cameron, Enlargement of the European Union, 121-59.
taking political responsibility. Different elements of the official discourse were mutually supportive and supportive of the depoliticisation. This kind of expert-oriented decision making is dangerous for the viability of democracy. Certainly expertise is needed for deciding on societal matters, but if we can trust experts always to make the best possible, objective, and impartial decisions, then why do we need democracy any longer? Belief in expertise that is objective and value-free undermines democratic decision making and public debate, as it narrows politics to a realm of experts and replaces political judgement with “objective” knowledge.

Estonian integration policy—A model pupil in the European race

For the applicant countries, adoption of the official discourse was a significant key to success in moving closer to membership. The reports of the Commission drew to a great extent on materials provided by the CEECs themselves, so the quality of these materials—mastering the right rhetoric being one important sign of quality—was essential for the Commission’s assessments. Each successive assessment was conditioned by responses of the CEE governments to the criticisms levelled at them in previous reports—the Commission followed whether the applicant countries “respond constructively” to the reports and “intensify and refocus” their preparations for membership accordingly. By producing the right kind of documents, the candidates were able to prove their convergence with common norms, their ability to internalise the EU system, and to “speak the same language” as the EU’s political elites.

The Commission reports played a central role in the formulation of Estonian integration policy. They were carefully analysed by domestic officials, and Estonia’s responses sought to take into account all the criticism, to point out improvements, and to present detailed plans for the future. The logic of integration required efficient work according to tight schedules to “keep the prom-

38. European Commission, Hans van den Broek, Interview on Enlargement.
"ises" given to the European Commission and guarantee a positive evaluation in the next Progress Report. Along with increasingly detailed documents and guidelines, integration became more and more dominant in the activities of the government, up to merging the NPAA with the government programme in 2000. As emphasised by the then–Prime Minister Mart Laar,

[The programme is] the first priority of the government. This time the programme is to be implemented unconditionally because it includes undertakings of urgent necessity for the Estonian state, the postponement of which is in no way possible any more. The work plan of the government will be a hundred percent consistent with the European integration programme. The programme clearly sets both the aims of the activities and responsibilities. And I dare to assure that control over the implementation of promises will be strict.

The strong emphasis by the Estonian government on inevitability and the “urgent necessity” to proceed with integration as quickly as possible responded well to the Commission discourse. The main reason for Estonia to consider EU membership inevitable was its existential concern about the security and survival of the nation. Together with the aspects of inevitability described above, this created a particularly strong sense of being in a situation of no choice. Estonia was portrayed as a diligent model pupil “prepared to do everything necessary to be ready at the time of our accession to assume the obligations arising from membership.” At the same time, the position of a “client” or “pupil” of the EU was a major source of annoyance in Estonia, which reinforced the official aim to pursue membership as quickly as possible to become a truly equal partner. The spirit and pace of integration are illustrated well by the following quotations of two leading figures of Estonian EU relations:

Accession to the European Union is not predetermined as is the changing of the seasons, or the passing of another year. Nor should it be compared to jumping over a fence—a one time effort. The European Union is constantly changing and developing—it is a moving target. And we must act accordingly. As stated in Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland”: in order to keep in one place one must run faster and faster [italics added].

Since the negotiations have been opened and the process is in the move, it dictates its own stages [italics added]. . . . One cannot simply postpone something here, especially by a candidate country that has declared political will to join.

While fast adoption of EU discourse and legislation, even if done in a superficial manner, was vital to come closer to membership, the skillful use of EU rhetoric did not always reflect readiness or ability to act accordingly. The plans and responses that the applicants presented to the EU sometimes mounted to no more than declarations and promises—hence the increasing emphasis of the Commission on implementation and enforcement. The candidate countries could often get away with just providing the right kinds of documents during earlier stages of enlargement. After the start of negotiations it became more difficult to merely reproduce the right rhetoric, since monitoring and control by the Commission grew stronger. Estonia is a good example. According to former prime minister Laar, the gap between promises and actual achievements was a problem especially during the first years of negotiations:

Recalling the situation a year ago we can use the word “on the verge of catastrophe.” . . . [W]e had reached a situation in which our capacity and credibility were measured against our capability to do something apart from using beautiful words. Not only adopting new laws but also enforcing them. Unfortunately we have to admit that in the first half of negotiations Estonia has promised more than it is able to keep or even has to keep in some areas.

43. Toomas Hendrik Ilves, address to the Estonian Parliament, 5 December 1996.
44. Priit Kolbre (then Estonia’s ambassador in the EU), interview to Postimees, 9 November 1998.
The gap between words and deeds has been explained by mental legacies of the communist period. As Karen Henderson argues,

Communist systems accustomed officials to erecting elaborate formal structures which accorded to externally imposed norms. The problem is imbuing the legal structures with practical content. Under communism, such structures were frequently too complex and over-regulated for proper implementation to be a realistic option. Officials and citizens in the CEECs are therefore well-practiced in the art of circumventing bureaucratic restrictions, and such behaviour is considered natural rather than anti-social.\(^46\)

Among Estonians, appearing to comply with Soviet rules while at the same time maintaining a more or less latently critical outlook was a norm. Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vihalemm analyse the Soviet-time adjustment of Estonians in terms of Orwellian doublethink as described in the novel \textit{1984}. According to them, the majority of Estonians had developed “an adaptive way of life, which allowed them to pursue their own personal interests without overt conflict with the official political system.” At the same time, people maintained “ironic and detached attitudes toward the Soviet forms of everyday life.” A critical attitude toward the Soviet system was widespread especially among elite groups, including Soviet functionaries, many of whom later, at the end of the 1980s, became active in national liberation movements and then occupied key positions in the newly independent state in the 1990s.\(^47\)

In some respects, the Soviet-time doublethink has been redirected to the EU—when it comes to bureaucracy and overregulation, the image of the EU among Estonians does not differ much from that of the Soviet Union, and the formal adop-


tion of rules that are not truly supported seems to be a workable strategy in the EU as well. A sceptical attitude has been nourished by the perception that the EU has been overly demanding toward the CEECs. The further the preparations for membership proceeded, the more the attractiveness of the EU was diminished because of the vast system of bureaucracy and regulations—what used to be an ideal, the Europe of dreams, became attainable and real and at the same time ceased to be an ideal:

Now, being close, that Europe of a dream rather appears as a boring administrative machinery that produces restrictions and bureaucracy. We must close many more countryside shops and pubs, install thousands of steel wash basins in school refectories, in order to pass the strict sanitary tests. It’s like the army! First delouse in the sauna, and only after that you get to wear the gold-starred uniform. First tidiness, then—administrative capacity."

As in the EU itself, in Estonia, too, European integration carries the strong image of an elite project. The elite-centred nature of integration, coupled with low trust in political institutions, has been one important reason for public scepticism toward the EU in Estonia. Public support for membership remained below 40 percent during the whole period of 1997 to 2002. EU attitudes correlated strongly with trust in public institutions, and EU support was at the lowest during a severe government crisis in 2001. It was uncertain up till the referendum held in September 2003 whether Estonians were going to accept EU accession. The positive outcome—67 percent of yes votes at the referendum—showed that a clear majority of citizens did eventually agree with the political elite: membership was inevitable for the security and welfare of the country. Nonetheless, it is possible that now, having become EU citizens, Estonians will develop a similar detached and distrustful attitude toward it as was commonly held toward the Soviet Union. Like the Soviet Union, the EU is considered by many to be an alien power but something that one had

49. See Raik, Democratic Politics, 178-87, 257. The other main reasons for euroscepticism were concern about national sovereignty and about economic and social consequences of EU membership.
better learn to live with. Of course, distrust of distant power and dislike of EU regulations do not necessarily need a Soviet legacy to build upon—there are plenty of models available in the EU itself. The euroscepticism of Estonians compares well with the lukewarm EU attitudes of the British, and Estonia shares with Britain many positions concerning the future of the EU.⁵⁰ A crucial difference between the Soviet Union and the EU is that the underlying values of the latter are accepted by Estonians: they associate the EU strongly with democracy, freedom, and market economy, although at the same time criticising it for its bureaucracy, overregulation, and democratic deficit.

During the preparations for membership, Estonian EU politics was indeed concentrated in the hands of a small elite group. Top civil servants had a central role in formulating EU strategy and policies. Political control over the work of civil servants—not only by Parliament but also by government—was weak, especially until the end of the 1990s. Because of the lack of political discussion and coordination, many political questions were either decided by civil servants or were not solved at all. Politicians found it difficult to sort out questions involving political choice, since these were easily lost in the midst of technical details and bureaucratic regulations. The central role of civil servants was apparently inevitable inasmuch as, due to the nature of EU legislation, much of the preparatory work was of very technical nature and demanded specific expertise that most politicians did not have. A danger inherent in this pattern is that it easily leaves all EU-related issues, even those involving political choice, to bureaucrats.

There is no doubt that integration had an overall positive impact on Estonian public service. Criticism from the EU gave an important impetus to the public administration reform intro-

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⁵⁰ For example, both countries oppose the extension of qualified majority voting in the fields of taxation, social security, and common security and defense. For Estonian positions, see http://www.eib.ee/files/Valitsuse%20Euroopa%20Liidu%20poliitika%202004-2006%20_KINNITATUD_.pdf. According to the Eurobarometer survey conducted in autumn 2003, only 38 percent of Estonians believed that EU membership would be a good thing for their country, which placed them as the third most negative country among current and future member states, headed only by the United Kingdom and Austria (Eurobarometer EB60—CC-EB 2003.4, http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/cceb/2005/cceb2003.4_comparative.pdf).
duced in 2001. The need to increase accountability in the public sector and to strengthen political leadership were included in the priorities of the administrative reform programme. Furthermore, demands by the EU to strengthen administrative capacity improved the functioning of democracy by enhancing the capability of the state to plan and implement its decisions and policies. However, to some extent the problems addressed by the European Commission were actually caused or reinforced by integration.\(^5^1\) Preparations for accession placed an immense workload on the state machinery of the applicants. It was hard, especially for a small state like Estonia, to find the human and financial resources needed for taking over and implementing the extensive *acquis communautaire* and conducting accession negotiations. Integration created an “overload,” pressure to do too much and too fast.\(^5^2\) In the case of Estonia, the overload and time pressure were major reasons for the poor quality of legislation and insufficient policy analysis. The administration struggled hard to fulfil its yearly plans. It is possible that the overall quality of administrative work would have been no better if Estonia had not applied for EU membership, but in any case, the logic of integration did not allow for the time that would have been needed for better quality. In addition to the quality of single proposals, the legislative system on the whole suffered from the emphasis on speed. There was no time to consider how best to incorporate EU norms into the existing domestic frameworks and to develop a coherent system, which led to a pattern of “one directive—one law.”

The role of the Estonian Parliament, the Riigikogu, in the integration was rather remote and formal. This was due to a number of reasons, including the logic of integration, unsatisfactory links between Parliament and government, lack of competence and


support staff, and the lack of effort made by the parties to formulate their positions. During the accession negotiations, the main task of Parliament was to accept as quickly as possible the new legislation required by the EU. Hence, integration continued the “speed-conveyor practice” of lawmaking typical of the transition period.\(^5^3\) Low administrative capacity made the situation worse: the drafts received by the Riigikogu were often of poor quality, and therefore the MPs had to use their time for correcting technical details instead of analysing political questions.\(^5^4\) The detail and scope of parliamentary work related to EU integration grew steadily. In essence, the EU expected the government to determine the work of Parliament to a great extent, as the Commission required detailed timetables indicating the adoption of legislation by Parliament.\(^5^5\)

Fast adoption of EU legislation was made easier by broad consensus among the major parties over the necessity of fast integration. The political consensus had a positive effect of supporting the smooth preparations for membership, but on the other hand, it decreased political interest in integration and flattened debate. The opposition was not uncritical of the activities of government in the field of integration, but the widely accepted understanding that EU membership is inevitable tended to take the sting out of any criticism. There was little discussion about EU-related issues within and among the parliamentary parties, and the parties lacked the motivation to formulate more detailed positions. The main worry of the opposition (in varying compositions) was that Estonia’s national interests were not protected well enough and that foreign policy leaders were “rushing into the EU without

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54. These problems were repeatedly discussed in the Parliament; see, e.g., Riigikogu stenogramm, 19 January 2000 and 18 January 2001 (especially the speech by Kelam).

conditions. However, the critics were mostly silent on how to define the national interests.

Estonian discourse of integration was contradictory in many respects as regards the position of Parliament. On one hand, the Riigikogu was expected to accept all EU requirements and adopt new legislation at enormous speed, while on the other hand, the importance of parliamentary debate and active contribution was increasingly emphasised. Parliament demanded a more influential position, which was accepted in principle by the government, but it was not up to taking up that position. It was portrayed as the main link to the citizens, but it did little to promote public debate on integration. All in all, it acquired a strong position in the discourse of integration, but this was not accompanied by power over the discourse—the ability to formulate Estonia’s EU politics or set the terms of EU debate. It has to be acknowledged, however, that in recent years, cooperation and coordination between the executive and the legislative powers have considerably improved, and the position of Parliament in EU-related issues has grown stronger. Still, it is a common view among Estonian MPs, who often see the Nordic parliaments as models, that there is much room for improvement. Understandings and awareness of the (desirable) role of Parliament have changed considerably: it has become a widely held view that the Riigikogu should exercise strong control over government and administration in EU issues. Furthermore, national parliaments are seen as the main link between the citizens and EU decision making. This imposes high demands on the parliaments and requires huge development in the practices of the Estonian Riigikogu.

Conclusion: Extension of the democratic deficit

Democracy promotion being one of the major purposes of EU enlargement, it is ironic that the process itself has been demo-


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ocratic only in a limited, formal sense. The study of Estonia’s preaccession period indicates that the underlying logic of enlargement/integration promoted bureaucratic, executive-dominated policy making and left little room for democratic politics in applicant countries. The keywords of the official discourse of enlargement/integration—inevitability, speed, efficiency, and expertise—formed a set of mutually reinforcing principles that all constrained democratic politics and tended to limit enlargement to a narrow sphere of elites and experts. The overwhelming presence of these ideals in the enlargement process is a good example of the seemingly impersonal power of discourse, a dominant discourse that is mostly considered natural or inevitable. This power constructed integration as a matter of fast and efficient expert work and the implementation of inevitabilities rather than a process involving political debate and choice. The logic of enlargement/integration had far-reaching implications for the democratic institutions, civil society, and public debate in the applicant states.

Many of the tensions between democratic politics and the logic of enlargement/integration are expressions of contradictions that are ever present in any democracy, while attempts to balance opposing values and tendencies are an important part of continuous reproduction of democracy—a process that can never be fully completed. Such insoluble dilemmas include tensions between efficiency and participation, the requirement of speed versus time needed for deliberation, the value of expertise versus respect for the viewpoint of every citizen, and the request for objective knowledge versus the acknowledgement of the necessity of values and political judgement. The classical conflict between democracy and efficiency was particularly acute during the preaccession period examined in the article: membership conditions demanded that the candidate states prioritised fast and efficient decision making, whereas public debate and inclusion of various political and societal groups would have required more time and resources. Tight timetables left little space for discussing EU-related matters in public or even in Parliament before

58. For a more detailed analysis, see Raik, Democratic Politics.
decisions were taken. Competition with other candidate countries supported the ideal of speed and contributed to a situation in which political leaders were more responsive to the conditions and demands imposed from the outside than to domestic expectations.

Relying on bureaucratic expert work, the logic of enlargement de-politicised matters of judgement and choice. Since the EU valued and rewarded fast and efficient expert work on the side of the candidate states, it was often useful and rational from the viewpoint of officials and leading politicians of the latter to present any EU-related decisions as inevitable instead of bringing forth scope for choice. This saved the time and energy that broader deliberation on alternative solutions would have required. The inclusion of Parliament and civil society, on the other hand, complicated and slowed down the work of officials. In addition, the lack of human and financial resources forced the people responsible for integration to focus on what was inevitable for coming closer to membership and to limit deliberation to a minimum. Thus, integration did undeniably speed up reforms, but the quality of democracy was harmed by pressures from the EU to do too much and too quickly.

Although to some extent the problems examined in the article are specific of the preaccession period, it has to be emphasised that the long and intensive preparations for membership created political and administrative practices that do not change overnight. Even more important, the constraints that were imposed by integration to democracy in the candidate countries reflect the way the EU functions in general. The weakness of democracy in the process of enlargement should be viewed as part of the democratic deficit that is put into practice in different EU policies. The preaccession process entailed gradual extension of the technocratic, elite-centered, and overly complex EU system to the applicant states.

In spite of the criticism presented so far, I would not regard EU accession as negative for popular democracy in the CEECs, if compared with the alternative of nonmembership. From the

viewpoint of democracy, the choice between joining and staying outside is one between bad and worse. First, this discussion has to be placed in the context of globalization and the overall weakening of the ability of nation-states to guide and control developments in society. The new Eastern EU members would hardly have more space for choice in domestic politics if they had stayed outside the EU. As external forces increasingly penetrate the internal, domestic developments inside the state, and the conditions of people’s lives are increasingly shaped by global and international forces, it is questionable whether a democracy that remains “domestic” and national can maintain its viability. To counter the effects of globalization that constrain democracy on the nation-state level, some degree of extension of democratic procedures to the international level seems inevitable. Regional institutions such as the EU are in many issues (from the new security threats to control over transnational economic actors and conditions of trade) more capable of exercising political power than the nation-states. Giving away some formal sovereignty of the state to common European institutions increases the distance between citizens and power holders, but at the same time it enhances the abilities of the latter to control and shape the forces that constrain our everyday lives and extend national boundaries.

Second, it is the position of an EU applicant country that offers the worst possible conditions for democratic politics. In that position, the CEECs had to adopt all new EU decisions without being able to influence them, and their domestic politics primarily aimed at responding to the EU’s expectations. EU membership poses new challenges to the CEE democracies, but it is necessary for removing the constraints inherent in the applicant status and for opening up new possibilities of change. In many respects, accession means moving from the hectic period of transition to “normal” politics, with more time and space for the strengthening of democracy.

Finally, I would like to point to the implications of the above analysis for the EU’s policies toward the (present and coming) applicant countries that did not become members in 2004. The article has highlighted some significant limits of integration as a
project for strengthening democracy in Europe. Even though the EU can motivate and support democratic reforms and increase the stability of democracy in its neighbouring transition countries, its ability and credibility in terms of acting as a democracy promoter are restricted by its own democratic deficit and by the modest role of democracy in its enlargement policies. It is of vital importance for the EU as a democracy promoter to continue its efforts to democratize its own institutions and practices. With respect to future enlargements and the EU’s policies toward new neighbours, one should also take seriously the problems that integration causes for the functioning of democracy in the applicant states. The closer a candidate country comes to accession, the more strongly it becomes subject to those aspects of enlargement/integration that constrain democracy instead of strengthening it. This goes against the common assumption in the EU that anything related to enlargement, from the very prospect of membership as such up to adopting the extensive EU legislation, supports democracy. The problems caused by integration may be more serious in the current applicant countries that are probably less capable of managing the “overload” of EU requirements than the countries that joined the EU in 2004. This point highlights again the crucial role of domestic conditions and commitment to reform for the success of EU policies of democracy promotion.