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## Estonian Presidency of the Council of the EU

### Unique chance to move things forward in the EU (and Serbia)

*After the Brexit vote occurred in 2016, the UK decided to give up on its Council presidency which was due to start in July 2017, in order to focus on the complex Brexit negotiations lying ahead. Consequentially, Estonia's presidency was rescheduled to begin six months earlier than it was originally planned.*

Consequentially, Estonia's presidency was rescheduled to begin six months earlier than it was originally planned. Despite such a challenge, all facts presented in this Insight seem to indicate that Estonia has put in a serious amount of effort to ensure that its presidency goes smoothly and according to the plan.

Firstly, Estonia has adopted a policy of "silence" during the six-month period prior to its presidency, which would enable it to act as a [neutral mediator](#). In other words, it will seek to avoid major confrontations with other EU member states and refuse to join in on the negative letters and appeals of groups of member states. This goes along the lines of the speech made by the Estonian Prime-minister Jüri Ratas at Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament), where he argued that "[the role of the presidency](#) is to search for a common denominator and balance point".

#### Preparation makes half of success

Estonia is the last "new member state" to hold the rotating presidency for the first time. Unlike any presidency beforehand, Estonia has one additional challenge: a shorter preparation period. Namely, after the Brexit vote occurred in 2016, the UK decided to give up on its Council presidency which was due to start in July 2017, in order to focus on the complex Brexit negotiations lying ahead.

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Secondly, with the two other “trio” presidencies (i.e. Bulgaria and Austria)<sup>1</sup>, Estonia has signed a [declaration of cooperation](#), which emphasises the need to work on issues such as: security, economy, the ‘migration crisis’, and Brexit. This initiative commits to long-term cooperation on these issues. Since it was signed by the heads of their respective parliaments, the declaration is also supposed to ensure effective coordination and communication between the three parliaments, alongside the European Parliament (EP).

Thirdly, from an [organisational perspective](#), Estonia plans on involving more than 1,000 people in the work of its presidency. In addition, more than 200 [events](#) have already been planned to take place in Estonia, among which there will be 20 high-level (ministerial) [meetings](#). Finally, Estonia had sent its [communication network team to Malta](#) (from the immediately preceding presidency, January-June 2017), in order to get familiarised with its communication organisation. All of the previously said strengthens the argument that the Council presidency during Estonia’s term will be well organised and professional.

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The previously described efforts by Estonia are acknowledged by the [EU Commission officials](#), who have praised Estonia for being able to mobilise itself so efficiently, six months ahead of the original schedule. Therefore, one may assume that Estonia will successfully lead the work of nearly [200 working parties in both Brussels and Tallinn](#).

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that Estonia has taken the responsibility of partially leading the presidency even before its term started. Due to the fact that snap parliamentary elections were called at the end of May in Malta, it was agreed that Estonia’s deputy minister for EU affairs will represent the Council in the European Parliament. In addition, the week after the Maltese elections were over, Malta asked Estonia to take over [four ministerial meetings](#) – telecoms, transport, justice, and home affairs. These latest circumstances point to the fact that Estonia has partially assumed its duty of the presiding country [a month early](#).

## Priorities of the Estonian presidency

Estonia has set four main [priorities](#) which it plans to pursue during its presidency:

1. an open Europe with an innovative economy;
2. a safe and defended Europe;
3. a digital Europe where information flows freely;
4. an inclusive and lasting Europe.

These priorities have been [divided](#) into 18 subchapters and the Estonian programme includes almost 80 bills of legislation which are supposed to promote these priorities. While this fact illustrates Estonia’s preparedness and commitment to improving Europe’s future, it is also good to have in mind the previously mentioned [speech](#) by the Estonian PM, where he stressed that, for his country’s presidency, “no priority, objective or indicator is more important than a strong and united Europe”. In other words, the Estonian presidency’s priorities ought to be perceived as measures directed towards further consolidation of the EU. Hence, the presidency is expected to favour constructive engagement and provide a much needed impetus in finding common ground for a number of pressing issues such as Brexit negotiations, fight against terrorism and xenophobia, the Greek financial crisis, etc.

## The Estonian Touch: A Digital Europe

Estonia’s most recognisable brand is, undoubtedly, a well-functioning, digitalised administration. Estonia considers itself as an “[e-country](#)”, where people have been able to [vote online](#) for general elections since 2007 and which allows its citizens to [deal with most of their business with the government](#) over the Internet. Interestingly, Estonia has dubbed the free movement of data and information as the [fifth fundamental freedom](#), besides the movement of people, goods, services, and capital. Having that in mind, it is not surprising that Estonia has emphasised the Digital Single Market as its priority during its presidency.

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The Digital Single Market is essentially about [removing national barriers](#) to online transactions and, as such, it builds upon the concept of the common market. The [abolishment of roaming charges](#) in June 2017, which allows people to make calls, send SMS, and use mobile data with no extra charges, represents the latest example of Europe’s dedication to the goal of Digital Single Market.

<sup>1</sup> Member states holding the presidency work together closely in groups of three, called ‘trios’, which enables them to set long-term goals and prepare a common agenda determining the topics and major issues that will be addressed by the Council over an 18 month period. Furthermore, each of the three countries prepares its own more detailed 6-month programme. This system was introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009.

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Estonia's efforts for digitalisation are built upon the Commission's 2015 strategy [Digital Agenda for Europe 2020](#) and the European Parliament's 2016 ["Towards a Digital Single Market Act"](#), which recognise the need to do more in this field. Therefore, Estonia has pointed out to additional [measures and innovations](#), such as: the transition to 5G, expanding Wi-Fi networks, the coordination of frequencies with other member states, as well as cooperation between regulators and the unification of standards. In addition, Estonia plans on enhancing and further developing [e-commerce, -services, -justice and -health](#) in the EU.

According to the Estonian PM, the four priorities of the presidency are not arranged [in order of their importance](#), however, this analysis puts the issue of the Digital Single Market in first place, as something which is Estonia's original product and contribution to Europe. Even though Malta has also focused on this issue, it was only a part of a larger 'Single Market' priority. In the case of Estonia, the development of a Digital Single Market and free movement of data is selected

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as a priority on its own. Furthermore, it even encompasses the principles of an "open and innovative European economy" and an "inclusive and sustainable Europe", which illustrates Estonia's focus on 'digitalisation' of public policy. This demonstrates that Estonia is taking a step away from the practice of ["securitisation"](#) of the EU's public policy, which has been prevalent during the previous presidencies in the midst of the large number of terrorist attacks which have occurred in Europe.

### What about Enlargement?

Even though enlargement is not among Estonia's listed priorities, that does not necessarily mean that Estonia plans on neglecting this issue during its presidency. The Estonian president, Kersti Kaljulaid, argued that she supports the idea of keeping the door open for further [enlargement](#), where all liberal and democratic countries would

have a right to join. Among these countries, she explicitly mentioned the "Eastern partners and the countries of the South Balkan". Given Estonia's geopolitical position and historical exposure to Russia, it is understandable why the EU enlargement is in its national interest. This might be an explanation why it is placing the candidate countries for the EU enlargement from the Western Balkans on equal footing with the countries of the [Eastern Partnership](#), for which the EU has not yet officially offered a membership perspective. At the same time, such a position should be a warning signal to the Serbian authorities, as it somewhat undermines the reforms undertaken in the context of the EU accession, a process which is considerably more demanding and complex compared to the Eastern Partnership framework of cooperation.

Estonian officials have also made more explicit statements on the country's position regarding Serbia's EU accession. Namely, during his visit to Belgrade in April 2017, the [Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs](#) explained that Estonia would continue to support Serbia's European integration process during its presidency.

Meanwhile, the Estonian ambassador to Serbia attended the [panel discussion organised by the CEP](#), where he argued that "the presidency represents a chance to build a stronger relationship between Estonia and Serbia". As an illustration of their commitment to the idea of enlargement, the ambassador said that the "new Trio" had already agreed on concrete points, among which is the idea that "the future of the Western Balkans is within the EU".

Finally, the ambassador concluded that Estonia has always been a supporter of enlargement, since it perceives this process as an investment into peace, security, and development in Europe.

However, given Estonia's already mentioned position towards Russia, it can be expected that the Estonian presidency will be particularly interested in moving forward with the Chapter 31 in the accession negotiations with Serbia, which concerns EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP).





On one hand, Chapter 31 is one of the [rare ones left](#) where the EU has not yet adopted the screening report, which means that it is still unknown whether Serbia will be expected to fulfil some additional requirements (in the form of opening benchmarks) in order to be eligible for opening this chapter. On the other hand, Serbia is expected to “[progressively align](#)” its CFSP with that of the EU’s, which has not yet been the case with Serbia’s alignment with the EU’s sanctions policy towards Russia. The following six months will reveal whether Estonia will put this issue forward on the agenda and be one of the strongest hardliners among the EU member states, as one might expect, or if it will manage to stick to the self-prescribed role of a ‘neutral mediator’.

Overall, in the following semester, Serbia will have an enlargement-friendly country at the head of EU’s Council rotating presidency, which is likely to advocate for a continuation of Serbia’s accession negotiations with a merit-based approach and the principles set in the [Negotiating Framework](#). At the same time, it is expected that Estonia will take advantage of its presiding position to place focus on accession-related issues it considers of particular national

interest, as it might be the case with the Chapter 31. The opening of the next negotiating chapters will depend not only on the Serbia’s preparedness in the respective negotiating

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chapters, but also on the EU’s assessment of Serbia’s expected progress in the Chapters 23 and 24 – the chapters that have been [critically evaluated](#) in the EU’s latest report, with the power to block the entire negotiation process.

Estonia can be a role model for Serbia in numerous aspects, from rationalisation and digitalisation of administration and services, to the questions of coalition building and interest representation. As one of the leading small member states with [the greatest negotiation and coalition-building potential](#), Estonia’s excellence might allow it to be successful in preventing the intrusion of unresolved bilateral issues in Serbia’s accession negotiations during its presidency. Ensuring a smooth and continual accession negotiation process, and thus setting an example for the future presidencies, might just be the greatest benefit for Serbia during Estonia’s presidency.

*\*The views expressed in this Policy Brief are the sole responsibility of the authors.*

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European Policy Centre - CEP - is a non-governmental, non-profit, independent think-tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration,

as well as strong social capital combine to create a think-tank capable of not only producing high quality research products but also penetrating the decision making arena to create tangible impact.

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