

Estonia Today

Estonia's return to independence 1987–1991

Estonia regained its independence on 20 August 1991. Capitalizing on confusion from a failed hardliner putsch in Moscow, the country literally turned the “worst of times” into the “best of times” with a show of cross-partisan solidarity that has been all too rare since then. Here is an in-depth look back at the chronological events that led up to August 20, 1991.

The beginning of the end for Soviet rule

The collapse of the communist system in Estonia was founded on objective contradictions and weaknesses within the system itself as well as internal and external pressures. By the mid-1980s, the uncompromising policies of Reagan and Thatcher and the growing resistance in the system itself had led the Soviet empire into deep crisis. It was clear to the Soviet leadership that they were losing the Cold War. In order to halt the arms race, reforms, or rather the semblance of reforms, were introduced under Mikhail Gorbachov. The restructuring—perestroika—was what ultimately dismantled the Soviet Union.

The new situation afforded a number of opportunities, which Estonia was quick to sense. The first heritage preservation clubs developed and began to restore the people's historical memory. In spring 1987, a protest movement arose against new phosphate mines in Estonia. Signatures were collected and in Tartu, students assembled in the university's main hall to express their lack of confidence in the government. At a May demonstration, young people showed up bearing banners and slogans, despite a ban against such actions. The government was forced to bend. In what became known as the phosphate war, the people for the first time felt their own power, sensed the government's unsteadiness and saw how productive pressure could be.

In 1987, the protest movement became political. Dissidents had been calling for the nullification of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact since 1979, but now this demand was aired publicly. On 15 August 1987, former political prisoners formed the MRP-AEG group (Estonians for the Public Disclosure of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), which was headed by Tiit Madisson. US Congressmen joined in, sending a message to Moscow calling for the right of the Baltic peoples to organize a demonstration on 23 August to mark the anniversary of the notorious Nazi-Soviet pact. The Soviet leadership decided to give in. Thousands of people took part in the demonstration, which began at midday on Tallinn's Town Hall Square and proceeded to Hirvepark, on the edge of the Old Town. The event was a true breakthrough in the popular consciousness. The fact that the official government-run press poured poison over the Hirvepark event did not salvage the situation for the authorities.

Madisson was forced into exile, and the cultural heritage movement came under pressure. A meeting of the heritage preservation organizations to be held in Tarvastu was banned. The heritage preservation people did not show up—but all manner of security, militia and interior force units did. This failed demonstration of power was good advertising for the heritage preservation society, and the number of heritage clubs doubled in the next month.

In September 1987, the Edasi newspaper published a proposal by Edgar Savisaar, Siim Kallas, Tiit Made and Mikk Titma calling for Estonia to make the transition to autonomy. Initially geared toward economic independence, then toward a certain amount of political autonomy, the project, Isemajandav Eesti (A Self-Managing Estonia), became known by its Estonian acronym, IME, which means “miracle”. The level of activity of the people grew and grew. On 21 October, a demonstration dedicated to those who gave their lives in the 1918-1920 War of Independence took place in Võru, which culminated in a conflict with the militia. For the first time in years, the blue, black and white national tricolor was publicly visible. Again historical re-evaluation rose to the head of the agenda. On 21 January 1988, the Estonian National Independence Party (ERSP) initiative group was founded. On 2 February 1988, Estonians marked the 68th anniversary of the Tartu Peace Treaty signed between the Republic of Estonia and Soviet Russia. The demonstration was met by special forces units bearing plastic shields and rubber clubs, and dogs. From then on, the government was more circumspect in using force. In Tallinn, interference and blocking tactics were used to break up the spontaneous rallies that were growing ever larger, but this did not prevent the people from commemorating Independence Day (February 24) and the anniversary of the March 1949 deportations.

The situation spurred artists and the intelligentsia into energetic action. On 1 and 2 April 1988, a joint plenary session of creative associations took place in Tallinn, where the pain and suffering of the Estonian people were aired in public in an effective fashion. Key public figures opined that the Estonian nation had reached the brink of catastrophe and that radical changes were necessary to save the situation. The Estonian Communist Party reacted to the proposals of the meeting with vague statements. On 13 April 1988, speaking on a popular TV show, Edgar Savisaar made

a proposal to create a perestroika-supporting Popular Front that would get the broader masses more active. A Popular Front initiative center was set up in that very TV studio, and a similar group was formed in Tartu in the days that followed.

The “Singing Revolution” of 1988

The Heritage Preservation Days held in mid-April in Tartu were to 1988 what the national song festival was to 1869, when Estonia experienced its first national renaissance. The nearly 10,000 people who assembled near Tartu’s Estonian Student Society on 14 April 1988 were witnesses to a true reawakening of national feelings, symbolized by the national colors that had been illegal for 48 years but now, flouting all official bans and orders, proudly retook their place in public.

From the Heritage Preservation Days, the blue-black-and-white message spread over the land. The national flag became the symbol of the new national renaissance. It also waved at a popular music festival held in Tartu in May, where tens of thousands had what could probably be likened to a spiritual experience upon hearing Alo Mattiisen’s “Five Patriotic Songs”. Popular Front support groups were being founded everywhere, and the Greens were also in action. The mass media played a major role in awakening the people.

In early June, around 10,000 people gathered spontaneously at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds for what were known as the nighttime song festivals. A large number of Estonian flags appeared among the people, of which many had no doubt been retrieved from hiding places. The national colors were hoisted up the Song Festival’s flagpole, to the sounds of triumphant jubilation. This demonstration, aptly christened the “singing revolution” by Heinz Valk, could only have been overcome by force. Estonia’s Soviet leader Karl Vaino was apparently prepared to use it, but Moscow was not. Vaino was sacked and Vaino Väljas, who had been serving as Soviet ambassador to Nicaragua, became the new general secretary of the Estonian Communist Party. Vaino’s assumption of the reins of power marked an initial easing of the crisis, and as a result, the 100,000-strong demonstration at the Song Festival called by the Popular Front, initially as a pressure tactic, became a victory party instead.

The national spirit now spread quickly throughout the country. All over Estonia, new associations and societies were established, and old ones reinstated. The restoration of monuments to the War of Independence, spearheaded by the Estonian Heritage Preservation Society and independent youth associations, served to bolster the people’s morale and refresh their historical consciousness. Along with the monuments, which seemed to be rising back to the surface from a fairy-tale bewitchment, the people, too, appeared to be shaking off a curse. The summer of 1988 culminated in a huge event organized by Popular Front at the Song Festival Grounds, “Estonian Song”, where attendance was estimated at as much as 300,000. Here, for the first time, the head of the Heritage Preservation Society Trivimi Velliste called publicly for the restoration of Estonia’s independence.

At the Popular Front foundation congress held in October 1988, the first conflicts emerged between the new leaders of the Estonian Communist Party and the Popular Front. In autumn 1988, a force representing the imperialist-minded faction of the civilian garrison entered the political arena—Interfront.

The Estonian citizens committees movement

In October 1988, Gorbachov unveiled a plan for a new Soviet legislature, the Congress of People’s Deputies, markedly restricting the rights of the republics. Gorbachov’s plan resulted in protests in every Soviet republic. In Estonia, hundreds of thousands of people signed petitions against the plan. On 16 November 1988, the Supreme Soviet of Estonia adopted a declaration of sovereignty, announcing that Soviet laws would be in force on Estonian soil only if they were approved by Estonia. Estonia’s decision fell under sharp criticism in Moscow. Abroad, the move was seen as a declaration of independence and a sign of the weakening of the Soviet Union.

On 24 February 1989, at the initiative of the leaders of the Estonian SSR, the national tricolor was raised at the traditional seat of power in Tallinn, the Pikk Hermann tower. Interfront greeted the move with a strike threat. For their part, Estonians were unfortunately still lacking a common vision of how far Estonia could go in its demand—some felt full restoration of independence was perhaps too radical a plan. At the elections of the Congress of People’s Deputies, held on 26 March 1989, the Popular Front won the most seats. In Moscow, reform-minded Estonian deputies formed a new faction with deputies elected from the other Baltic republics and set as their goals the repeal of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and autonomy. However, this proved more complicated than the leaders of the Estonian SSR had thought it would be.

To step up pressure on Moscow, on 23 August 1989, at the initiative of the Popular Fronts, a more than 600-km-long human chain was formed linking the three Baltic capitals, Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius. The “Baltic Chain” took the nations’ aspirations for freedom to the front pages of the world’s newspapers. It was becoming harder and harder to ignore the Baltic question. On 27 August 1989, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR adopted a threatening resolution, The Situation in the Soviet Baltic States, which warned that the strivings for independence could place the existence of the Baltic nations in jeopardy. The effect of the document proved to be the opposite of the intended, reinforcing those very strivings.

By this time, the independence movement was being carried by the citizens’ committees movement that had arisen in Estonia. On 24 February 1989, registration of Estonian citizens began on the proposal of the Estonian National Independence Party, the Christian Union and the Heritage Preservation Society. The aim was to hold free elections to a new independent representative body, the Congress of Estonia. Although registration progressed slowly in the beginning, a breakthrough took place in summer. On 11 November 1989, the

representatives of the committees elected the head Estonian Citizens Committee headed by Tunne Kelam. While just six months ago, some Estonians had considered the bid for freedom unrealistic, now the majority of them were firmly in the independence camp.

Estonia's return to independence, 1990-1991

The Congress of Estonia elections on 24 February 1990 became an independence referendum of sorts. The Congress of Estonia convened on 11 and 12 March 1990, affirming the continuity of the state of Estonia in spite of decades of occupation. The same trend was continued by the new Supreme Council, elected from the general population on 18 March 1990, which declared a period of transition to the restoration of the Republic of Estonia. The Supreme Council elections were won by the Popular Front, whose leader, Edgar Savisaar, became prime minister of the Estonian SSR.

Moscow did not recognize the decisions taken by Estonia and began applying pressure on Estonia. On 15 May 1990, Moscow-minded demonstrators attempted to seize Toompea castle, but were rebuffed by opposition from the people, who hastened to the aid of the Supreme Council.

Early in 1991, Soviet leaders opted for the use of force to quash the Baltic bids for independence. Bloody events in Vilnius and Riga led to barricades in the

streets of Tallinn as well. The intervention of Russian President Boris Yeltsin helped resolve the crisis.

The Baltic question had by this time risen to the level of international politics, a topic in talks among superpowers. A public poll held on 3 March 1991 also helped the cause, forestalling a pan-Soviet referendum on the issue of preservation of the Soviet Union. In the Estonian poll, 77% voted for Estonian independence. Moscow continued to wave a treaty of union at the Estonians, hinting at economic sanctions in the case of non-compliance.

The impasse was resolved by an attempted coup by Soviet hardliners on 19 August 1991, which failed rapidly. In Estonia, an understanding was reached between the two rival political movements, and in defiance of approaching tanks, the Supreme Council in coordination with the Congress of Estonia adopted a decision on national independence on 20 August 1991. The failed putsch was followed by the recognition of Estonian independence, first by Russia and some time later, by the Soviet Union. Within a month's time, leading Western countries had reinstated diplomatic relations with Estonia and on 17 September 1991, the flags of all three Baltic States were raised in front of the headquarters of the UN in New York — Estonia had returned to the fold of the world's free nations.

Written for the MFA by **Mart Laar**, historian