

A FULBRIGHTER IN ESTONIA¹

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I. I offer a posthumous thanks to Bean Maegi, a Fulbright alumnus who was with us in Estonia in Spring 2016. It was his idea to propose a panel on the Fulbright to the AABS.

II. How I ended up in Tartu.

A. Background.

1. I was born in Cuba, and with my family left the country as a teenager two years into the Castro regime. So that experience led me to include the study of communism and dictatorships in Cuba and elsewhere as one line of research in my scholarly agenda in comparative politics, as well as a subject in my more general or informal reading, film selections, etc.

2. In 2014, having transitioned from two decades as chair of my department, I felt free to explore teaching opportunities abroad. The Fulbright, of course, is an ideal venue for that. I had done a brief stint in Argentina back in the early 1980s after securing tenure. More recently I learned from a fellow Floridian of her experiences as a Fulbrighter in Moldova, so that was a further spur. But where to go?

3. For some time I had been wanting to visit Scandinavia. Looking for a university that was in the general area, I noted that Tartu was looking for a political scientist. I knew a little about Estonia, which I had picked up in my reading about communism, namely that it along with Latvia and Lithuania had been forcibly incorporated into the USSR following the Hitler-Stalin pact, that they all had been subject to Stalinist terror, deportations, purging, expropriations, etc., German occupation for several years after Hitler turned against his partner in crime, renewal of Stalinist repression starting in 1944, and that Estonia had made a relatively successful transformation into a democracy and market economy after the collapse of the Soviet empire.

¹ This is the most recent version of a paper presented at The 2018 AABS Conference at Stanford University: The 100th Anniversary of Baltic Independence, Palo Alto, CA, June 1-3, 2018 and, previously, at the 12th Conference of Baltic Studies in Europe (CBSE), “The Baltic States at 99: Past, Present, and Future,” University of Latvia, Riga, June 21st, 2017.

B. Tartu

So, about six months before the submission deadline I emailed the then-chairman of the department, Vello Pettai, about my interest. He was very receptive, informative, and encouraging. Over a series of emails we discussed what I would teach, when, etc. if accepted. He advised me to choose the spring semester that starts in February because then the days are getting longer and culminate in St. John's festivities at the end of June. Also, Vello gave me contact information for previous Fulbrighters who had been to Tartu. I contacted all I could reach by email or phone. A couple were very helpful. Once I was awarded the grant in the spring of 2015, my wife and I made plans to visit Scandinavia and swing by Estonia to learn more about the university, the city, and logistical or practical information such as where to live, shop, etc. We spent three full days there, during which we met key staffers at the American embassy in Tallinn and a few of the political science faculty in Tartu, and walked the central areas of the city, stopping in at shopping centers, etc.

Soon after getting back home Vello emailed me that a colleague in sociology was going to Switzerland for two years and would be leasing her apartment in increments of time as needed. I followed that lead and we ended up with a lovely apartment only about a ten minute hike to the Institute where I taught and only a few minutes more to the Catholic Church we attended and a supermarket where we shopped frequently. In the months that followed I read scholarly books and articles about Estonia, as well as a book by an American expatriate who married an Estonian and resides in Tartu. For her part, my wife, who is good with languages, drew up a list of Estonian words and phrases and picked up a bit of the grammar and pronunciation rules. (I am not good at languages, but fortunately most Estonians we dealt with spoke good to excellent English, and those who didn't helpfully called on someone who did for assistance.) Also, we learned something about the country's cuisine and other cultural traits.

Finally, at the PDO we met several other Fulbrighters, including two also heading for Tartu, Ben Maegi and Charles Kroncke and his Estonian wife Kaie. That fall we stayed in touch and planned to meet soon after arriving in Tartu, which we did. That spring we met often on campus, at each other's apartments, at church, and for coffee and pastries at the Werner cafe, a local landmark. This made the stay immensely more enjoyable and easy to overcome whatever feeling of homesickness we could have experienced.

C. Take-aways.

1. Find an area of the world where you would like to explore for personal or scholarly reasons.
2. Initiate contact with key personnel at the university early.
3. If awarded the grant, (a) contact Fulbrighters who have been there before and (b) if you can afford it, make a pre-visit.
4. Gain some acquaintance with the language, culture, etc., of your assignment.

III. Activities during the Fulbright.

A. Teaching.

1. At the Johan Skytte Institute (into which the political science department was folded under a new chair), I taught two courses, one each in American politics and Latin American politics. These were seminar-sized courses of about ten students each, a mixture of graduate and undergraduate students. Most of the students were not from Estonia, but from Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, France, Italy, and Brazil. Along with the Estonians, their English was very good, even excellent in some cases. I had them read the same material as in my courses at home, only a lighter load, and to write two drafts of a paper on a research topic chosen in consultation with me. Also, I required two verbal progress reports delivered in individual consultations. This worked out very well. Some of the best work turned in was comparable to the best work I get at home. Also, I was invited to give two lectures on the American presidential election. One was at the Society of International Relations, a student organization, and the other at the Institute.

2. In our 2015 pre-visit to Estonia, I was asked to meet with the Assistant Director of the School of Diplomacy in Tallinn. It turned out that they had lost an instructor in Latin American foreign policy, a Portuguese diplomat, when he was reassigned to his country's embassy in Moscow. Although that was not a sub-field I had studied formally, I agreed to teach the course. So I put that at the top of my agenda when I got home, reading as much as I could in preparation, building a substantial bibliography. Teaching at the School was different. The students were adults, diplomats from other countries, teachers, or otherwise employed, who were enrolled in the school. It was more of a lecture course, four consecutive nights for three hours each in March. (It snowed one night.) Some students could not keep up with the readings and dropped out. I did require an essay and gave the class two options to consider. They all did fine. Subsequently, a participant asked me for a letter of recommendation to a Ph.D. program in England, and I was pleased to oblige. Also, for about a year I stayed in touch by email with another student from that class, whom I encouraged to apply for a Fulbright to come to the U.S.A. to study for a year.

B. Other.

1. As previously mentioned, in 2015, before getting to Estonia I read books on its history, along with several journal articles on political developments. Also, I added Estonian elections to a collection I have accumulated and which I have analyzed for general patterns. Along with the rest of the post-communist European democracies, Estonia's party system is more fractionalized than in other regions of the world I have examined. Also, Estonia has frequent turnovers of prime ministers, although in the decade ending last year, before the Reform Party government fell, this seemed to have stabilized.

2. During our stay in Estonia, I read a story by Jaan Kross, "Uncle," included in *The Dedalus Book of Estonian Literature*. I liked it very much, so I proceeded to read all the novels translated into English that I could check out of the university library, four in

all: *Professor Marten's Departure*, *The Czar's Madman*, *Sailing against the Wind*, and, my favorite, *Treading Air*. Also, we watched a dramatization (with English subtitles) of an as yet untranslated novel, *The Wikman Boys*. All are historical novels. Kross was Estonia's best known novelist, nominated several times for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Most students have read at least one of his books. Another novel that all students have read is *Spring (Kevade)*, by Oskar Luts. Set in a high school, it tells the story of one year in the life of its characters, including many an antic and escapade. We also watched a film adaptation of the film and visited a museum in Tartu dedicated to him and his work. Also, we watched several additional Estonian films and TV series with English subtitles. Among the most memorable are "In the Crosswind" (*Risttuules*), "1944," "December Heat" (*Detsembrikuumus*), "Names in Marble" (*Nimed marmortahvilil*), and "The Fencer" (*Vehkleja*). All this watching was not only instructive and affecting, it helped in my conversations with Estonian faculty and students, or in my lectures.

Incidentally, in the same Dedalus anthology I read a short story, "On Lake Peipsi," by Juhan Liiv, one of Estonia's most famous poets. It is about two men who, heading home on a cold night, decided to take a shortcut through the frozen lake. When the ice began to crack, fearing they would die each man resolved that if he survived he would give up some sinful vice, a resolution that was promptly forgotten when they both made it to safety. Over lunch one day with the then-head of the Institute, Kristiina Tõnnisson, I started telling her Liiv's story but, immediately recognizing it, she picked up the thread and finished it. Well, the thing is, I told her, I remember a similar tale in Mark Twain's *Roughing It*.² We wondered who had imitated whom. Some time later I checked the publication dates. Answer: Twain's tale came out in 1872, two decades earlier than Liiv's story. That stands to reason, as he would have been more likely to be read by an Estonian author than the other way around, although, of course, we can't rule out the possibility that the stories were imagined independently. But I tell this anecdote simply to illustrate the common sense idea that no matter what your field is, becoming acquainted with at least a little of the literature of your host country can help make unanticipated connections in casual conversations with your colleagues.

3. I sat in for several sessions of a class offered by the legendary Estonian political scientist Rein Taagepera, the recipient of prestigious international prizes, including the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science (2008). I had read some of his work even before I even thought of a Fulbright in Estonia. My wife and I had lunch with him several times. He is a genteel, cordial, and most generous person. His biography is an inspiration. Along with his family he fled Estonia when the Red Army was approaching. He ended up in a refugee camp in Germany, thence to Morocco, Canada, and finally the U.S.A. His training was in physics, and he practiced engineering before turning to political science.

² In that version, supposedly Twain himself and two other men were lost in a snow storm and thought they were going to freeze to death. They, too, made promises—to give up tobacco, cards, and spirits, respectively, if they were spared. In the grey light of dawn, however, they woke up to find they were only a few steps from a stage station and an inn that had been hidden from them by a snow-drift. Having survived, one by one they returned to their vices. Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), *Roughing It*, Chs. XXXI-XXXIII. EBook #3177. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3177/3177-h/3177-h.htm>

In the 1990s he ran for president of Estonia. He also founded the political science program at Tartu. Today, although retired from both Tartu and UC Irvine, he continues to teach and publish. It's a privilege to have made his acquaintance.

4. I attended three different conferences in Tartu, and as many lectures by faculty or guests on or off campus that I learned about. That included a conference on the Russian threat to the Baltics, another on Russia more generally, still another on Eastern Europe; lectures by faculty on Estonian history or politics; lectures by ambassadors from Germany and the U.K. and another by the then Estonian foreign minister. Also, I attended theses prospectuses by M.A. students.

5. We visited as many museums in Tartu and Tallinn as we could. Most memorable were the Museum of the Occupations in Tallinn, the KGB Jail in Tartu, the Tartu University Museum, the Tartu Toy Museum, the Tartu City Museum, and the aforementioned Oskar Luts Museum. We regularly attended recitals by students of all levels at the Elleri School on Lossi Street. Also, I got library cards from the university library and the public library which enabled me to check out books from the former and DVDs from the latter. Again, all this familiarity was helpful in my conversations and lectures.

6. After grades were turned in, we took a road trip to Viljandi, Parnu, and Kurassare. And Vello Pettai and his family kindly invited us to go on a one-day trip to the southeastern corner of the country that culminated atop Estonia's highest peak, "Big Egg Mountain" (Suur Munamägi; elevation 1,043 feet).

7. To show our appreciation and celebrate the end of the semester, the two other Fulbrighters assigned to Tartu, Ben Maegi and Charles Kroncke, and I threw a party for university faculty and staff we had interacted with during our stay. If memory serves, although most invitees came, no staff member did; maybe they did not feel comfortable socializing with faculty. That afternoon we wore the Fulbright T-shirts handed out the previous July at the Pre-Departure Orientation (PDO). See photo on next page.

8. Being residents of Florida, we had no use for snow boots or heavy winter clothing. We asked the Catholic pastor how we could donate those items and he recommended that we take them to the Baptist Church in Tartu because they administer a charity, "Friends Helping Friends," where the needy can buy donated items at low prices or even at no cost. So we did.

c. Take-aways.

1. Learn as much as your assigned country as you can before you get there. Familiarize yourself with its history, geography, and culture, including its novelists, poets, or other notables. Continue that "education" while in the country. 2. See if any faculty with whom you'll serve have interests comparable to yours; read their publications in English and try to establish communication with them ahead of time. 3. Take advantage of the intellectual life on campus, and contribute if invited. 4. Get to know more of the country than its capital or university town. 5. Download into your

phone an app called “Taxify.” It’s easy to hail a cab with it and, unlike Uber, you don’t have to use your credit card.



Left to Right: Ben Maegi, author, and Charles Kroncke

IV. Post-Estonia.

1. We three Fulbrighters stayed in touch by text and email. In June, 2017, at the AABS 2017 Baltic Studies Conference, “The Baltic states at 99: Past, Present and Future” (Riga, Latvia), Ben Maegi and I, along with another Fulbrighter at the time assigned to Lithuania, Priscilla Harris, made a presentation on the Fulbright Program. Charles had intended to join us, but was unable. He and Priscilla are here with us today. Tragically, Ben is not: he suffered an untimely death last March. Also, by phone or email I have shared our experiences with two new Estonia-bound Fulbrighters, one about to complete her spring semester assignment, who from her many emails appears to have had as wonderful an experience as I had, and another going there next year. Also, in March I received a Fulbright Outreach Lecturing Fund (OLF) grant to bring to campus a Visiting Czech Scholar for three days to lecture on his country’s politics.

Before the Riga conference we made a return trip to Tartu. There we met for lunch or dinner with Vello Pettai and Rein Taagepera, and have exchanged and commented on each other’s drafts of papers. It was a privilege being able to read Taagepera’s *Estonian Politics. 100 Years*³ ahead of publication. Also, periodically my wife and I contact by text or telephone Father Miguel, pastor of Tartu’s only Catholic Church, whom we also saw in that visit. After the conference, as we waited in line to check our bags at the Riga airport, a young woman approached me to say hello and, lo and behold, it was one of the graduate students I had had in class the previous year! She

³ Rein Taagepera, *Estonian Politics. 100 Years* (The Government Office of the Republic of Estonia and Post Factum, Eesti Meedia, AS, 2017).

had graduated and was on her way back to Tbilisi. She said it was cheaper to take a bus to Riga from Tartu and then fly home from Riga.

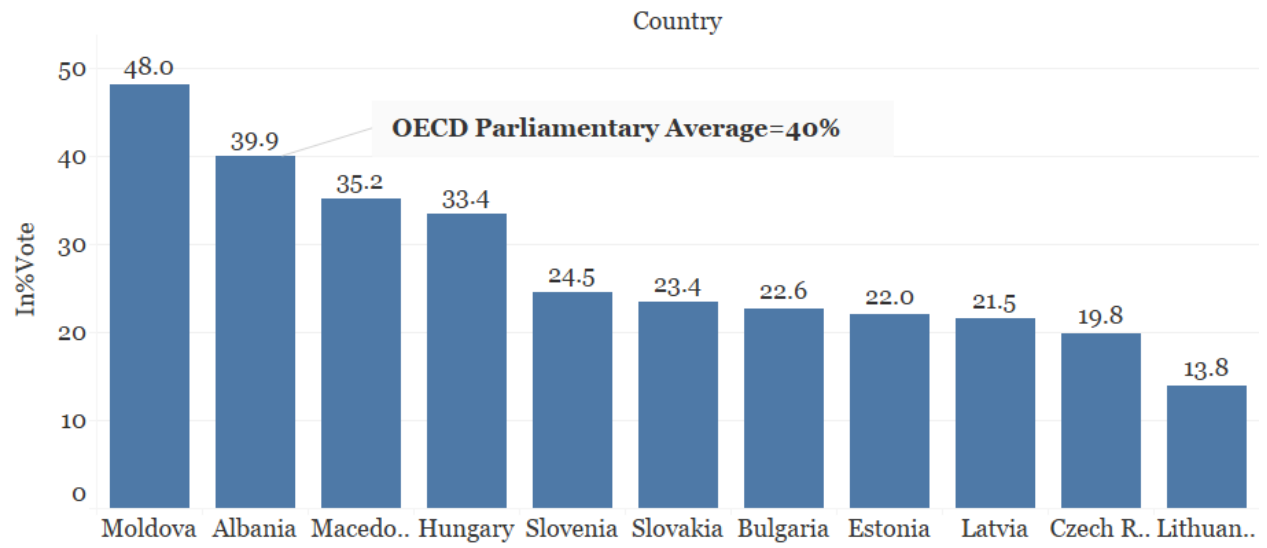
Finally, in my own study of elections around the world (938 elections to date), I measure a number of electoral outcomes, including the prime minister party's vote (Inc.Vote), the reelection rate (Outcome), and the number of consecutive terms and years in office (Reign). The charts below respectively show how the Baltic states fare on these variables compared with their post-communist peers within central, northern and eastern Europe (CENE). The averages for parliamentary democracies as a whole serve as a benchmark. Note that all the CENE countries (except Albania on Incumbent Vote) do less well than the overall parliamentary average. Note, as well, that except on incumbent vote Estonia places above the CENE median, and higher than its sister Baltic states, which are located near the bottom of the post-communist set. Just what accounts for the relatively better Estonian record is worth investigating.

V. Conclusion

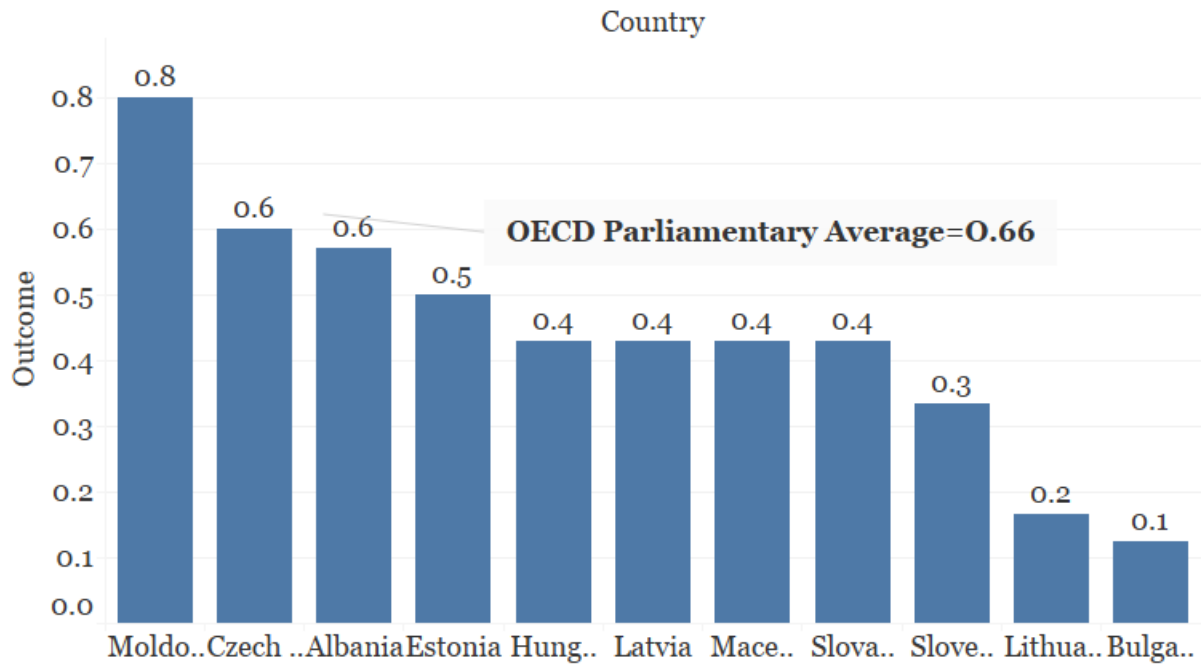
My Fulbright assignment was as idyllic as one could hope. Neither my wife nor I suffered from homesickness, culture shock, difficulties in adjusting or any of the downsides of a semester abroad. Probably this has to do with the quality of life and academia in Estonia, which is higher than in most of the CENE region. It is an ideal place for teaching, learning, and research.

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Parliamentary Elections in Post-communist Democracies



Parliamentary Elections in Post-communist Democracies



Reign (in Years) in Post-communist Democracies

