

EU STRUCTURAL FUNDS IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES – USEFUL OR HARMFUL?

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Abstract

The current article is focused on the role of financial assistance from the European Union in the budgets of the three Baltic countries. They all have seriously benefitted from the support of EU structural funds, which have reached close to five per cent of their GDP. Based on the case of higher education research funding, the article argues that the Baltic countries overlook the additionality principle of the European Union cohesion policy. Structural funds are replacing the Baltic countries' own funding. During the current EU programming period between 2014 and 2020 the exit strategies should be prepared by the governments of Baltic countries in order to be able to finance research with significantly lower support from EU cohesion funds. The precondition is that instead of a short-run view, in the coalition treaties of the Baltic governments, a long-term strategy for how to move toward knowledge intensive economies is also needed. The first and most urgent need is to improve the quality of use of the EU support funds by all three countries in order to support long-run productivity growth and increase the competitiveness of the Baltic countries.

Keywords: EU regional policy, EU structural funds, Baltic countries, development, assistance

JEL: R11, P21, P52, O2

1. Introduction

The reference system for the adoption and application of structural funds of the European Union for the period of 2014-2020 differs seriously from the previous periods. The prospects of further economic growth are modest, countries' public debt is high and growing, and the business environment is insecure. The current net beneficiary countries of the EU will probably face the reality of a rather drastic decline of EU support during the next budget period in 2021-2027. Consequently, these countries should agree on smaller EU funding in the near future. The idea to establish ceilings for the support of the Cohesion Fund has already been proposed during the debate about the budget of the European Union for 2014-2020.

Therefore, it is highly important from the view of the majority of the EU "new" member states to acknowledge that they have fallen into serious dependency on EU

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structural funds. In all three Baltic countries, EU support forms more than 10 per cent of their state budget revenues. Much worse is the situation if looking at the relative importance of EU support for public sector investments. Here European Union assistance covers approximately three quarters of all investments of the three Baltic countries.

The following article attempts to analyse how the dependency on external support from EU funding has developed and grown in the three Baltic countries. Using the example of the funding of research in the higher education of these countries, the article shows how funding from the EU has combined with the use of domestic tax revenues, creating a switch of funding between different sources and withdrawal of a country's own resources. The article also tries to give some general evaluations about the positive and negative effects of EU external assistance and suggests ways to eliminate this over-dependency on EU funding.

2. Structural Funds as the Tool to Achieve a Socio-economic Convergence of European Union Member States

Countries with widely different income levels have joined the European Union in the course of several enlargement rounds. It has raised the question how to reduce the gap in income levels of the countries belonging to the same integrated region. In other words, this is a question about the factors of economic convergence and how the joining with the European Union can speed up the convergence process. Convergence is a process that could be analysed from different angles (Barro, Sala-i-Martin 1992). Real convergence describes the convergence of income levels, nominal convergence reflects the convergence of price levels and institutional convergence means the harmonisation of legislation and other formal institutional setup (Islam 2003). In addition, one can also speak about the convergence of business cycles, consumer behaviour and social stratification, etc. (Varblane, Vahter 2006).

In the preamble of the Treaty of Rome, the founding document of the EU, the member states were given the obligation to reduce the differences existing between the various regions and the "backwardness" of the less favoured regions (Manzella, Mendez 2009). The European Social Fund as the first structural fund was also established by the Treaty of Rome in 1957, with the aim to improve employment opportunities for workers in the internal market and contribute to raising the standard of living. (Kelber 2010). The next step was based on the initiative of Italy and Britain to set up the Regional Development Fund (RDF) in 1973. It was still a relatively small unit as the total agreed budget for the RDF was only 5% of the Community budget (Manzella, Mendez 2009)

The new era of regional policy started with the ratification of the European Single Act in 1986. It marked the process of the creation of the free internal market of the EU. Another reason for the regional policy reform was the accession to the EU of several poorer countries – Greece (1981), Spain and Portugal (1986). Under

condition of opening up their economies to the competition they needed, the regional funding instrument helped them to compete and converge their income levels with the European average level. The cohesion policy was designed to offset the burden of the single market for the Southern countries and other less-favoured regions. For these purposes, in 1994 the Cohesion Fund was created with the aim to encourage economic convergence between member states of the EU.

Since the reform of the EU Structural Funds in the late 1980s, four main principles were established to underpin policy implementation, which continue to constitute its cornerstones: concentration, programming, partnership and additionality (Barry 2003). For further discussion about the implementation of EU support by the three Baltic countries, the additionality principle is important, meaning that the Cohesion Policy aims at complementing rather than substituting national policies for regional development implemented by beneficiary Member States by means of their national resources. This means that the structural funds supplement but do not replace member states' own structural expenditures. (European Commission 2015). Hence the cohesion funds are a supplementary scheme, which is of a temporary nature. This money should be considered by governments as temporary support in order to encourage the convergence process and should not be used in order to replace financing of the main activities of the member states by their own funds.

3. Comparative Position of the Baltic Countries among other Central and East European Members of the EU by EU Support

Foreign financial assistance sources of the Baltic countries can be divided into three groups. The first group of sources is the European Union structural funds, which have three sub-funds: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund (CF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). The second group of support funding consists of the European Union's agricultural policy funds: the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) as well the European Fisheries Fund (EFF). A third group of smaller-scale aid programs are mainly bi-lateral funds from Norway and Switzerland. In monetary terms, the first support group of sources provides around two-thirds, the second group of funding one-third and the third group of funding only 1-2 per cent of all foreign support received by the Baltic countries.

In absolute terms the role of the three Baltic countries from the structural funds of the European Union is rather small. Table 1 shows the distribution of funds from EU structural funds between the CEE member states of the EU during the two periods of 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 in billions of euros (based on data from Erste 2014). By far the largest recipient of foreign aid is Poland with 77.6 billion for the current period. The smallest recipient is Slovenia with 3.1 billion. The three Baltic countries together received 14.7 billion between 2007-2013 and 14.9 billion in the current period. This amount forms around 9 per cent of the total EU structural funds allocated to the CEE countries. The allocations to the Baltic countries remain largely

the same during the new funding period; only Estonia will get 5.9% more than in the previous period.

Table 1. Planned allocation of EU structural funds for the Central and Eastern European (CEE) members of EU during two programming periods between 2007-2020

	Planned allocation of the EU structural funds		Difference between 2014-2020 and 2007-2013 in	
	2007-2013	2014-2020	absolute terms (billions)	relative terms (%)
Estonia	3,4	3,6	0,2	5,9
Lithuania	6,8	6,8	0	0,0
Poland	67,2	77,6	10,4	15,5
Latvia	4,5	4,5	0	0,0
Slovenia	4,1	3,1	-1,0	-24,4
Hungary	24,9	21,9	-3,0	-12,0
Slovakia	11,5	14,0	2,5	21,7
Czech Rep	26,5	22,0	-4,5	-17,0
Bulgaria	6,7	7,6	0,9	13,4
Romania	19,1	23,0	3,9	20,4
Total CEE	174,7	184,1	9,4	5,4

Source: Calculations from Erste 2014

In order to get a better idea about the importance of EU structural funds the relative indicators of all new member states of the EU are presented in Figure 1. The left-hand column shows in euros per capita EU structural funds and the right-hand column shows them together with national co- and self-financing. Estonia is ranked as the biggest beneficiary from EU structural funds with the direct support of 2,540 euros per capita from the EU in the period between 2007 and 2013. The other two Baltic countries were also above the average support level for the Central and Eastern European members of the EU.

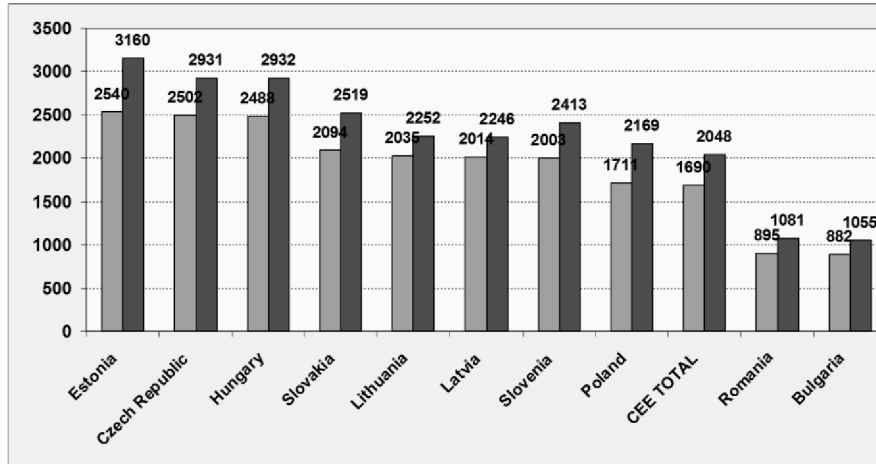


Figure 1. The European Union's Structural Funds (ERDF, CF, ESF) for the new Member States in 2007-2013 per capita in euros (left-hand - support from the EU budget, right-hand – together with the requested national co-financing).
Source: Calculated using data from KPMG 2013

A broader view of the financial contribution the Baltic countries received from the EU is described in Figure 2. This figure provides the net contribution from the EU to all EU members relative to their gross national income. Hence it shows the financial position of countries within the EU common budget. Countries with positive figures are those which receive more from EU structural and agricultural funds than they themselves pay into the EU budget. Countries with negative figures are net payers who finance the net beneficiaries. The data in Figure 2 shows that the three Baltic countries were the biggest beneficiaries from the EU budget in 2012 among all EU member states. Estonia's (EE) net income was 4.84% of its GDP, followed by Lithuania (LT) 4.82% and Latvia (LV) 4.29%. Therefore, for the Baltic countries the financial assistance from EU structural funds has become a major stimulus similar to the Marshall Plan for Western Europe after World War II.

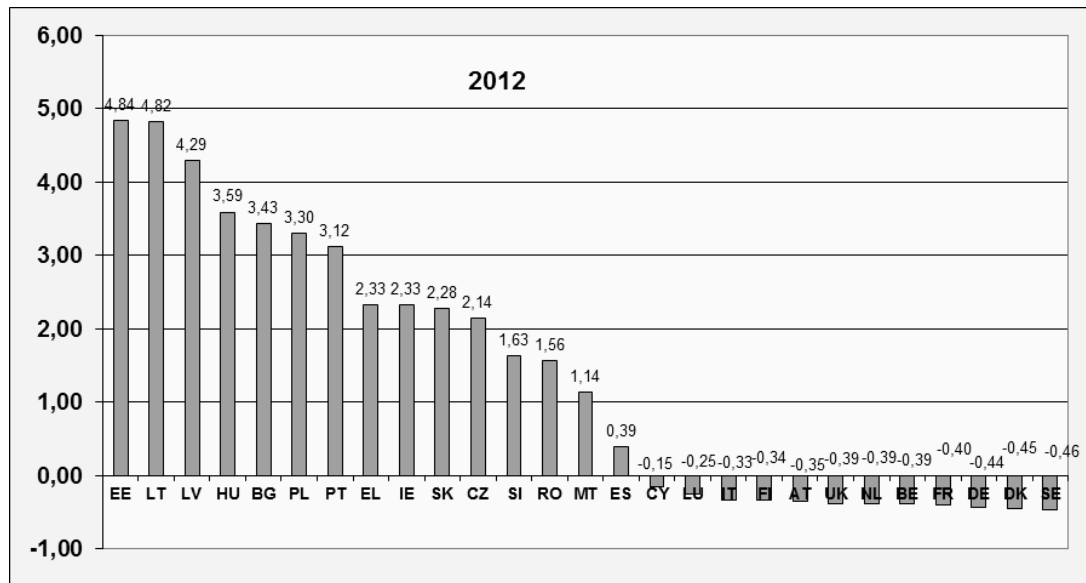


Figure 2. Net contribution from EU structural funds to EU member states in 2012 (in per cent from GDP) Negative figure denotes net payer, positive net beneficiary.

Source: Calculations from the EU financial report dataset 2016

Abbreviations used: EE – Estonia, LT – Lithuania, LV – Latvia, HU – Hungary, BG – Bulgaria, PL – Poland, PT – Portugal, EL – Greece, IE – Ireland, SK – Slovakia, CZ – Czech Rep., SI – Slovenia, RO – Romania, MT – Malta, ES – Spain, CY – Cyprus, LU – Luxembourg, IT – Italy, FI – Finland, AT – Austria, UK – United Kingdom, NL – Netherlands, BE – Belgium, FR – France, DE – Germany, DK – Denmark, SE – Sweden

4. The Growing Dependency of the Baltic Countries on EU Support

The dependency on financial assistance from EU structural funds of the Baltic countries has evolved over time. The first foreign aid was received in 1991, but significant growth in the volume of foreign support has been seen only since the year 1999, when the European Union launched for the EU candidate countries three pre-accession programs: PHARE (called Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring Their Economies, but it spread further for all accession countries), ISPA (Structural Pre-Accession Instrument) and SAPARD (Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development). In order to illustrate the growth of the role of EU funding for Estonia in the period between 2000 and 2013, Figure 3 was created, which shows the relative net contribution from the EU to the Estonian GDP in percentage. The trends for Latvia and Lithuania are similar, but due to the longer time series for the early 2000s, Estonian data are used.

In a broader sense, three periods could be identified in the formation of dependency from the EU funding of Estonia. During the first period between 2000 and 2003 the dependence on external funds was very small, just 0.5 per cent of the Estonian GDP (see Figure 3). The second phase began in 2004 and lasted until 2008, when the average annual payments from EU funds amounted to around 1.5 per cent of GDP. This was a period of rapid economic growth in all Baltic countries, which was accompanied with the very rapid growth of tax revenues, making the role of foreign funds relatively moderate. The third phase of dependency started in 2009 and continues up to date, with average annual EU net payments being around five per cent of the Estonian GDP.

This is a much higher dependency level compared with the previous periods. All Baltic countries have seriously benefitted from the support of EU structural funds. The recent economic crisis has had a profound impact on the budgets of all Central and Eastern European countries (European Commission, 2014, p. xv). But the rapid acceleration of the use of EU structural funds played stabilizing role and allowed, for example, Estonia to go through the economic crisis without increasing public sector debts. The reduction of Estonian tax revenues by 400 million euros in 2009 was covered by the increasing use of structural funds in the same amount.

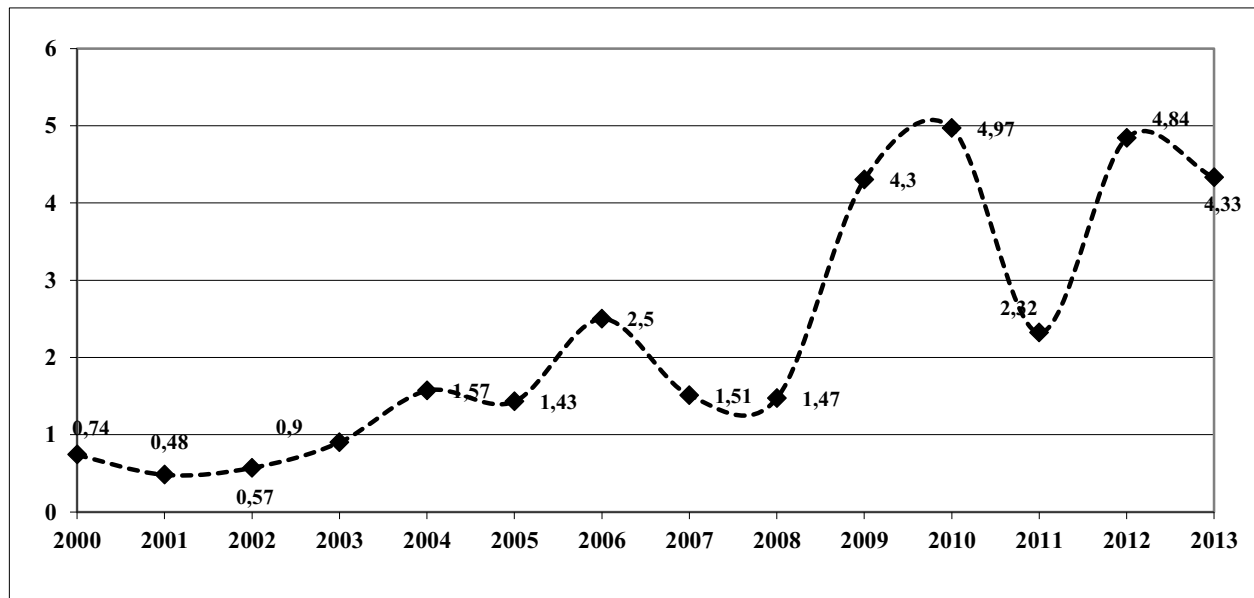


Figure 3. The net contribution from the European Union budget as a percentage of the Estonia's GDP (the European Union, from the budget-paid amounts divided by the GDP).
 Source: Calculations using data from the EU financial report dataset 2016

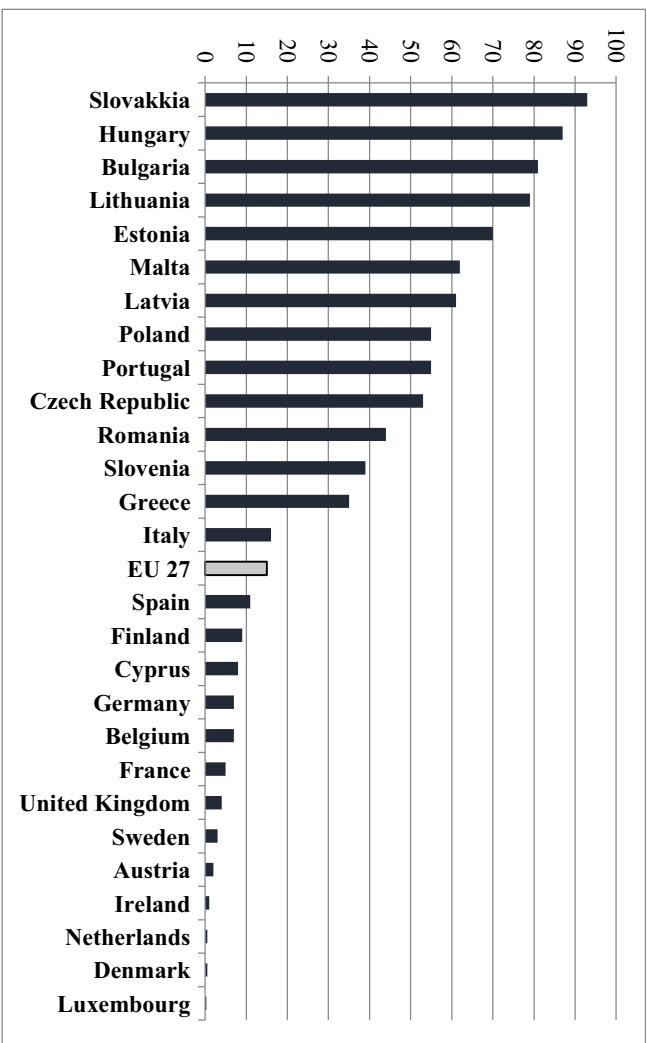


Figure 4. Structural funds and national co-financing as % of total public investment (average 2010-2012).
 Source: European Commission 2013: 4

But the most important change for the Baltic countries has been that EU cohesion policy funds became the major source of public investment. As the structural funds of the EU can be used in the different areas of development, such as education, the labour market, research and development, the information society, the environment, transportation, and regional and local development, large areas of the public sector investments in the Baltic countries are “eligible”. Gradually the funding from EU cohesion funds has replaced the funding from the countries’ own tax revenues of the three Baltic countries. The Estonian business support schemes, for example, are financed 95 per cent by European Union funded subsidies. Figure 4 shows the overall picture – the relative importance of the structural funds and national co-financing as a per cent of the total public investment in all EU members. It reveals that between 2010 and 2012 the share of EU funds was 79% of Lithuanian, 70% of Estonian and 61% of all Latvian public sector investments (European Commission, 2013). Without EU support the public investment in the Baltic countries would have been almost non-existent, especially during these years of economic crisis.

5. Funding of Research and Development for Higher Education as an Example of the Baltic Countries’ Growing Overreliance on EU Support

In the previous section, how the relative importance of EU structural funds in the total governmental investments of the Baltic countries has grown was shown. In the following section the case of the funding of research and development for higher education in the three Baltic countries will be examined in a more detailed way.

Between 2008 and 2014 the funding of research and development in Estonia almost doubled in nominal terms from 80 to 150 million euros per year. But the whole growth occurred due to EU structural funds, which share from the total funding increased from 12% in 2008 up to 54% in 2014. If also considering the requested co-funding, the share of EU funding reached up to 59% of the total funding. This means that the relative importance of EU funds increased 5 times. In Figure 5 the trend of freezing research funding from the Estonian tax revenues and the growth of EU funding (denoted as foreign on Figure 5), which mainly has been channelled into the creation of the modern research infrastructure, is clearly visible. The funding from Estonian tax revenues was mainly used for the funding of institutional and personal grants, i.e. mainly for the salaries of researchers. This part of funding has remained virtually unchanged since 2008. As the cumulative consumer price index growth between 2008 and 2014 was 28.6%, this means that in real terms research funding used for the remuneration of researchers from the state budget decreased accordingly.

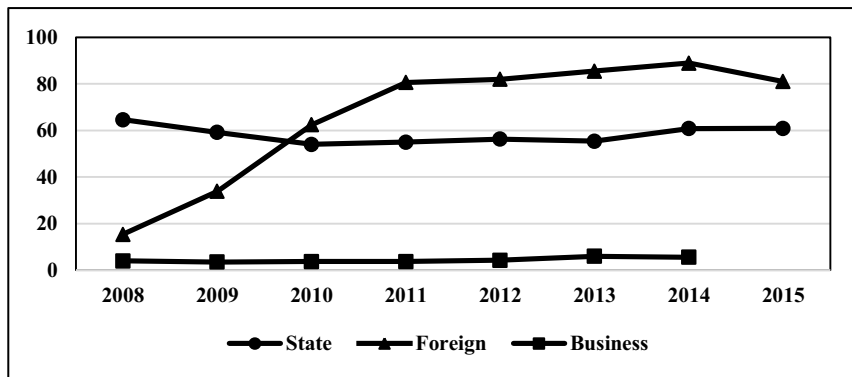


Figure 5. Funding of research and development expenditures of Estonian higher education 2008-2015 by sources (mill. EUR).
Sources: Calculations from dataset of the Statistics Estonia 2016 and Estonian Research Agency 2016

The dynamics of the funding of research and development for higher education in Latvia takes an even more drastic view. The total amount of funding was in 2014 around 65 million euros, which is similar to 2008, the best year of research funding before the economic crisis started. But contrary to Estonia, the funding of research from Latvia's own tax revenues was not frozen, but instead heavily reduced during the first years of the economic crisis (see the period between 2008 and 2010 in Figure 6). This means that pressure on the reduction of wages of researchers in the Latvian higher education system was much more severe than in Estonia.

Summarizing the trends in Latvia one could observe the strategy of replacement of the reduction of the country's own state budget with funding from EU sources. But due to the end of the financial period of 2007-2013 the funding opportunities from EU funds dried up and therefore the contributions of Latvia's own tax revenues and EU structural funds equalized by 2014.

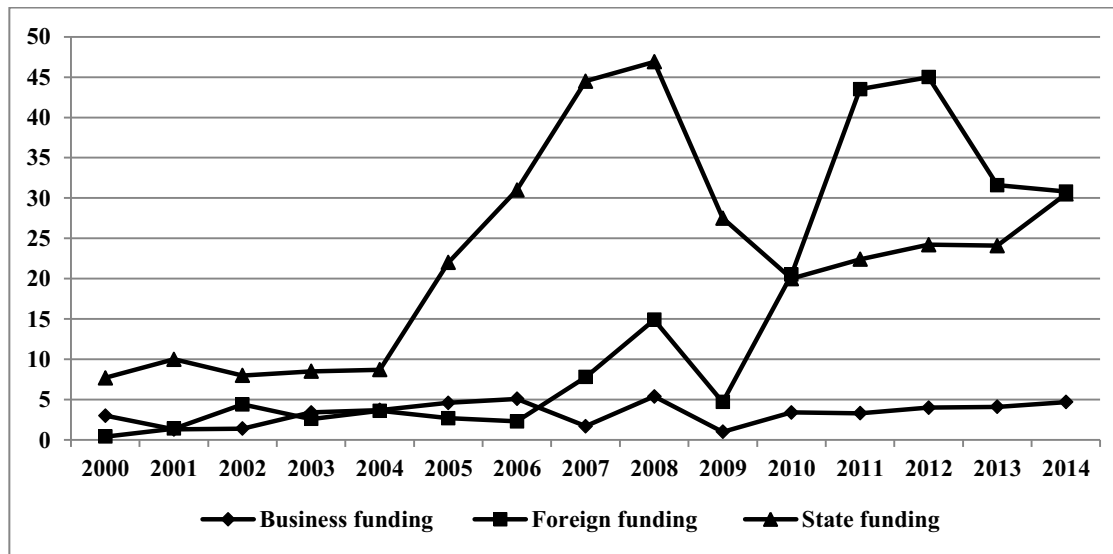


Figure 6. Funding of research and development expenditures of Latvian higher education 2000-2014 by sources (mill. EUR).
 Source: Calculations from dataset of the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia 2015

The case of Lithuanian funding of research and development for higher education is located somewhat between Estonia and Latvia. Between 2008 and 2014 the total funding in Lithuania has increased from 135 to 200 million euros or nearly 1.5 times. Similarly to Latvia and Estonia, the rapid growth of EU structural funds can be observed from 10 to 80 million per year (Fig.7). But funding from Lithuania's own tax revenues, which reduced during the crisis period, was almost restored by 2014.

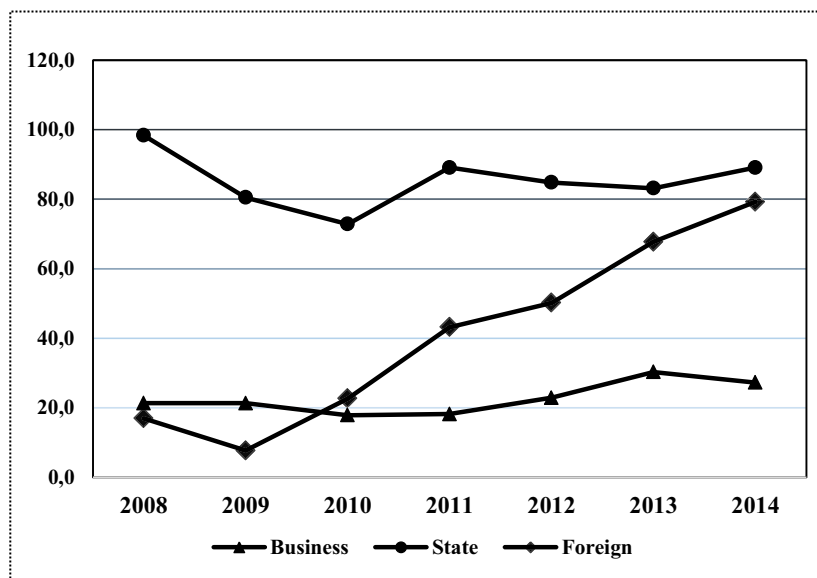


Figure 7. Funding of research and development expenditures of Lithuanian higher education 2000-2015 by sources (mill. EUR).
Source: calculations from dataset of the Statistics Lithuania 2015

In conclusion, one could find many similarities between trends of funding research and development for higher education in these countries. The results of the case of higher education could also be extended to other fields which have been eligible for EU support. Throughout this period all three Baltic countries have shifted the funding of different strategically important expenditures such as research and development, education and infrastructure within their state budget from their collected tax revenues to EU support. This action raises the question whether it is a sustainable approach and shows the necessity of complex decisions to be taken in the future if European Union funding from structural funds is eventually reduced.

6. What are the Potential Hazards Associated with Over-dependency on External Funding?

The rapid growth of the use of foreign funding in recent years has led to a number of problems. The most important of these is related to the perception of EU support as external funding, which is treated as alien or so-called euro money that comes from elsewhere and by which the most important factor is the use itself, not effective use (Varblane 2014).

For applicants of EU structural funds, it is not always clear that this is similar tax revenue from various taxes collected in other EU countries and transferred through the European Union budget to the Baltic countries. In the public consciousness all benefits of EU membership are limited to the funds coming from the EU. The fetish of absorption is widespread: we have to spend it all and quickly in order to show an excellent absorption rate. The Ministry of Finance of Estonia reports on a monthly basis the rate of absorption of EU structural funds by different ministries.

The majority of EU structural funds also needs local self-financing or co-financing. Thus, when foreign aid-funded development projects in the Baltic countries are not strategically well targeted, a considerable amount of co-financing could be misused from the local state budgets. The existence of this phenomenon stresses how important it is to keep in mind strategic targets by deciding how to use EU structural funds.

As already shown above, the majority of EU structural funds are used in order to finance public sector investments. During the last decade, an enormous amount of infrastructure was created, which maintenance and renovation should be already financed from the budgets of the three Baltic countries themselves. This growing burden of funding necessity has to be seriously addressed by governments after the 2014-2020 programming period.

The next problem is the need to take into account that the application for external assistance and the use of reporting and monitoring are related to the large, well-trained workforce in the public sector. It is not merely a matter of implementing entities, but the business sector problem as well in the management of support schemes for the project writers and performers. There is no overview of how many people are involved in the implementation and use of EU funds in the Baltics. But preliminary observation shows that in Estonia 405 employees work in Enterprise Estonia, which is responsible for business support measures; 180 employees in SA Innove and 126 in SA Archimedes, both which deal with educational and research programs; 62 employees in the Estonian Research Council; and 383 employees in the Agricultural Registers, etc. According to the Ministry of Finance, the average wage of employees in all institutions administrating EU structural funds was 1.7 times the average wage of Estonia (Varblane 2014). Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, being small countries, have a limited supply of skilled labour and therefore it is

highly important to simplify the application of and reporting about the use of EU funds with the aim to reduce administrative bureaucracy and labour.

The growing and increasingly diverse support schemes give false signals to private firms that this business model could be viable without market approval and relying mainly on ongoing EU support. Loan consultants of commercial banks estimate that an increasing number of applicants whose business plan's key part is the European Union's support has come on the market. If this support falls off, the company is not able to progress any more.

Finally, external financial assistance from the EU will allow the government to alleviate the current situation and to delay the changes in policy making. Essentially, governments could avoid badly needed reforms as financial support from the EU helps to temporarily improve budget revenues and allow the status quo to be maintained. For example, Estonian regional reform with the aim to merge the tiny local municipalities into larger units has not happened within the last two decades. Another example is the long-term development of the tax debate of Estonia. The ruling coalition used the phrase "do not play with taxes", refusing to change anything. But they could use this slogan only under conditions where around 12% of the state budget revenues comes as assistance from the EU, which helps to keep the budget balanced. As soon as these receipts disappear, changes in the tax system are inevitable and dispute must be opened.

7. Ways of Exit – How to Survive with Declining EU Funding

The first step is to acknowledge that a very high dependency on European Union funding is a problem in all three Baltic countries. It has taken the form of addiction. The Baltic countries need to elaborate an exit plan which shows how to cope with the situation where EU funding is gradually reducing and the governments of all the Baltic countries cannot rely on 10-12 percent of their annual revenues of the state budget being EU support any longer.

The Baltic countries should already reflect on the post-2020 period, when the Cohesion policy funding for most of the CEECs will be much smaller. The desirable strategic goals of social and economic development and the sources of countries' own funding for realisation of these goals must be equalised

The EU funding period of 2014-2020 will be with high probability the period with the biggest amount of support for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The most urgent need is to improve the quality of use of EU support funds by all three countries. They need to position the support funds for areas which support long-run productivity growth and increase the competitiveness of their economies. The precondition is that, instead of a short-run view in the coalition treaties of the Baltic governments, the long-term strategy for how to move toward knowledge-intensive economies is needed. It is not sufficient to mention the building of knowledge-intensive economies as the goal; the key elements needed for that must also be

financed. Human capital creation, research and development activities and innovation must be among the priorities of the budgets.

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EUROOPA LIIDU STRUKTUURIFONDID BALTI RIIKIDES – KASULIKUD VÕI KAHJULIKUD?¹

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Tartu Ülikool

Artikkel keskendub Euroopa Liidu eelarvest makstavate toetuste rollile kolmes Balti riigis. Euroopa Liidu toetuste suhteline tähtsus on kõigis Baltimaades väga suur, ulatudes kuni viie protsendini sisemajanduse koguproduktist. Käesolev artikkel näitab, kuidas järk-järgult on suurenenud Balti riikide sõltuvus Euroopa Liidu toetusrahadest. Detailsemalt näidatakse teaduse rahastamise näitel, kuidas Baltimaad asendasid oma maksutuludest teaduse rahastamise Euroopa Liidu toetusrahadega. Selline nihe on toimunud ka mitmetes teistes valdkondades – näiteks ettevõtluse toetamisel või kogu avaliku sektori investeeringutel infrastruktuuri. Artiklis rõhutatakse, et kolme Balti riigi valitsused peaks tegelema praegu Euroopa Liidu toetusrahadest sõltuvusest väljumise strateegia koostamisega. Vastasel korral toimub Euroopa Liidu järgmisel rahastamisperioodil 2021-2027 Balti riikides seni tõe- fondidest rahastatud valdkondades järsk rahastamise vähenemine, mis aeglustub teadmuspõhise majanduse arengut neis riikides.

1. Sissejuhatus

Euroopa Liidu struktuurifondide kasutamise taustsüsteem aastateks 2014-2020 erineb oluliselt eelmiste perioodide omast. Väljavaateid edasiseks majanduskasvuks on tagasihoidlikud, riigivõlg riikides on suur ja kasvab, ärikeskkond ebaturvaline ja suur segadus seoses Suurbritannia võimaliku lahkumisega Euroopa Liidust. Kõik see suurendab tõenäosust, et praegused Euroopa Liidu eelarvest toetusi saavad riigid seisavad silmitsi tegelikkusega, kus toimub järsk langus toetustes järgmisel eelarveperioodil aastatel 2021-2027. Seega peaksid need riigid kokku leppima, kuidas tegutseda väiksema EL-i rahastamisega lähitulevikus. Seetõttu on väga oluline, et enamik Euroopa Liidu „uusi“ liikmesriike tunnistaksid, et nad on sattunud tõsise sõltuvuse Euroopa Liidu struktuurifondidest. Kõigis kolmes Balti riigis on ELi toetuste osakaal suurem kui 10 protsenti nende riigieelarve tuludest. Palju hullem on olukord, kui vaadata Euroopa Liidu toetuste suhtelist tähtsust avaliku sektori investeeringutest. Siin hõlmab Euroopa Liidu abi ligikaudu kolm neljandikku kõigist investeeringutest kolmes Balti riigis.

Artikkel näitab Euroopa Liidu toetustest sõltuvuse kasvu kolmes Balti riigis. Kõrg- haridussektori teadus- ja arendustegevuse rahastamist kasutatakse näitamaks, kuidas oma maksutuludest rahastamine asendatakse Euroopa Liidu toetusrahadega. Artikkel üritab anda ka mõned üldised hinnangud Euroopa Liidu toetusrahades positiivsetest

¹ Artikkel „EU Structural Funds in the Baltic Countries – Useful or Hamful?“ asub publikatsiooni CD-l.

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ja negatiivsetest mõjudest Balti riikidele ning annab soovitusi, kuidas vähendada sõltuvust EL toetusrahadest.

2. Baltimaade võrdlev positsioon Euroopa Liidu toetuste osa Kesk- ja Ida-Euroopa riikide hulgas

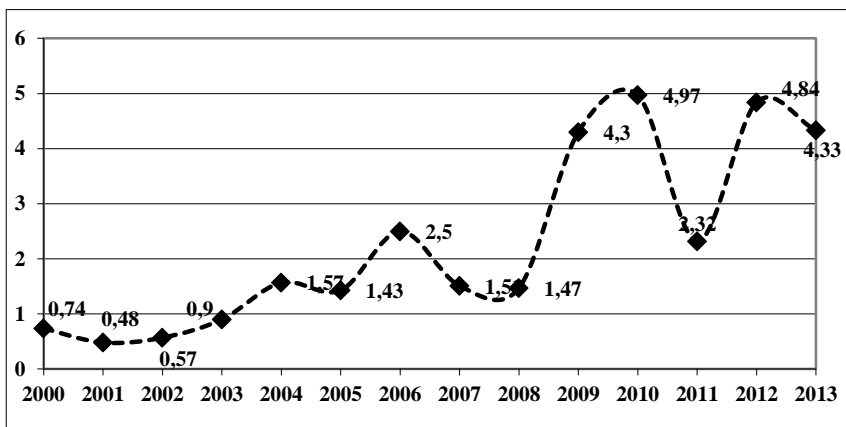
Absoluutarvudes on Balti riikide osakaal Euroopa Liidu tõukefondidest üsna väike. Ülekaalukalt suurim välisabi saaja praegusel perioodil 2014-2020 aastani on Poola 77,6 miljardi euroga. Väikseim toetuste saaja saab olema Sloveenia 3,1 miljardiga. Kolm Balti riiki said ajavahemikus 2007-2013 kokku 14,7 miljardit eurot ja käesoleval perioodil 14,9 miljardit. See moodustab umbes 9 protsenti kogu Euroopa Liidu struktuurifondidest, mis eraldati Kesk ja Ida Euroopa liikmesriikidele. Hoopis teine on Baltimaade positsioon kui arvutada välja Euroopa Liidu struktuurifondide suhtelised näitajad eurodes ühe elaniku kohta. Eelmisel perioodil sai Eesti ühe elaniku kohta 2540 eurot, millega oli kõige rohkem tõukefondidest kasu saanud riik Euroopa Liidus. Ka Läti ja Leedu olid keskmisest kõrgema toetuste tasemega elaniku kohta Kesk- ja Ida-Euroopa riikide hulgas.

Teine võimalus hinnata Euroopa Liidu rahalise toetuse olulisusest Balti riikidele pakub EL toetuste suhe rahvamajanduse kogutoodangusse. Kui võtta kokku nii EL tõukefondide kui ka põllumajanduspoliitika vahendid, siis kolm Balti riiki on suurimad kasusaajad ELi eelarvest. Näiteks 2012. aastal oli Eesti netosissetulek EL fondidest 4,84% SKP-st, järgnesid Leedu 4,82% ja Läti 4,29%. Seega Balti riikide jaoks on Euroopa Liidu eelarvest saadav tugi kujunenud suureks stiimuliks, mis on üsna sarnane Marshalli plaanile Lääne-Euroopas pärast II maailmasõda.

Baltimaade sõltuvus Euroopa Liidu toetusfondidest on aja jooksul kasvanud. Esimene välisabi jõudis nendesse riikidesse juba 1991. aastal, kuid märkimisväärsel tasemel toetusrahad jõudsid Balti riikidesse alates 1999. aastast, mil Euroopa Liit käivitas kandidaatriikidele kolm ühinemiseelse abi programmi PHARE (restruktureerimise fond), ISPA (infrastruktuuride fond) ja SAPARD (liitumiseelne programm põllumajanduse ja maaelu arenguks). Toetuste kasvu illustreerimiseks on lisatud joonis 1, mis näitab Euroopa Liidust saadud toetuste suhet Eesti sisemajanduse koguprodukti aastatel 2000 kuni 2013. Trendid Lätis ja Leedus on suhteliselt sarnased. Üldistatuna võib välja tuua kolm etappi toetussõltuvuse väljakujunemises. Esimesel perioodil 2000-2003 on sõltuvust välisvahenditest väga väike - vaid 0,5 protsenti Eesti SKP-st. Teine etapp algas 2004. aastal ja kestis kuni 2008. aastani, mil Euroopa Liidu toetused moodustasid umbes 1,5 protsenti SKT-st. Sel ajal toimus kiire majanduskasv kõigis Balti riikides, millega kaasnes väga kiire maksutulude kasv ja toetusrahade osakaal oli suhteliselt tagasihoidlik. Kolmas etapp algas majanduskriisi käigus alates 2009. aastast ja jätkub tänini, mille puhul keskmine aastane Euroopa Liidu toetuste maht on viis protsenti Eesti SKP-st. See on palju suurem sõltuvus tase võrreldes eelmiste perioodidega.

Sama kehtib ka Läti ja Leedu kohta, kes samuti on saanud tõsiselt rahalist tuge Euroopa Liidu tõukefondidest. Eriline abi oli neist 2008. a. majanduskriisis. Näiteks Eesti sai sel perioodil õiguse kasutada kiirendatud korras tõukefonde ja see

võimaldas läbida majanduskriisi tõstmata avaliku sektori võlakooamat. Kui 2009. aastal maksutulud vähenesid 400 miljoni euro võrra, siis samas mahus suurenes EL tõukefondide kasutamine.



Joonis 1. Euroopa Liidu eelarvest saadud puhastoetused (pärast Eesti poolsete maksete mahaarvamist) protsendina Eesti SKPst
Allikas: EL finantsraportite andmebaas

Kuid kõige olulisem muutus kõigis Balti riikide oli asjaolu, et Euroopa Liidu tõukefondide vahenditest sai peamine allikas riiklikele investeeringutele. Kuna tõukefondide kasutamine väga erinevates arenguvaldkondades nagu haridus, tööturg, teadus- ja arendustegevus, infoühiskond, keskkond, transport, regionaalne ja kohalik areng on „abikõlbulik“ siis tasapisi on Balti riikides asendatud rahastamine enda maksutuludest EL toetustega. Aastatel 2010 ja 2012 rahastati 79% Leedu, 70% Eesti ja 61% kogu Läti avaliku sektori investeeringutest Euroopa Liidu vahenditest.

3. Kõrgharidussektori teadus- ja arendustegevuse rahastamine Balti riikides kui näide rahastamisallikate vahetamisest

Artikli eelmises osas näidati, kuidas EL tõukefondide tähtsus Balti riikide avaliku sektori investeeringutes on kiiresti kasvanud. Järgnevalt käsitletakse põhjalikumalt kolme Balti riigi kõrgharidussektori teadus- ja arendustegevuse kulutuste rahastamist ja selle allikaid. Aastatel 2008 kuni 2014 Eesti kõrghariduse teadus- ja arendustegevuse rahastamine peaaegu kahekordistus (80lt 150 miljoni eurole aastas). Kuid kogu kasv tuli tänu EL tõukefondidele. Nende suhteline osakaal kogu Eesti kõrgharidussektori teadusrahastusest kasvas 12%lt 2008. aastal kuni 54% -ni 2014 a. Kui arvestada ka vajalikku kaasrahastamist, siis EL tõukefondide osa jõudis isegi 59% kogu rahastamisest. See tähendab, et EL poolse rahastuse suhteline tähtsus suurenes 5 korda. Samal ajal külmutati teadusuuringute rahastamine Eesti maksutuludest.

Lätis on kõrghariduse teadus- ja arendustegevuse rahastamise puhul veelgi drastilisem olukord. Rahastamise kogusumma oli 2014. aastal ligikaudu 65 miljonit eurot, mis on sarnane nagu see oli 2008. aastal. Kuid vastupidiselt Eestile pole Läti oma maksutuludest teaduse rahastamine külmutatud, vaid oluliselt vähendatud võrreldes majanduskriisi eelsele perioodile 2007.a. Lätis võis selgelt näha strateegiat asendada oma maksutuludest teaduse rahastamine Euroopa Liidu toetusrahadega.

Leedu kõrgharidussektori teadus- ja arendustegevuse rahastamine asub mõnevõrra Eesti ja Läti vahel. Aastatel 2008 kuni 2014 on Leedus teaduse rahastamine kasvanud 135-lt 200-le miljonile eurole ehk ligi 1,5 korda. Sarnaselt Eestile on selle kiire kasvu taga Euroopa Liidu tõukefondid. Ka Leedus vähendati oma maksutuludest teaduse rahastamist, kuid 2013-2014 aastal on märgata selle taastumist.

4. Euroopa Liidu toetusrahadest liigse sõltuvusega kaasnevad võimalikud ohud

Kiire Euroopa toetusrahade kasutamise kasv on viimastel aastatel toonud kaasa mitmeid probleeme. Kõige tähtsam neist on seotud Euroopa Liidu toetusrahadesse suhtumisega, sest neid käsitletakse siiani kui võõrast ehk „euro“ raha, mis tuleb mujalt ja mille puhul on peamine õigeaegne mitte niivõrd tõhus kasutamine (Varblane 2014).

Peamine on suuta Euroopa toetusrahad õigel ajal välja maksta ja kõigi Balti riikide rahandusministeeriumid reastavad ministeeriume just selle alusel, kui kiiresti on nad suutnud ettenähtud Euroopa Liidu toetusrahad ära kulutada.

Enamik Euroopa Liidu tõukefonde vajab ka kohalikku omafinantseeringut ja kaasfinantseeringut. Seega juhul kui välisabiga rahastatud arendusprojektid Balti riikides ei ole strateegiliselt hästi suunatud kaotatakse ka märkimisväärsel hulgal kaasrahastamisele kulutatud vahendeid.

Suur osa Euroopa Liidu toetusfondide rahadest on sunnitud avaliku sektori investeringutesse, mille abil on viimase kümnendi jooksul loodud tohutu infrastruktuur. Kuid see vajab edaspidi hooldust ja renoveerimist, mis tuleb rahastada juba kolme Balti riigi eelarvetest ja oma maksutuludega. Selle infrastruktuuri säilitamisega kaasneva täiendava rahastamise teemaga on vaja kõigil Balti riikide valitsustel tõsiselt tegeleda juba nüüd, enne kui käesolev rahastamisperiood lõpeb.

Kolme väikese Balti riigi seisukohalt on järgmine probleem seotud vajadus kaasata suur hulk hästi koolitatud avaliku sektori tööjõudu Euroopa Liidu toetusrahade taotluste hindamise, kasutamise aruandluse ja järelevalvega. See ei ole pelgalt rakendusüksuste vaid ka äri sektori probleem, kes peavad taotlus- ja aruandlusprotsessi kaasama väga suure hulga tööjõudu. Seni puudub terviklik ülevaade, kui palju inimesi on kaasatud Euroopa Liidu toetusrahade rakendamise ja kasutamisega Baltikumis. Aga juba esialgne analüüs näitab, et Eestis on sellega seotud mitu tuhat inimest – näiteks Ettevõtluse Arendamise Sihtasutuses 405, Põllumajanduse

Registrite Ametis samuti 400, SA Innoves 180 ja SA Archimedes 138 töötajat jne. Vastavalt Eesti rahandusministeeriumi andmetele ületas Euroopa Liidu tõukefonde haldavate ametnike keskmine palk 1,7 korda Eesti keskmist (Varblane 2014). Eesti, Läti ja Leedu on väikeriikidena väga piiratud kvalifitseeritud tööjõu pakkumine ja seetõttu on väga oluline, et lihtsustada taotluste ja aruannete kohta ELi vahendite kasutamise kohta, mille eesmärk on vähendada halduskoormust ja vabastada tööjõudu.

Kasvavad ja üha mitmekesisemaks muutuvad Euroopa Liidu toetusrahad annavad vale signaali ka eraettevõtetele, et ärimudel võiks olla elujõuline ka ilma piisava müügivõimeta, tuginedes peamiselt praegusele Euroopa Liidu toetusele. Kommertsbankade laenukonsultantide hinnangul on turule tulnud järjest rohkem taotlejaid, kelle äriplaani peamine osa on Euroopa Liidu toetus. Kui see ära langeb, pole ettevõtte edu enam võimalik.

Lõpuks, Euroopa liidu poolne toetusraha võimaldab valitsustel leevendada praegust olukorda ja viivitada poliitiliste otsuste tegemisel. Sisuliselt valitsused võivad vältida hädasti vajalikke reforme, kuna Euroopa Liidu rahaline toetus aitab parandada ajutiselt eelarve tulubaasi ja võimaldab hoida *status quo*. Näiteks Eesti haldusreformiga, mille eesmärk oleks liita pisikesi omavalitsusi suuremateks üksusteks, ei juhtunud viimase kahe aastakümne jooksul midagi. Teine näide on pikaajaline maksude alase arutelu vältimine Eestis. Valitsuskooalitsioon kasutas valimiskampaanias loosungit „meie ei mängi maksudega“, keeldudes midagi muutmast. Aga sellist loosungit saab kasutada vaid oludes, kus 10-12% riigieelarve tuludest tuleb Euroopa Liidust, mis aitab hoida eelarve tasakaalus. Niipea kui need tulud kaovad on muudatused Balti riikide maksusüsteemides paratamatud ja seetõttu oleks just nüüd vaja vaidlustele uks avada.

5. Kuidas saada hakkama Euroopa Liidu toetusrahade vähenemise tingimustes?

Lahenduste leidmisel on esimene samm tunnistada, et praegune väga suur sõltuvus Euroopa Liidu rahastamisest on probleemiks kõigis kolmes Balti riigis. Hädavajalik on välja töötada Euroopa toetusrahadest väljumise kava, mis näitab, kuidas toime tulla, kui ELi vahendeid järk-järgult vähendatakse ja Balti riikide valitsused ei saa enam arvestada sellega, et 10-12 protsenti eelarvetuludest on Euroopa Liidu toetus. Euroopa Liidu poolne rahastamine saavutab perioodil 2014-2020 suure tõenäosusega oma maksimumi nii Eesti, Läti kui Leedu jaoks. Seega on praegu väga vaja kasutada toetusrahaid parimal viisil – paigutada toetusraha valdkondadesse, mis toetavad pikas perspektiivis tootlikkuse ja majanduse konkurentsivõime kasvu. Niisuguse käitumise eelduseks on kõigi Balti riikide suutlikkus saada üle koalitsioonivalitsuste lühiajalisest vaatest ning realiseerida pikaajalise visiooniga strateegia, kuidas liikuda teadmismahukama majanduse poole. See ei ole piisav, et vaid rääkida teadmismahukast majandusest kui abstraktsest eesmärgist, vaid ka eelarve prioriteediks peaks olema rahastada selle põhielemente – inimvara arendamist, teadus- ja arendustegevust ning innovatsiooni.