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CASE STUDY

UPDATE EUPopLink Country report - Estonia

[version 2; peer review: 3 approved]

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Abstract

This report examines the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism in Estonia, a country characterised by strong and long-standing support for European integration. Estonia's pro-European orientation has been shaped by the historical narrative of a "return to Europe," security concerns, and the close connection between EU membership and national identity. Despite this broad consensus, several political parties express Eurosceptic and populist tendencies. The analysis focuses on EKRE, Fatherland, the Estonian Centre Party, Together, and Right-wingers. Among them, EKRE emerges as the most prominent Eurosceptic-populist actor, combining nationalist and anti-establishment rhetoric with criticism of EU integration, particularly on sovereignty, migration, and climate policy. The findings show that Estonia remains relatively resilient to stronger Eurosceptic mobilisation, while EKRE maintains stable political support. Estonia thus represents a distinctive case of enduring pro-European consensus coexisting with a limited but persistent Eurosceptic opposition.

Keywords

Estonia, populism, euroscepticism, eurooptimism

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

I included both conceptualisations of populism and euroscepticism, along with a brief reflection on the CEE and the Estonian case. I decided to keep the conceptual overview brief to maintain the report's focus and compactness. Regarding the suggestions from REV2, I attempted to include all of them fully. As such, I refined the description of Estonia as a state that regained its sovereignty, added more detail to the delineation of the parties' euroscepticism and Aivo Peterson's activities, provided more nuance about EKRE's course, and clearly differentiated between Together and The Right-wingers. Taken together, I believe I have substantially enhanced the paper's style, making the document a dignified part of the report collection.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

1. Introduction

The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026).

Populism and Euroscepticism have become integral themes in scholarly debates on party politics and European integration. Borrowing the definition by Cas Mudde, populism can be understood as *"an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people"* (Mudde, 2014; 543). The inspection of Central and Eastern Europe through the lens of populism raised concerns about democratic backsliding in the region, and neither the Baltic states have become free of populist forces (Stanley, 2017). Similarly, this report utilises a broad understanding of Euroscepticism as an opposition to Europe, while it distinguishes between two strands of euroscepticism – soft euroscepticism, understood as qualified opposition to the EU (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002; cf. Flood, 2002), and hard euroscepticism, coined as a principled opposition to European integration (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2003, 6; cf. Flood, 2002). In light of the conceptualisation, it is worth noting that Central and Eastern Europe has been caught up in the rising tide of euroscepticism over the past two decades (Dunin-Wasowicz et al., 2023), whereas euroscepticism in the Baltic states has not reached the same level of significance (Balčytiene et al., 2025). Taken together, this report employs both concepts to investigate the Estonian case, which has strong pro-European ties yet, surprisingly, also has audible eurosceptic parties.

Estonia belongs among the pro-European countries in the European Union. For instance, 63% of the Estonian population feels "attached" to the European Union, compared with the EU average of 53% (Eurobarometer, 2025). According to national surveys, up to 78% of Estonian citizens support EU membership (Government Office of Estonia, 2025). As a country regained its independence following decades of Soviet occupation, in a geopolitically intricate world, Estonia was highly motivated to become a "good European". The narrative of "Return to Europe" was present in both elite discourse and societal sentiment since the 1980s (Lieven, 1994; Feldman, 2001), suggesting a broad consensus of European belonging in Estonian society. The motivations for joining the EU were multiple – rooted in values, existential anxieties, a sense of belonging, and economic imperatives. Even though the support for the EU accession was not unequivocal, the anti-EU forces remained limited (Austers and Bukovskis, 2017; Duvold et al., 2020; Lauristin, 1997; Petersoo, 2007). It is against this background that Estonia joined the EU with enthusiasm. Following accession, the sense of Europeanness became closely tied to the Estonian identity (Kirch and Kirch, 2006; Oskolkov, 2024; Petersoo, 2007). What is more, Estonia's attitude of responsibility and proactive engagement allowed it to leapfrog the image of a passive recipient and assume the role of an assertive member and a proactive contributor to EU policymaking (Putinaitė, 2024; Braghiroli, 2024).

Generally, the Estonian party system is relatively stable, underpinned by the long-term dominance of the Reform Party (Reformierakond), a liberal-right party founded in 1990, which led the party competition from the mid-1990s until the 2023 elections (Saarts, 2015; Politico, n.d.). However, perhaps surprisingly, some Estonian parties still exhibit traits of Euroscepticism and populism (inter alia, Vasilopoulou, 2009; Leruth et al., 2018). The most Eurosceptic party with populist hetoric, the Estonian Conservative People's Party, is a visible yet isolated actor within the Estonian political spectrum (Austers and Bukovskis, 2017). It is even more intriguing that this party has not been the only one of its kind in Estonian politics. The traditionally conservative Fatherland likewise expresses moderately Eurosceptic positions, primarily opposing further EU federalization and emphasizing national sovereignty, while the Centre Party displayed similar Eurosceptic tendencies only until 2016 (Jakobson, 2024; Valgerist, 2024). There are also newcomers to the Estonian party system – Together (Koos) and Right-wingers (Parempoolsed). Even though these parties do not exhibit full-fledged Eurosceptic/populist features, they complement the counterintuitive shape of the Estonian party system. Furthermore, these parties remain prominent despite increasing geopolitical threats (Politico, n.d.). It is against all odds that these parties can retain significant support in Estonian politics and thus deserve a close inspection of their discourse to

explain the peculiarity of Estonian party-based Euroscepticism. As such, this report illuminates the party organisation of the Estonian populists and links it to their anti-European discourse and implications in an in-depth yet comprehensible manner.

This report is structured into five sections. Following the introduction, the second section characterises the cases of the Estonian Conservative People's Party, Fatherland, Centre Party, Together and Right-wingers. It contextualises their ideologies, main political programme goals, and key leaders. The third section describes the positions of the analysed parties on the EU and Euro-populist traits. The fourth section discusses the implications of Estonian euroscepticism, and the fifth section concludes by outlining the main traits of the Estonian party-based euroscepticism and identifying possible implications worth further inquiry.

2. Populist political actors

This section consists of a description of the parties carrying both clear Eurosceptic and populist traits – right-wing leaning Estonian Conservative People's Party (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond*, hereafter referred to as 'EKRE'; member of the ECR), right-wing conservative Fatherland (*Isamaa*; EPP), and left-wing leaning Estonian Centre Party (*Eesti Keskerakond*; Renew) and two newly-established parties – Together (*Koos,* not represented in the EP) and Rightwingers (*Parempoolsed,* not represented in the EP).

2.1 EKRE

EKRE is a relatively new party in the Estonian party system, deriving from the merger of the Estonian People's Union and the Estonian Nationalist Movement. Established in 2012 and rising in the 2015 national elections, EKRE is a right-wing party that falls into the category of populist radical right parties or self-assessed national conservatives (Mudde, 2016, 7; Braghiroli and Petsinis, 2019; Kasekamp et al., 2019; Petsinis, 2019; cf. Saarts et al., 2021). As such, the party projects anti-Russian and anti-immigration stances, promotes traditional values, and expresses populist rhetoric. Furthermore, the party foregrounds anti-European sentiments underpinned by anti-liberal stances (Braghiroli and Petsinis, 2019; Kasekamp et al., 2019). One of the most visible figures in the party was Mart Helme, who led it from 2013 to 2020. He was known for his diplomatic service in Russia and was also distinguished for his radical discourse, becoming one of the key figures of the conservative right in Estonia. His son, successor and the current party leader, Martin Helme, follows a similar populist trajectory (Auers and Kasekamp, 2013; Saarts et al., 2021).

2.2 Fatherland

Founded in 2006 as a merger of two conservative parties, Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, Fatherland is a right-wing conservative party aligned with Christian values. As such, it stands for traditional values and sovereignty. Fatherland is not a full-fledged populist party, yet it does not spare from occasional leanings towards anti-elite rhetoric. It shows only a mild anti-European position, and these stances are mainly evident in the party's campaigns to the European Parliament, where it leads soft-Eurosceptic campaigns (Ehin, Saarts and Jakobson, 2020). As such, the party amplifies the need to protect national interests and opposes federalisation.

2.3 Estonian Centre Party

The Centre Party was founded in 1991 as a successor of the Popular Front of Estonia. It took part in the national elections for the first time in 1995, attained third position and remained an established party ever since. Drawing on the centre-left and populism, the party represents the interests of socially vulnerable groups. The party has also been distinctively popular among the Russian minority and non-ethnic Estonian voters. Support from ethnic Russians for the Estonian Centre Party has been in decline since 2016, and further so in 2019, when the party surprisingly formed a governing coalition with the EKRE party, which has traditionally held anti-Russian and nativist views. However, the party remains the most popular among both social and ethnic minorities (Ehin and Talving, 2019; Jakobson and Kasekamp, 2023). Under the leadership of Edgar Savisaar and his populist rhetoric foregrounding national sovereignty underpinned by moderate anti-European sentiment, the Centre Party was perceived as pro-Russian during 1991–2016 (Austers and Bukovskis, 2017; Jakobson and Kasekamp, 2023).

2.4 Together

Established in 2022, Together is a new party on the Estonian political spectrum. It has not become relevant in the national sphere, as it did not breach the 5% threshold in the 2023 national elections. However, it is an interesting case of a one-person party. Anchored on the left wing of the spectrum, Together's discourse conveys pro-Russian connotations. The leader and the only candidate to the EP in 2024, Aivo Peterson, foregrounded the need for strong international cooperation and the urgency of peace. Nevertheless, the vagueness of the programme and the complete omission of the EU from the party campaign indicate opposition to the EU, mixed with populist stances (Jakobson, 2024; Sazonov, 2025). In addition, it is also worth noting that Aivo Peterson was arrested and sentenced to 14 years in prison for treason grounded in deliberate pro-Russian campaigning (ERR, 2025).

2.5 Right-wingers

Right-wingers were also founded in 2022, generating a new party of former Fatherland members. The party is right-wing conservative and market-oriented. Even though this party has not succeeded on the national level nor acquired a seat in the EP, it is another example of a party with anti-establishment stances. Against the backdrop of a pro-market orientation and the representation of entrepreneurs' interests, it criticises the EU for insufficient trade liberalisation (Jakobson, 2024).

3. Positions on 'Europe' and the Populism-Euroscepticism nexus

This section is divided into subsections based on the selected cases, providing a nuanced exploration of each party.

3.1 EKRE: Entrapped in identity crisis, or strategically double-sided?

After the founding of EKRE in 2012, the party's anti-European discourse persisted, encompassing narratives of sovereignty, social conservatism, and the economy. The party's popularity rose significantly during the 2015 migration crisis, as EKRE adopted an ethnonationalist, anti-establishment rhetoric (Saarts et al., 2021). EKRE's opposition towards "Europe" is embedded in: 1) geopolitical concerns about insufficient EU security guarantees against the increasingly assertive foreign policy of the Russian Federation, 2) disapproval of the EU's support for sexual minorities and 3) criticism towards the crisis in the eurozone and 4) concerns about the EU's and other foreign entities' interference into national matters (Braghiroli and Petsinis, 2019).

On the other hand, EKRE's attitudes towards the EU have been somewhat ambivalent. EKRE has stressed the benefits and importance of economic, security, and cultural connections to the European Union. Still, it has highlighted the need for a new referendum on Estonia's EU membership (Ploom and Veebel, 2017). The party's support for the referendum was further underscored by discussions about the European Commission's democratic deficit and the changing EU political landscape. Furthermore, the party stressed the need to allow citizens to articulate their opinions (Ploom and Veebel, 2017; Koorits, 2016a; Veebel, 2017).

Having been on the scene for more than a decade, the party has undergone gradual evolution. Even though the party can be assessed as hard Eurosceptic (Ehin and Talving, 2019), EKRE does not belong to the "exiters" group. As such, it swings back and forth between EU support and calling for a referendum to reconsider Estonia's EU membership. During the campaign for the 2019 European Parliament elections, the party refrained from discussing a referendum, reflecting the pro-European sentiments in Estonian society (Ehin and Talving, 2019). However, five years later, the party admitted the urgency of opening discussions on the referendum, in case the EU treaties are to be amended (EKRE, 2024). Thus, it can be assumed that this ambivalent discourse is used as a strategy to attract a broad range of voters, including ethnic Russians. The choice of such a target group may seem surprising for a party founded on a highly critical and suspicious stance toward the Russian Federation. As a result, EKRE has undergone a notable shift in focus.

It is against this background that EKRE is currently integrating eurosceptic and populist discourse. EKRE is a vocal opponent of the EU's energy and climate policy, such as the Green Deal, and has somewhat mixed opinions on Russia following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Jakobson and Kasekamp, 2023; Valgerist, 2024; Braghiroli and Makarychev, n.d.). By utilising populist discourse, Braghiroli and Makarychev (n.d.) note that EKRE attempts to appeal to the broad electorate, including the Russophone minority, in several ways. For instance, by stressing traditional family values, anti-multiculturalism, the promotion of Russian historical narratives, and support for the mostly Russophone Ida-Virumaa county. In addition, the party rode the wave of anti-vaccination sentiment, which again correlates with the significant medical scepticism in Ida-Virumaa.

3.2 Fatherland: From pro-Europeanism to populist soft-Euroscepticism?

As noted by Ehin et al. (2020), Fatherland was not previously categorised as Eurosceptic. However, the party stresses the need to defend Estonian interests in the EU and opposes further federalisation. As such, Fatherland presents itself as a defender of Estonia in the EU, foregrounding arguments about belonging to an influential political faction in the EP – European People's Party (EPP) and drawing on the importance of European cultural heritage (Isamaa, 2019). Fatherland also expresses anti-immigration sentiments and warns about the threats of radical Islamism, linking migration and value-based narratives (Isamaa, 2024).

3.3 Centre Party: Ambiguous pro-European?

The Centre Party has been relatively moderate in its Eurosceptic views. Drawing back to the accession period, the party under the leadership of Edgar Savisaar took no clear position on membership (Lust, 2006; Pettai, 2005). A soft Eurosceptic discourse was evident in occasional utterances by prominent party figures who seem to use ambiguity as a strategy. It is against the backdrop of a significant Russian minority in Estonia that the party sought to retain an all-catch position, requiring a thoughtful discursive strategy. The party espoused populist rhetoric under the leadership of Edgar

Savisaar (1991–2016). However, after the 2016 national elections and his replacement by Jüri Ratas, the party adopted a more pro-European stance, which also coincided with a decline in support among the Russian minority. Nevertheless, the party is divided in its stance towards the EU, as leading figures make somewhat controversial statements. For instance, Yana Toom criticised the sanctions imposed on Russia, Jaanus Karilaid predicted a worsening state of the Union and suggested the membership referendum, and Oudekki Loone criticised the EU's cohesiveness succeeding Brexit (Ehin and Talving, 2019; Koorits, 2016b; Karilaid, 2016).

3.4 Together: Breaking the status Quo?

Together foregrounds the matters of foreign policy and nationalism. While its discourse remains relatively vague, the party claims to promote sovereign foreign policy and global peace. It reveals clear features of an all-catch party, arguing in defence of the interests of all people living in Estonia. It is this ambiguous appeal to peace, traditional values, and multiculturalism, and the absence of EU discourse in the election programme, that imply a populist, anti-European stance (Jakobson, 2024).

3.5 The Right-wingers: Mild populism mixed with soft Eurosceptic tendencies?

The Right-wingers reject extremism and propose a reliable, credible, and non-extreme right, and thus, Euroscepticism is not their defining feature. Nevertheless, the party criticises the EU for overregulation, claiming it harms the EU's global competitiveness. Underlined by the discursively expressed opposition towards further integration, the EU is believed to undermine the sovereignty of the nation-states. Fuelled by an anti-establishment reasoning and technocratic strategy, the party stresses elite incompetence and highlights the logic and benefits of laissez-faire. As such, it foregrounds the belief that the market can solve immigration and environmental problems (Jakobson, 2024).

4. Responses to Euroscepticism and consequences

Given its geopolitical constraints, strong motivation for European integration, and long-term alignment with European values underpinned by a longitudinally and discursively constructed European identity by Estonian elites, Estonia is not a Eurosceptic hub. There is currently only one distinct party in the populist-eurosceptic nexus – EKRE. The party is alienated from the Estonian political spectrum for its radicalism, as the Centre Party has abandoned anti-European stances and issued only occasional lukewarm or pessimistic utterances. In addition, Fatherland remains softly Eurosceptic, and Together and Right-wingers are small parties in the Estonian party system. It is against this background that EKRE remains with a limited coalition potential, except for the 2019 elections, when it was invited into a coalition with the Centre Party. However, it has to be noted that this step was heavily criticised and led to shifts in electoral support for the Centre Party, as a part of its electorate, mainly ethnic Russians, declined in support.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the report highlights that the Estonian party system remains relatively resilient against a complete takeover by populist and Eurosceptic parties and that Estonia stands out as a long-term, consensual, pro-European country at both the elite and public levels. However, EKRE still receives stable support of around 16% (Politico, n.d.) and, as such, it serves as an interesting example of a tenacious populist radical right party (PRRP) able to adapt to various challenges – even to an urgent geopolitical threat. As a result, there are two significant areas for future research. For instance, further inquiries could delve into a more in-depth analysis of the EKRE's discourse post-2022 to examine its' changing EU discourse, chameleon-like behaviour, or, instead, the crisis of the parties' identity. What is more, the scholarship could greatly benefit from a detailed investigation of Estonian pro-Europeanism, such as the elite discursive framing of the EU and pro-European communication to the public, to elucidate the contrasting case of resilient pro-Europeanism and active engagement.

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Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

The case study does not include a methodology, dataset or analysis; it is a report based on a literature review, with all sources listed in the bibliography.

No data associated are with this article.

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✔ **Ildiko Otova**
New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria

The report offers a clear and up-to-date analysis of the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism in Estonia, drawing on well-established definitions. The examples selected are appropriate for the analysis, particularly EKRE; however, the other cases could have been positioned more convincingly in relation to the chosen conceptualizations of populism and Euroscepticism. Overall, the report is well structured and informative and provides a useful basis for comparative studies of both the Baltic region specifically and broader trends across Europe.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Political Science, Populism, Euroscepticism

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 14 August 2026

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Stefano Braghiroli
University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

I'm glad to see that all the previous recommendations have been addressed.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: European studies, party politics, Euroscepticism and illiberalism.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 13 August 2026

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Vassilis Petsinis
Corvinus University in Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

Revised report approved.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Comparative Politics, European Politics, Ethnopolitics, Populism, Euroscepticism, Far Right, Central and Eastern Europe, Southeastern Europe, Baltic States

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 09 July 2026

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Stefano Braghiroli
University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

Overall, the report is well written and structured. The narrative is clear and the cases are discussed with sufficient accuracy. Here are, however, some points to consider.
1. I would avoid referring to Estonia (and the Baltics) as "a post-Soviet state." The label has become increasingly controversial. I would rather suggest to mention that the country regained its independence following decades of Soviet occupation.
2. "The traditionally conservative Fatherland likewise expresses moderate anti-EU positions, while the Centre party displayed anti-EU tendencies only until 2016." I would connote those view primarily as opposed to a federalization of the EU and more focused on national sovereignty.
3. It might be worth mentioning that Aivo Peterson (KOOS' leader) was arrested and sentenced to 14 years in prison for treason.
4. EKRE's anti-Russian views have become more nuanced recently https://theloop.ecpr.eu/comparing-ekres-strategy-towards-russophone-estonians-with-italys-lega/
5. I would really make sure that Right-wingers are not put in the same basket as KOOS. Their key discourse is to reject extremism and to propose a reliable, credible, and non-extreme right. I wouldn't say that euro-skepticism is central to their discourse.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Partly

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?

Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: European studies, party politics, Euroscepticism and illiberalism.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 25 June 2026

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Vassilis Petsinis
Corvinus University in Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

This is a comprehensive and well-substantiated report. It covers the most relevant actors in the Estonian political scene and promptly places their potentially populist and Eurosceptic inclinations into context. The authors have considered a sufficient chunk of academic, informative, and other sources. Herein, based on my theoretical expertise in questions of populism and Euroscepticism, as well as my regional specialisation in the Baltic States, I would like to make the following suggestions for improvements to the authors:

(1) It would upgrade the quality of the report if the authors provided a preliminary conceptual overview of party-based populism, including its main features, with a particular stress on the polities of Central and Eastern Europe (including the Baltic States).

(2) Along similar lines, the authors could also provide a brief conceptual overview of party-based Euroscepticism and its main variants (e.g. based on the typology elaborated by Chris Flood - Flood, 2002) with an emphasis on the politics of Central and Eastern Europe.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Comparative Politics, European Politics, Ethnopolitics, Populism, Euroscepticism, Far Right, Central and Eastern Europe, Southeastern Europe, Baltic States

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.