Estonia is an economy in transition. For many, the Estonian economy began with the rebirth of an independent Estonia at the start of the 1990s. Leaving the centralized command economy of the Soviet bloc brought challenges as well as opportunities. Today, as Estonia prepares to join the European Union, the opportunities of larger markets and increasingly free trade are balanced by the demanding challenges of increasingly integrated participation in the global economy.

To meet these challenges, Estonia is now considering the development of a national design policy. This policy must be set against the background of a global knowledge economy.

Globalization is one of the most discussed but least understood forces in the world today. While globalization involves increasing competition and expanding business networks, it also involves the spread of democracy and the development of resources. A balanced view of globalization reveals both trends.¹

One force that leads to globalization is the fact that economies and political units are larger than ever before. So are the networks of actors that operate within them. Another is the shift of economies from lightly worked natural goods to an increasingly complex range of manufactured goods and services.

The most visible aspect of today’s global knowledge economy is the fact that the greatest value is added to products and services through human activity. For this reason, national competitive strategy generally involves finding ways to develop industries that add the greatest value to national economies. In a world where design represents an opportunity to add value to products and services at a relatively low marginal cost, governments are now considering design policies as a tool for creating competitive advantage. In this sense, design policies can become an instrument for economic growth in some ways similar to those aspects of other policies that affect economic growth, including policies affecting taxes, education, health, or immigration.

In 2002, the Estonian Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications began to explore the issue of an Estonian design policy as part of the work leading to Estonia’s membership in the European Union. With support funding from the Danish Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs, Estonia launched a research project to examine relevant national design policies and to study Estonia in relation to needs and policy proposals. An international research team led by Dr. Tech. Per Mollerup of Designlab in Denmark undertook the work. Team members were Prof. Ken Friedman of the Norwegian School of Management, Prof. Pekka Korvenmaa of the University of Art and Design Helsinki, and Mr. John Landerholm, an industrial designer in Denmark.

In July and August of 2002, the research group undertook a rough survey to identify possible design policy initiatives. The survey generated over three dozen leads.² From these, the group examined the policies of six nations.

In the next phase of research, the group conducted qualitative interviews to examine supply factors in the design profession and design education, and to examine demand factors in industry and business.

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¹ Bauman 1998; Sassen 1998; Soros 2002; Stiglitz 2002.
² Friedman 2002a; 2002b; 2002c.
This research was extended with questionnaires and other forms of inquiry.

In March 2003, the ministry presented the research findings to a group of experts for discussion and review. 3 This May, the ministry published the final report. 4

The full project report is now available on the World Wide Web at URL: <http://www.mkm.ee/dokumendid/Disainiuuringu%20l6ppraport.pdf>

The report discusses the research project and the main findings, placing them in the context of national design policies elsewhere. This project suggests important opportunities for research in the area of design policy, and it locates design as an important economic factor in today’s world markets.

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3 Mollerup, Friedman, Korvenmaa and Landerholm 2003a.
4 Mollerup, Friedman, Korvenmaa and Landerholm 2003b.