

Breaking the Shackles: Latvia After the USSR

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Latvia restored its independent statehood on 21 August 1991, and since then many analysts have presumed that the Latvian government is in charge of its affairs. It is more accurate to think of Latvia's political reality as dualistic: on the one hand it is an independent self-governing state, but on the other it remains influenced by Russian intervention and the legacy of Soviet rule. This dualistic reality is crucial to understanding the present issues. Many analysts discussing the transition of postcommunist regimes to democracy apply the criteria of an ideal Western democracy without adjusting their analyses for the practical context. Problems linked to the legacy of the old regime are pernicious, and Latvia must search for innovative ways to overcome them.¹

It remains unclear whether Latvia is a self-determining nation, a settler state, or a client state of Russia. The status of a client state is indicated by Russia's huge unauthorized military presence. Moreover, Russian politicians have felt it their right to interfere in Latvia's internal affairs. Many of the interventions involve the Russian post-war settler population, although Russia remains ambivalent as to whether it views them as its own citizens or as citizens of Latvia. At times, Russia has argued that Latvia has no jurisdiction over these people, as in the case of former Soviet "black beret" policemen who were indicted for criminal offenses in Latvia.² Yet, on other occasions Russia has argued that all post-war settlers are unconditionally entitled to Latvian citizenship without having to apply for it.³ What's more, Russia wavers in its position toward the Soviet Union's legacy on the Latvian state. Before the demise of the USSR, Yeltsin forces denounced the Soviet practice of international law-breaking and the use of the military to compel Latvia. Since the spring of 1992, however, the policies of Yeltsin's Russia have become contradictory. Russia has tried to use the troop withdrawal for political leverage and has claimed ownership of former Soviet facilities in Latvia. Meanwhile, it has disavowed responsibility for the destructive policies of the Soviet period, denying for example, payment of pensions to people who spent years in forced labor camps. Rhetorically, Russia's statements about the Baltic states have become more hard-line since mid-1992. Baltic politicians have reacted with concern to the Orwellian logic of Russia's attempt to paint itself as the victim in relations with its small neighbors.

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The Consequences of Forcible Incorporation

Russia must deal with the difficult legacy of the Soviet Union's foreign policy. Latvia, a member of the League of Nations, was illegally incorporated into the USSR in 1940. As a principle of international law, most democracies of the world refused to recognize the Soviet annexation as legal and permitted embassies of the Republic of Latvia to exist in the United States and elsewhere.⁴ De jure recognition made it possible in 1991 for Latvia (as well as Estonia and Lithuania) to restore its de facto statehood rather than create a new state. In their legal continuity the Baltic states differ from the new states emerging out of the former USSR, and they also differ in their international and moral claims against the governments of the former USSR and Russia.

Russia's failure to address the harsh consequences of Soviet occupation of the Baltic states is wrapped up within the broader issue of whether dealing with a nondemocratic past is an integral part of democratization. I propose that it is. The transition from communism requires fundamental foreign policy reform. Indeed "New Thinking" in foreign policy was a component of Gorbachev's reforms and was inscribed in the banner of Russian democrats when Gorbachev began to waiver. The Baltics have been a test case of whether the new foreign policy of the USSR/Russia is based on international law and the repudiation of Stalinism. In December 1989, the Soviets took the first step by admitting the existence of the secret protocols of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and by declaring them invalid in the Congress of People's Deputies.⁵ The next step would have been to declare invalid the forced incorporation of the Baltic states into the USSR in 1940; yet this step has never been taken.

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Both leaders and the masses need time to make the psychological adjustment to historical revelations. While many people in the former Soviet Union found the revelations of the reform era liberating, others did not. Individuals personally linked to the consequences of history, such as the presence of the foreign troops in Latvia, have had an especially difficult time. An October 1990

survey tried to measure this difficulty by asking: "Do you agree with the statement that in 1940 the USSR occupied and annexed the Baltic states, forcibly incorporating them into the USSR?" Ninety-one percent of Latvians and 41 percent of non-Latvians responded in the affirmative, two percent of Latvians and 27 percent of others disagreed, and seven percent of Latvians and 32 percent of non-Latvians had difficulty answering the question.⁶ We thus find a split in the political views among non-Latvians: while some acknowledge the historical

fate of the Republic of Latvia, others cling to the orthodox Soviet perspective.

Latvia as an Occupied State

With the Soviet occupation of 17 June 1940, Latvia lost sovereignty over its territory. Since 1940, most Latvians have considered the Soviet and ex-Soviet military to be an occupation force, despite the latter's objections.⁷ Whatever terms one uses, the Russian troops have no legal basis for being on Latvia's territory, and the Latvian government has urged that the issue be resolved with the help of the international community.

Since 1991, Russian and Latvian representatives have negotiated over the withdrawal of the ex-Soviet troops with limited success. Since early 1992, Russia has used the lack of housing and other problems to defend the slow pace of withdrawal. Latvian leaders have responded that they cannot accept this argument because the social problems of the former USSR may continue forever. Some have argued that talk about difficulties is simply an excuse, one that has been exposed by Russia's rejection of Latvian and Western proposals to help build housing for the withdrawing forces.

Moreover, Latvia also has social problems that are aggravated by the presence of foreign troops. For example, between 1986 and 1990 the authorities built 10,700 flats for Soviet military personnel amounting to 23 percent of the entire housing stock built in Latvia in that period. Yet, as of 1 July 1990, 170,400 civilian families in Latvia were on the waiting list for apartments, with some 34,000 families having been there for more than ten years.⁸ As for education, in early 1992 ten of the fifteen schools in the city of Liepaja used Russian as the language of instruction; among the pupils were 1,650 children of army personnel (18.1 percent of the pupils in Russian schools). The army paid nothing for this service because the city funds the schools.⁹

The Latvian government has been primarily concerned about the political interference of the Soviet/Russian forces in Latvia's domestic affairs. These forces supported the hard-line Communist coup attempts of January and August 1991, and on other occasions supported anti-government forces. The recent linkage of troop withdrawal to Latvia's laws on citizenship and language has also been disconcerting and at the same time has highlighted the international nature of the issue. Russia's rhetoric became more aggressive during 1993, apparently expecting that this would promote its foreign policy interests. An official of Russia's Foreign Ministry has gone on record saying that:

I think that it would be altogether wrong if Russian diplomacy did not accentuate human rights problems in the Baltic states. This is true both in regard to the entire Russian-speaking population and specifically the military personnel. The question of human rights is a very strong weapon. The West is highly sensitive to this issue in contrast to us. As a result of our diplomatic

activities the reputations of the three Baltic countries can be increasingly undermined, and this will destroy their false image of victimization and will also serve the interests of our citizens, including military personnel.¹⁰

Developments in Russian domestic politics affects how the Russian government addresses the issues surrounding Soviet-era settlers and ex-Soviet troops in Latvia. Although by 1993 most Russian politicians have joined in the accusations against the Balts, this issue has been pressed most decidedly by right-wing nationalists and former Communists. The more democratic Russia becomes the more hope exists for an early solution to these issues.

Latvia as Settler State

Past policies create contemporary consequences. For decades Latvians have feared demographic, cultural, and political extinction from the increasing presence and power of settlers. Both these fears and the actual balance between the indigenous population and settlers has been changing in the 1990s, but each has a long way to go.

In a process that has few parallels in the world, Latvians have become a demographic minority in all cities and have been brought to the brink of becoming a minority in Latvia as a whole. Latvians constituted 77 percent of the population of Latvia in 1935, but by 1989 this percentage had decreased to 52 percent, primarily because of the disproportional immigration of Russians, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians. This unprecedented immigration was closely tied to Soviet policies. Many officials were brought in to oversee political life, while the Soviets facilitated the settlement of retired Soviet officers and their families with preferential access to state housing and by other regulations. Soviet economic policies sponsored huge enterprises that could not be staffed locally and led to the importation of both managers and workers.¹¹

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Analysts of settler dominance over an indigenous people emphasize that their power resides in control over the political and security sectors. Besides questions about Russia's continuing military presence, there is the issue of post-war settlers in other security forces. For decades a non-Latvian

cadre has dominated the police. In January 1992, Latvians made up just 15 percent of the police and other employees of the Ministry of Interior in Riga, and 35 percent in all of Latvia.¹² While some personnel changes had occurred by September 1993 they remain incomplete. Finally, the issue of Latvian representation in the police is compounded by problems of political loyalty of the settlers to a non-Soviet system.

The economic and cultural marginalization of an indigenous population is also typical of settler societies. While it is difficult to measure the contemporary economic power of non-Latvians, it appears to be considerable. Researchers have suggested that about 80 percent of privately held business in Latvia is in the hands of non-Latvians.¹³ In light of the difficult economic situation in Latvia, ethnic stratification is likely to become more controversial.

Citizenship and Language Issues

On issues of the rights of ethnic minorities in Latvia one needs to distinguish between historical minorities and post-war settlers. Simply put, most political forces in Latvia feel that while historical minorities are entitled to full citizenship rights and cultural autonomy, the post-war settler population poses special problems. The issue is how to transform a previously dominant settler population into an ethnic minority that accepts the reality of the demise of the USSR and focuses on integrating into the social and political system of the Republic of Latvia. Moreover, if subgroups of settlers do not wish to integrate, the issue becomes whether and how they may repatriate to Russia, Belarus, or the Ukraine, or emigrate westward.

Historically Latvia has had minorities of Germans, Russians, Poles, Jews, gypsies, and others, most of whom have been citizens and have enjoyed cultural rights. In the course of reestablishing independence, Latvia has tried to reestablish these same rights. This has included efforts to revitalize the traditional Russian community of Latvia, which was also suppressed under Soviet rule because it included old believers, an independent Orthodox Church, and numerous distinct cultural and political identities.¹⁴ Therefore, the reactivation of citizenship rights to all those who were citizens of Latvia before Soviet occupation has included non-Latvians. A process of registering all inhabitants of Latvia was set up in 1991, with one of the goals being to establish who was already a citizen and who might wish to become one. The estimate of pre-existing citizenship for about 70 percent of Latvia's inhabitants emerged from this registration process.¹⁵ This included most Latvians, a segment of Latvia's Russian population, and members of smaller minority groups.¹⁶ By September 1993, a law covering the criteria for the naturalization of new citizens had not yet been passed. Draft projects submitted in Latvia's Parliament suggested that naturalization would be linked to length of residence, knowledge of the Latvian language, and political loyalty to the Republic of Latvia. The spouses of citizens would be given preferential treatment while former Soviet military officers, KGB personnel, and similar groups would be excluded from eligibility.

While the last criterion addresses the problem of political loyalty among a considerable part of the settler population, the language requirement addresses the problem of Russian monolingualism. Many post-war settlers are monolingual Russian speakers who have perceived Latvia as an extension of Russia. The

prevalent Soviet-era linguistic practice was that Russians moving to non-Russian territories did not learn the local languages, but expected the local inhabitants to speak Russian. In the post-Soviet world this is no longer acceptable and Latvia has urged that all residents learn the language. The Law on State Language presents various measures to enhance the role of the Latvian language in public life. As a result, the dominance of Russian in public interaction is decreasing and the difficulty of sticking to Russian monolingualism is increasing. While many people have accepted this as a reasonable requirement, others have accused Latvia of infringing on the linguistic rights of “Russian-speakers.”

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the linguistic issue in full, but it should be clarified that Latvia's new policy does not mean that Russians are unable to use Russian among themselves or have their own schools. Forty-five percent of Latvia's school children were enrolled in Russian-language schools in 1992/1993. As a comparison with census data indicates, this meant that almost all Russian children attended Russian-language schools, as did most other non-Latvians (minority schools for Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians have recently been established but to date have attracted few students). In contrast to the availability of Russian language schools outside of Russia,¹⁷ there were no native-language schools for Latvian children living in Russia.

Russian leaders in Latvia and Russia have taken a different perspective, especially since mid-1992 when they began to focus on “numerous violations of the rights of ethnic Russians” in the Baltic states.¹⁸ Few concrete examples have been mentioned except for broad references to citizenship and language laws. In 1992 Russia requested a special commission of the United Nations to go to Latvia to investigate charges of human rights violations. This commission issued a report in October 1992 stating that it did not find any systematic violations by Latvian policy-makers. It also noted that it cannot be said that Latvia is in breach of international law by the way it determines the criteria for granting citizenship, and that “it should be emphasized that no instances of violence, no mass dismissals from employment, exclusion from educational establishments, evictions from apartments, or expulsions”¹⁹ were reported. Despite such reports from the U.N. and other fact-finding missions, some Russians in Latvia remain aggrieved and supported by politicians in Russia.

The Democratic Alternative in Latvian-Russian Relations

Decades of illegal Soviet rule in Latvia have created an unprecedented ethnopolitical situation where the indigenous nation is weak, yet Soviet-era settlers claim that their rights are infringed upon. As Latvia struggles to undo the legacy of Soviet policies, much depends on the extent to which cooperative solutions can be found with Russia and the international community. We should begin by stating the problems that need solving.

First, it is undemocratic for a giant state to keep military forces on the

territory of a small neighbor without the smaller state's consent. The government of Latvia has been successful in winning the political support of the United Nations and other international organizations for the unconditional withdrawal of the former Soviet troops. Yet, in October 1993 the issue remains unresolved and continues to threaten both regional security and stability within Latvia.

Second, it is undemocratic for a state to intervene in the domestic affairs of a neighbor and to use threats. Members of the former Supreme Soviet of Russia have stood out in making threatening statements in the past. For example, Sergei Stepashin, who was chairman of the Committee on Defense and Security, threatened economic sanctions if Latvia did not change its laws to the advantage of "Russian-speakers," using that term to refer to the 46 percent of Latvia's inhabitants who are non-Latvian.²⁰ Besides being unacceptable in principle, such rhetoric misleads by including all residents of Latvia who are not ethnic Latvians. As noted, many non-Latvians are citizens of Latvia and a significant number know Latvian. Among those who are not "Latvian-speakers" there are Ukrainians, Belarusians, and others who might resent Russia's protectionism. Even some Russians may feel that such pressure can boomerang on them.

More importantly, Russian politicians should consider what it is they really want. If they want "Russian-speakers" to remain in Latvia and be accepted as citizens, it would make sense to urge these people to learn the local language so that they can integrate into the social and political life of Latvia. If these people do not try to integrate, threatening statements made on their behalf only confirm the fears that they are a fifth column for hardliners seeking the reestablishment of empire.

Practical help needs to be extended to individuals who wish to leave Latvia. Survey data indicate that about 20 percent of post-war settlers would welcome repatriation to Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. To date, Latvian authorities have encouraged voluntary resettlement by providing certain payments, especially in return for vacating state-owned apartments. In 1992 and 1993, some 60,000 persons resettled from Latvia eastward. More will likely go if they gain the support of the receiving countries, as well as an international repatriation fund. As for those individuals (at least another 20 percent of post-war settlers) who would prefer to emigrate westward, the Western democracies have a chance to demonstrate their helpfulness in a difficult situation by opening their doors.

Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

For United States interests, the most worrisome Baltic-Russian issue is the continuing stationing of ex-Soviet troops on Baltic soil. The U.S. Congress has recognized this by linking continuation of aid to Russia to progress in troop withdrawal. Executive branch representatives have also stated that America sees troop withdrawal as the top regional priority. Yet, the United States could do more to facilitate action. The linkage between aid to Russia and withdrawal from

the Baltics should be made even clearer. Moreover, it would expedite negotiations on the withdrawal, timetable, and details if American mediators were to assist the Latvian and Russian negotiating teams. The experience of year-long bilateral negotiations shows that the balance of strength between Latvia and Russia is so uneven that Latvia alone is unable to counter Russia's delaying tactics.

More is at stake than Latvian sensibilities. As long as the Russian military remains in Latvia, regional stability is threatened. Since 1991 it has become increasingly clear that hardliners in Russia want to use their military presence in the Baltic States as a tool to reassert regional dominance. They urge Russian foreign policy-makers to continue including the Baltic states in Russia's special sphere of interest—the so-called “near abroad.” This counters United States interests in the Baltic region, even more so since the same hardliners want to reestablish the status quo ante in other areas, e.g., they want to reassert Russia's status as the other military superpower. Since the end of the Cold War, international security has been ill-defined; if revanchist forces should capture power in Russia, Latvia may well become a test case in the way Berlin once was. American policy-makers should use preventative diplomacy now when the time is opportune.

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Diplomatic pressure works best when it is complemented by material incentives. The linkage between foreign aid and military withdrawal should make the latter more attractive. In addition, various plans to expedite withdrawal by building housing for Russian officers should be pursued

more vigorously. Yet, the use of U.S. funds earmarked for this purpose should be carefully monitored. Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany has complained about not knowing the fate of the billions of marks Germany paid for building housing for ex-Soviet troops leaving Germany. American policy-makers should seek ways of securing that their money is used as designated. One possibility would be to follow the suggestion of Latvia's foreign minister and hand the repatriation money directly to each Russian military family as it leaves for home. Another alternative would be to create an international commission in charge of the construction of Western-aided housing.

As already indicated, ethnic tensions in the region would be defused if the Western democracies would help the emigration from Latvia of those Slavic settlers wishing to leave the country. For years, the United States has been generous in opening its doors to Jewish emigrants from the Soviet Union and in supporting the resettlement of others in Israel. Why not extend this generosity to other ex-Soviets? Slavs wishing to leave Latvia would doubtless welcome

special United States immigration quotas for stateless persons, and most would welcome financial assistance for repatriation to their historical homelands.

Americans should not be naïve about Russia's cynical use of the human rights issue as a political weapon against Baltic governments. The image of human rights defenders is tarnished if the difference is blurred between real human rights offenses and the limitation of privileges of a settler group brought in by a foreign occupying power. Even if one can ignore political history, it remains a fact that most states treat immigrants differently from indigenous minorities. It will serve United States foreign policy well to base itself on careful fact-finding and fair-mindedness. Today, American prestige is high in Latvia, but only a wise foreign policy can assure that it remains high in the years to come.

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Notes

¹ For a full discussion see Rasma Karklins, *Ethnopolitics and Transition to Democracy: The USSR and Latvia* (Washington, D.C., Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, January 1994).

² One of the OMON members accused in the January 1991 killings in Riga, Sergei Parfenov, acquired citizenship of the Russian Federation on 27 April 1992. See *Diena*, 9 May 1992, p. 1. After his conviction Russia demanded that he "be returned to his native country." He was in fact released to Russia in August 1993 and was welcomed home at the Moscow train station by enthusiastic Communists and a band playing the old Soviet anthem. *Diena*, 7 August 1993.

³ During troop withdrawal negotiations with Latvia, Russia has demanded that Latvia guarantee citizenship to all its residents, including those military persons wishing to remain in Latvia. *Diena*, 5 May 1992.

⁴ William J. H. Hough III, "The Annexation of the Baltic States and its Effect on the Development of Law Prohibiting Forcible Seizure of Territory," *New York Law School Journal of International and Comparative Law*, Winter 1985, p. 6; see also Boris Meissner, *Die Sowjetunion, die Baltischen Staaten und das Völkerrecht* (Cologne: Politik und Wirtschaft, 1956).

⁵ Compare *Osteuropa*, 1990, no. 10:A 623-A 625 and Thomas Sherlock, "New Thinking on the Nazi-Soviet Pact," *Report on the USSR*, 28 July 1989, pp. 12-15. For a time the Soviets argued that they could not find their copies of the relevant documents. On 29 October 1992, an aide to President Yeltsin showed on television the Soviet originals of the secret protocols to the Hitler-Stalin Pact. *The New York Times*, 29 October 1992, p. 7.

⁶ *Sovetskaia Molodezh*, 24 November 1990, as cited in FBIS-SOV-90-246, 21 December 1990; the survey was conducted by the Center for Sociological Research and was based on a sample of 1,000 residents.

⁷ *Pravda*, 8 March 1989, and other Soviet newspapers have rejected the epithets "migrant" and "occupant" as provocative.

⁸ Data compiled from official sources by the Commission on Human Rights and National Question, Supreme Council of Republic of Latvia, 14 April 1992.

⁹ *Diena*, 13 February 1992.

¹⁰ V.N. Trofimov, «Rossiia—Pribaltika: Kak zhit dalshe?» *Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, July 15-31, 1992, nos. 13-14, p.79.

¹¹ Compare Tonu Parming, "Population Processes and the Nationality Issue in the Soviet Bloc," *Soviet Studies* No. 32 (July 1980) pp. 398-414. See also Ellu Saar and Mikk Titma, *Migrationsströme im sowjetischen Baltikum und ihre Nachwirkung auf die baltischen Staaten nach Wiederherstellung der Selbständigkeit* (Cologne: Berichte des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien No. 9, 1991), p. 18.

¹² Data by Minister of Interior, *Diena*, 8 January 1992.

¹³ "Anywhere from 75 to 82 percent of the republic's private capital is held by the so-called Russian-speaking people." Vladimir Yemelyanenko, "Will a Colonialist Become a Citizen?" *Moscow News*, 1992, No. 40, p. 4. For similar estimates see *Neatkariga Cina*, November 5, 1991.

¹⁴ Soviet era policies included turning Riga's Orthodox Cathedral into a planetarium and destruction of the Ivanov library, the oldest Russian library in Riga. On the latter compare Temira Pachmuss, "Russian Culture in the Baltic States and Finland, 1920-1940," *Journal of Baltic Studies* No. 16 (Winter 1985), pp. 383-398.

¹⁵ Unofficial projections of the Immigration Department of Latvia, December 1992.

¹⁶ Most Latvian Poles, Jews, Lithuanians, and gypsies are citizens, and so are about 25 percent of Russians. Since former citizenship is the decisive criterion, Latvians who were not citizens on 17 June 1940 also have to apply for naturalization. It is misleading to allege that Russians are denied automatic citizenship in Latvia because they are Russians, as stated by Vladimir Yemelyanenko, "Will a Colonialist Become a Citizen?" *Moscow News*, 1992, No. 40, p. 4.

¹⁷ In 1992 8.5 million schoolchildren attended Russian language schools in the former non-Russian union republics of the USSR. All textbooks were published in Russia, but were paid for by the other states. *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 17 March 1993, p.1.

¹⁸ *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 31 October 1992.

¹⁹ Ibrahima Fall, *Allegations of Discriminatory Practices Against Minorities in Latvia*, Report on a Fact-Finding Mission to Riga, Latvia, 27 to 30 October 1992 (United Nations, 1992), pp. 9 and 23. *Diena*, 2 December 1992, p. 1.

²⁰ *Diena*, 21 September 1993.