

Still “Treading Air”? Looking at the Post-Enlargement Challenges to Democracy in the Baltic States

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Abstract: Within the post-Soviet area, the Baltic states have been far ahead of any other former Soviet republic. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have done amazingly well in terms of political, economic, and social transition. Yet, like many other new members of the European Union, the Baltic states still face varying degrees of challenges to this perpetual transition that every state faces. The author identifies two problems that affect the three states in varying degrees: corruption and social integration. Whereas Estonia’s political class has become rather transparent and accountable, Latvia and Lithuania have recently encountered serious corruption scandals that have the potential to undermine democratic progress. At the same time, the Slavic minority communities in Estonia and Latvia continue to face political and social alienation, prompting the riots that followed the “Bronze soldier” incident in April 2007. Overall, the author asks the question taken from Estonian author Jaan Kroos’s literary work: “Are we still ‘treading air’?”

Keywords: Baltic states, corruption, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, minority integration

In the novel *Treading Air* by Estonian novelist Jaan Kroos, the character Ullo shares his story about changes during the Soviet occupation following World War II.¹ Ullo concentrates on the changes brought about by Sovietization and uses the metaphor “treading air” to illustrate working hard for no return. With the Soviet occupation, political, economic, and cultural life was transformed in the Baltic region. Likewise, Europeanization is reshaping Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Of the post-Soviet states, the Baltic states have outshone all others in terms of democratic and economic transition. Even in terms of Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic states have done well alongside countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. Nevertheless, they still have challenges to democracy, like all states. Never have politicians in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania considered enlargement

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to be the solution to all of their problems, but rather a strategy for improving their ability to deal with these challenges. Over three years on from European Union (EU) enlargement, I look at the persistent challenges to democracy in the Baltic states and ask the question, are they still “treading air”?

As a way of teasing out these challenges, I concentrate on two areas prevalent in the three Baltic states, to lesser and greater degrees. The first issue is the state of political corruption. Corruption still dogs Baltic politics, especially in Latvia and Lithuania, although Estonia is not immune. Most recently, questions of corruption have developed surrounding the Ventspils mayor and new Latvian president, Valdis Zatlers, who has confirmed taking bribes in his past job as a medical doctor. Although no country is free of corruption, the Baltic states still experience particular opportunities for corruption that are largely to do with economic and political transition. Second, I look at the status of the social integration projects in Estonia and Latvia. Each state has chosen similar but varied paths to dealing with the large Russian-speaking communities in their midst. With the recent “bronze soldier” riots in Tallinn in mind, I examine whether the social integration projects are working. Before I look at these challenges in the Baltic context, I discuss how far the Baltic states have come.

From One Union to Another

Estonia's, Latvia's, and Lithuania's trails from Soviet republics to EU member states are quite remarkable. While the Baltic states experienced interwar independence, the three societies largely had to build new states from scratch. Even before the end of occupation, the Baltic Republics, along with the rest of the Soviet Union, began to experiment with electoral democracy. The democratically elected “people's fronts” led the way to Baltic independence and to three burgeoning democracies. In Estonia and Latvia, the moderate “people's fronts” vied for political power with the nationalist “citizen's committees.” In both states, the “Fatherland” parties, Isamaa and Tēvzemei un Brīvībai, respectively, gained control of the government in the first post-Soviet elections. The purpose of the Fatherland parties was to titularize (confirming to the nation's title) the two states; thus Estonia for Estonians and Latvia for Latvians.² The result of the two national elections was the establishment of an exclusive restorationist state. On the other hand, the Lithuanian electorate took a different path altogether.³ The moderate people's front, Sąjūdis, and the social democratic Lithuanian Democratic Worker's Party (LDDP), Lietuvos demokratinė darbo partija, gained the most seats to gear the country to a new inclusive state. These early choices would differentiate the two northern littoral states from the one in the south in many ways, although all three would take a similar path to EU membership.

The new governments' role was to engineer and manage several simultaneous and interrelated processes. Arguably the most important process has been democratization coupled with titularization. All three states did away with the Soviet-elected national Supreme Councils by having elections soon after independence in 1992. Lithuania's largest party after the 1992 elections was the LDDP, which was a party derived from the Lithuanian Communist Party. On the other hand, Estonia and Latvia both banned the Communist Party and prevented anyone who had been a member of the all-union Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) or worked in the security services, such as the KGB or MVD, from holding official office. Similarly, Estonia and Latvia declared

in their citizenship policies that automatic citizenship would be presented to only those individuals who had been citizens (or their descendants) of the interwar republics. Otherwise, individuals could become naturalized through passing history and language exams set by the state. Lithuania, on the other hand, having fewer minorities in addition to a sizable second (Polish) minority group, opened citizenship to permanent residents, encapsulating the great majority of Lithuanian society. On the face of things, Estonia and Latvia went down an alternative path to that taken by Lithuania. However, as Dovile Budryte illustrates, this was not entirely the case.⁴ Relations between the Lithuanian state and the Polish community, largely in the Vilnius region, were made more difficult by the shaky Lithuanian-Polish relationship and vice versa. Nevertheless, all three states went ahead with democratic changes at the national and local levels, only with Estonia and Latvia having sizeable stateless communities.⁵

Perhaps equally important to some was the Baltic economic transition. In 1992, Estonia implemented shock therapy, which moved privatization at a rapid pace. With intensive foreign direct investment (FDI) from Finland and other Nordic countries, Estonia made great leaps in economic growth. Latvia and Lithuania have gone slower in terms of privatization, but have also experienced significant FDI from the Nordic states and Germany. With the democratic transition termed consolidated and the economy growing well, Estonia was the first of the three Baltic states to be declared enlargement material in July 1997. Yet, by 1998 the European Commission began annual Regular Reports on all three states, monitoring economic and political changes. By 2000, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were given virtual clean bills of health, with some notable reservations. These were corruption, competition, and reforms in justice and home affairs. May 1, 2004, was the day set for enlargement, and the candidates could do little to be removed from the list.⁶ The political decision in Brussels had been made: ten new member states with two to follow.

The postenlargement party has been long and beneficial to the Baltic states. All three states have sought to maximize their place at the tables of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Understandably, the Baltic states have many foreign policy objectives in common.⁷ These include using the common market to their advantage, mitigating Russia on their border (even when still lacking an official border), and influencing EU policy in the European Council and, to a lesser extent, the European Commission. Of primary importance has been the Baltic states' focus on the new outsiders to the East.⁸ In fact, the Baltic states have gone from taking an importer to an exporter approach to Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova in particular.⁹ Indeed, the Baltic states have come far, but to what degree do they still face challenges to their own democracy? The next section illustrates the fight against corruption and minority exclusion in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Postenlargement Challenges

Two primary areas of concern exist in the Baltic Sea Region. I concentrate on the recent events in Latvia regarding the scandal involving Ventspils mayor and newly elected president Zatlers, as well as the Lithuanian scandals involving Viktor Uspaskich and Arvydas Pocius. At the same time, my analysis examines the Baltic states in comparative fashion with a look at Transparency International data from 2004 onward. Second, I discuss the challenges of social integration in Estonia and Latvia. I compare the Bronze statue riots

in Estonia with the education reforms in Latvia. By setting out the Baltic states' current challenges, we can determine if they are still treading air.

Political Corruption

Every state, from Finland to Haiti, suffers from corruption to a greater or lesser degree. At the same time, it is no incident that the states seen to be least corrupt are also stable democratic states and vice versa. Carl J. Friedrich defines political corruption for our purposes as "whenever a power holder who is charged with doing certain things, that is a responsible functionary or office holder, is by monetary and other rewarded . . . induced to take actions which favour whoever provides the reward."¹⁰ Rasma Karklins argues that the presence and characteristic of corruption is path dependent.¹¹ For Karklins, "corruption is the key obstacle to democratic and economic progress in the post-Communist region."¹² What is it about postcommunist regimes that lends itself to corruption? The answer, according to Karklins, can be found in the state's institutions. While ineffective institutions are often the cause of corruption, institutions may also be the solution by making them more effective and more accountable to other institutions and to society as a whole.

Latvia and Lithuania have both experienced significant corruption scandals since joining the European Union. Before the elections of October 2002, Latvian politics was characterized by competing oligarchs in Riga (Andris Šķele) and Ventspils (Aivars Lembergs). Running on an anticorruption ticket, the New Era party (Jaunis Laiks) won the 2002 parliamentary elections. Shortly after the elections, the highly controversial Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (Korupcijas novēršanas un apkarošanas biroja [KNAB]) was created out of Latvian President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga's initiatives. KNAB has been controversial because those who have been investigated, like Andris Šķele (People's Party), Einars Repše (New Era), and more recently Aivars Lembergs (Green and Farmers' Union), have accused KNAB of having political motives. Can one take the political out of the fight against political corruption? Theoretically, but rarely in practice, can the fight against political corruption not be part of political scoring. However, KNAB has investigated officials on all sides, indicating an apolitical stance. Although the Bureau does have presidential oversight, it is not directly beholden to the government.

One of KNAB's most controversial activities is the current investigation of the mayor of Ventspils and financier of the Green and Farmer's Union, Aivars Lembergs. KNAB charged Lembergs on July 20, 2006, with large-scale bribery by coercive means, money laundering, and failure to declare real estate property. Long a force with which to reckon in Latvian politics, Lembergs owns Ventspils Nafta, an oil refining business, and runs the political organization For Latvia and Ventspils. The Latvian state prosecutor alleges Lembergs accepted a great deal of bribe money from 1993–95.¹³ Allegedly, Lembergs received \$880,020 in dividends from shares in the Switzerland-registered company Multinord AG, which he accepted as a bribe. Lembergs also faces charges of money laundering and exploiting his position in the joint-stock company Kalija Parks, a fertilizer manufacturer. According to the Latvian prosecutors, Lembergs accepted services from Kalija Parks to increase his own personal wealth by approximately \$850,881. Later, the Latvian state prosecutor charged Lembergs with being part of an organized crime group that had obtained nearly \$10 million illegally.¹⁴

Do the investigations into corruption illustrate that Latvia is coming to grips with this problem, or that corruption in Latvia is more endemic than once thought? The Transparency International rankings for Latvia have remained fairly constant throughout the enlargement and postenlargement period, thus indicating more the former than the latter. Latvia's fight against corruption is ongoing. According to the Latvian news agency LETA, Lembergs has argued that the campaign against him is part of a plan to close parliament orchestrated by president Viķe-Freiberga and financier and philanthropist George Soros. While Lembergs is currently being held in custody, a new investigation into former prime minister and Green and Farmers Union leader Indulis Emsis has begun. Emsis is charged with accepting illegal payments.¹⁵ Finally,

Latvia's new president, Valdis Zatlers, has admitted to accepting bribes while a surgeon at the State Trauma and Orthopaedic Hospital. He has not only apologized but has also begun to pay taxes on illicit earnings. Although the amount Zatlers has received is nowhere near what has allegedly passed into Lembergs's hands, this is hardly an individual that can be counted on *prima facie* to further the fight against corruption in Latvia. For her part, the outgoing president, Viķe-Freiberga, stated,

“Theoretically, but rarely in practice, can the fight against political corruption not be part of political scoring.”

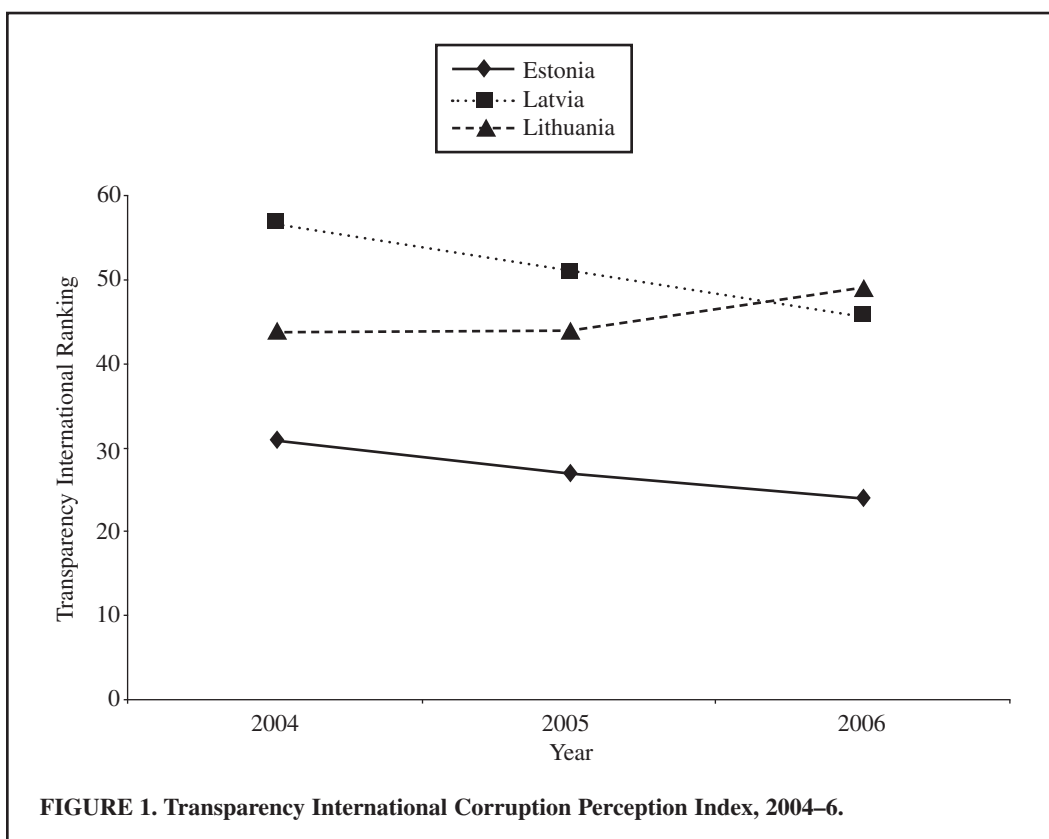
“At this very moment, the sword of Damocles is hovering above the heads of several people. It is hanging by a thread and we still do not know when it will fall. If we truly live in a law-based state, the sword will fall.”¹⁶

Lithuanian politics has also experienced a great deal of scandal since enlargement. Lithuania entered the EU on May 1, 2004, without an elected head of state after the removal of Rolandas Paksas several weeks before.¹⁷ Paksas's downfall began over allegations by the State Security Department that the president had continued links with Russian organized crime. In October 2003, security department officials provided to parliament taped records of Paksas's conversations with his campaign financier, Yuri Borisov, and the latter's conversations with Aznor Kikalishvili, an alleged Russian organized crime boss. A special commission declared in December 2003 that Paksas is a threat to national security. One such allegation is that Paksas gave citizenship to campaign financier Borisov. Eventually, Paksas was removed from office and banned from running for public office, while Borisov was stripped of his citizenship. Lithuania entered into the EU with a bruised political scene. Valdas Adamkus, a former president, won the subsequent vote to replace Paksas to become president again.¹⁸

While it appeared that the worst was behind Lithuania, it was still not easy sailing. In May 2006, state security forces raided the Labor Party's headquarters, at the time Lithuania's most popular political party, on suspicions that the party had received funding from Russian special services and bribes for supporting the procurement of EU funds. Rather conveniently, the Labor Party's leader, Viktor Uspakich, was in the Russian Federation when the raid occurred. Although Uspakich was eventually extradited to Lithuania from the Russian Federation, Lithuanian politics had to

cobble together a broad ruling coalition following the fall of the largest political party in parliament. Yet the political quagmire had not ended in Lithuania. The year 2006 ended with the investigation and attempted removal of the State Security Department director, Arvydas Pocius, for suspicions of corruption and leaking classified materials. Eventually, Pocius was dismissed from his post in May 2007 and replaced by Povilas Malakauskas, the head of Lithuanian parliament's special investigation commission.¹⁹ Like Latvia, corruption remains highly visible on the political agenda, yet both countries still have far to go.

Altogether, there is a clear distinction between the state of corruption in Latvia and Lithuania and that in Estonia. By looking at the Transparency International evaluation data, we get a good idea of the state of play in all three states. Figure 1 indicates the TI Corruption Perception Index rankings for 2004–6.²⁰ Estonia is far ahead of most other 2004 enlargement countries and some notable long-established democracies (e.g., the United States). Estonia is currently ranked twenty-fourth at a global level. Since enlargement, Latvia has steadily improved, going from fifty-seventh to forty-sixth in two years. Lithuania, on the other hand, has done worse as time continues, going from forty-fourth to forty-ninth in 2006. Seen within the context of the EU, Latvia and Lithuania have considerable work to do, as do many other 2004 and 2007 enlargement states. However, seen in the context of the former Soviet Union and at a global level, the Baltic states are doing well. Considerable FDI continues to support the Baltic economies, which are growing quickly, with the side effect of high inflation preventing entry into the European common currency regime.



Social Integration

In the lead-up to enlargement, the European Union, along with the Council of Europe and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, paid a significant deal of attention to the status of minorities in Estonia and Latvia. By the time enlargement occurred, the citizenship policies had been amended to allow children after 1991 to be granted automatic citizenship on their parents request and, in Latvia, to begin a naturalization procedure for permanent residents outside of a strict time window earlier established in the 1994 Citizenship Law. The end of the 1990s saw the initiation in both states of their respective social integration programs. Both states have focused on linguistic integration into the titular community. In practice, this means ending the bilingualism of Estonian and Latvian children and encouraging bilingualism for minorities. Thus, education has become the central battleground for social integration. Both states have approached the issue similarly, although in different time frames. In September 1993, the Estonian parliament passed an education law setting 2000 as the deadline for all secondary schools to become Estonian-language schools, although minority languages would continue to be taught.²¹ Eventually, because of a lack of Estonian language teachers willing to teach in predominantly Russian-speaking areas, such as in the district Ida-Virumaa, the Estonian parliament declared that the deadline for language transition would be moved from 2000 to 2008.

The Latvian parliament waited until 1998 to pass a law on language's role in education in secondary schools.²² The education law stated that year-ten students would be taught exclusively in the state language, although it allowed for continued minority-language training. Growing international pressure and minority collective action led the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science to reconsider the original law and encouraged parliament to make amendments to the 1998 education law. The result was the 60/40 approach, where 60 percent of the curriculum would be taught in Latvian and 40 percent in the minority language (e.g., Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian). The change eased international pressure, but resentment among the minority community continued. In particular, the Russian-speaking community, led by Tatyana Zhdanok, a controversial MP (now MEP), began to hold protests in Latvia's capital, Riga. Slogans such as "SOS: Save Our Schools" and "Stop Reforma" accompanied swastikas, implying the state is reliving a Nazi past in the present, an oft-cited perspective among the Russian-speaking community. The Latvian government handled the protests effectively. Through co-optation of some minority elites, well-organized and disciplined police officials, and targeted youth events, the antireform movement ended with a whimper. Whereas the 2004 school year began with loud protests, subsequent school years have only seen children going to now bilingual schools. In the end, both states continue to implement social integration in the minority communities through generational replacement. Indeed, if a state has made minority children citizens, the government needs to ensure these citizens speak the state language. However, whether the 60/40 strategy is best pedagogically for the students remains to be seen.

Where the major issue in the Latvian minority case was well organized and peaceful, recent events in Estonia illustrate the combustible nature of minority grievances. In the center of Tallinn, near the old town and across from the Estonian occupation museum, was a bronze memorial to the Soviet soldiers who died fighting the Germans (and presumably the Estonians, Finns, and others fighting with them). Other than a tram stop, the location was rather peculiar in today's Tallinn. Like all three states have done many times before, the state intended to move this Soviet-era monument out of the city center, to a park in the suburbs.

The political choice to move the statue overlapped with an archaeological interest to investigate the soldiers who had been buried in the place following the battles of the “Blue Hills” (*Sinimae*) and Tallinn. Because of “credible evidence,” the government made the decision to bring forward the excavation to April 26, 2007.²³ As the crowd began to gather, police were deployed. As is so often the case, a rather peaceful demonstration became violent, with clashes between police and protestors.²⁴ Tallinn experienced two nights of rioting. Underneath it all, the authorities excavated and removed the bronze statue.

The event suggested a crisis for Estonia’s policy of social integration. Russian youths, witnessing another sign of discrimination, this time of long-dead soldiers who gave their

“Through co-optation of some minority elites, well-organized and disciplined police officials, and targeted youth events, the antireform movement ended with a whimper.”

lives to liberate Estonia from the horrors of the Nazi occupation, responded in the only way open to them as noncitizens: violence. Perhaps it can be concluded that the social integration policy simply is not working in Estonia. This conclusion, however, would ignore the circumstances of minorities in Estonia and the event itself, and miss the debate that moved both sides to act. Many Russians are indeed noncitizens, which leaves them outside the national political process. At the same time, permanent residents are able to vote in local elections,

and this has a significant impact on local politics in the northeast region of Ida-Virumaa. The Estonian state has given noncitizens in Estonia this rare right, which permanent residents in Latvia incidentally do not have. With low unemployment and a perpetually growing economy, minorities are unlikely to be economically disadvantaged based on language identity alone. Second, the event overlooks the complex nature of those who participated in the riots. Although the majority of youths who took part in the riots were Russian, many Estonian youths used the opportunity to do their own “smash and grab.” At the same time, a large portion of the Tallinn police force is in fact Russian. Thus, it is misleading to automatically assume this is a Russian on Estonian, or vice versa, incident.

Finally, the debate on which this event sits is a debate that has dominated the Baltic-Russian relationship since the end of the Soviet Union.²⁵ The debate is essentially about who won the Cold War and when it ended. Estonians know that they lost and that the misery that it brought did not end for them until August 1991, at least.²⁶ Any benefit of Soviet occupation, for Estonians, was not worth the price of the loss of freedom, mass murder, and mass deportation. On the other hand, Russians see in the Soviet resistance against Nazi Germany a great sacrifice not only by the Soviets but particularly by Russians themselves. On top of these perceptions, we have the rather difficult and complex circumstance of Estonian troops fighting as a division of the Waffen SS against the Soviet army after 1943, although the fact that many Estonians also went to fight for the Soviet Union is less well-known, or at least people are less ready to consider it. This debate characterizes the common rhetoric in the Russian media and the Estonian-Russian political relationship.

So, has the social integration project failed in Estonia? The answer is not really. Estonia has experienced little interethnic violence. Furthermore, economically at least, minorities

are not second-class residents. There are open avenues for becoming an Estonian citizen, recognized by the European Commission, Council of Europe, and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as being fair and just for Estonia's circumstances. Several factors, however, make social integration more difficult. Unlike Latvian, the Estonian language is not related to Russian and is particularly difficult to learn. Whereas marriage between Latvians and Russians was and is common, exogamy has always been less likely in Estonia. Finally, Estonians have fostered a national persona that often sits opposite of the popular stereotype of a Russian. For example, whereas Russians are openly jovial, Estonians are quite reserved. Although these are challenges, they do not preclude social integration. Great opportunities are available for minority citizens, especially as labor markets open in other EU member states. In the end, however, social integration depends on the youth. Children born after 1991 are automatically citizens and the Estonian state must ensure that these young minority citizens can speak the state language if their notion of nation is to remain intact.

Conclusion

The Baltic states' challenges are not a sign of failure, but rather persistent post-Soviet legacies that have to be confronted and solved. The fact that Estonia is relatively corruption free and Latvia and Lithuania are confronting their own problems with corruption says much about the Baltic states' success in addressing this legacy. Work to fight corruption still remains, but these states are headed in the right direction. Minorities still gather much attention in Estonia and Latvia, but both states have made considerable strides to implement social integration without assimilation. The events in April 2007 are not evidence of the way things are in Estonia, but rather an exception. Overall, the story of the Baltic states shows three states that have come far in a short time. Are the Baltic states still "treading air"? At the very least, we can say that enlargement has led Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to put their feet squarely on the ground.

NOTES

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20. Data taken from Transparency International, survey indices Web site http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/gcb (accessed August 27, 2007).

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23. Author's interview in Tallinn shows that Internet chats indicated planned attempts to cause significant disruption in the city center.

24. See *Postimees*, "Politsei on seoses vandalismiaktidega kontrollinud 500 isikut," April 27, 2007.

25. See Eva-Clarita Onken, "The Baltic states and Moscow's 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 1 (2007): 23–46.

26. In fact, one might argue that World War II did not end until the last Soviet soldier left in August 1994.