

# **Baltic-Russian Relations in Light of Expanding NATO and EU**

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## **Post-Imperial Clash of Different Mentalities**

In spring 1991, Baltic national flags were waving in the streets of Moscow. In the capital of the Soviet empire, where anticommunist spirits were high, the devastating actions of Soviet authorities against the Baltic states had evoked sympathy toward the nations striving for freedom. Now, more than ten years later, we hear from Moscow that, according to public opinion polls, the Baltic states are the greatest enemies of Russia, together with the overthrown Taliban government in Afghanistan and Russia's hereditary rival—the United States. What on earth has happened?

The answer is quite simple. During the turmoil of 1991 a lot of people, especially those living in Russia, could not understand how different we actually are. At that moment nobody was expecting the Soviet Union to decompose so quickly or that the feeling of unity would so quickly cool down with the introduction of practices of international law (borders, citizenship, visa system, and so forth), which were unknown to most people living in the Soviet Union.

The clear self-determination of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian states and the rise in the awareness of national interests and identity were so different from the overwhelming confusion dominating in the former mother country that the countries developed in opposite directions. That led to a rapid decline in the sense of community, which had been created by Soviet authorities, often artificially, under the slogan "Friendship of nations."

Mutual distrust was increased even more by the phenomena accompanying disintegration of any empire—the presence of a foreign army and calls for its departure, problems related to citizenship, border disputes, and so forth. No doubt the Baltic authorities, especially the Estonian and Latvian, also added to the problems by deliberately ignoring Moscow and concentrating fully on reintegration into Europe. That was the only possible decision because without a profound

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upheaval of the old system the Baltic states would never have been able to achieve such political and economic development as we witness today.

Russia recovered from the revolutionary euphoria to find itself in a completely different situation. The communist system was so viable, comprehensive, and so deeply blended with Russian national characteristics that the state was unable to put an end to its totalitarian past. In contrast to the rebirth of postwar Germany, Russia continued to fluctuate between different images of the past, which led to prejudice and misapprehension.

Yet, this was the fault less of the problems of the era than of the Russian tradition. The theory on the clash of civilizations first developed by British historian Arnold Toynbee in 1940s and elaborated a half-century later by Harvard University professor Samuel Huntington has been very accurate. Experience confirms that along the eastern border of Estonia and Latvia runs a line between two cultures substantially different from one another.<sup>1</sup>

At first sight trivial, yet so timeless in nature, is the difference of mentality encountered in comparing the Baltics with Russia. The way of thinking inherent to the West, including the Baltics, comes from Rome; the Russian from Constantinople, Byzantium.

Characterizing Byzantium, Toynbee stressed two important moments. First, there is unshaken belief in the society that "we" are always right. The refusal to acknowledge one's mistakes and the making of illusions make it easy for the second factor to emerge: objective totalitarianism in state institutions separately and on the level of the state as a whole.

Russian Orthodoxy originating from Byzantium and its submissiveness to the state have influenced the Russian mentality. The attempts made in the fifteenth century to turn Russia toward the Western Christian world were unsuccessful.

Russia's roots in Byzantium have through time been so strong that attempts to modernize the structure and political arrangement of Russian society have been in vain. The leading politician of the liberal wing of modern Russia, Irina Khakamada, publicly admits that Byzantium still has a large impact on everyday policy. In contradiction, the Baltic countries have historically been guided by western rationality. It is understandable why Russian-Baltic relations have been tense and full of prejudice as the events of the last decade have unfolded.

Another important factor is a distinctly different perception of the tragic events of 1940. In 1991 it became clear to the Baltic political elite that re-establishing independence would start where, under the pressure of Soviet occupation, it was interrupted in summer 1940. Making public the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact at the Conference of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union, together with acknowledging the fact that they still existed in 1989, was the result of lobbying of the Baltic delegates.

Although the Russian leadership has confessed to having made secret deals with Germany, official rhetoric still indicates that the Baltic States were incorporated into the Soviet Union on a voluntary basis. In 1998, the Foreign Ministry of Russia publicly announced that the Soviet Union did not occupy the Baltic states, adding that before the war international law did not prohibit threatening

with force.<sup>2</sup> Russian deputy foreign minister Alexander Avdeyev announced that in 1939 the Soviet army entered the territory of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in accordance with international treaties. At the last minute, the top leaders of those countries consented to Russia bringing in troops, said Avdeyev, and therefore from the point of international law one cannot talk about armed invasion and occupation of the Baltic states.

Second, Avdeyev claimed that in 1940 the representative bodies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania filed an official application to the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union for incorporating the countries into the Soviet Union.

Third, Avdeyev believes that the legal evaluation of an activity can be provided only by proceeding from the laws effective at the time. "In relation to the claim that in 1939–1940 the Soviet Union illegally used the tactic of threatening the Baltic States with force, due to which they agreed to the bringing in of troops, is at least disputable." Avdeyev writes. He justifies the activity of the Soviet Union in the Baltic states at that time as follows: "Prior to the statutes of the United Nations international law did not include a norm that would have prohibited threatening with force."<sup>3</sup>

That rigid, and at times even cynical, rhetoric has been one of the main stumbling blocks in the way of a mutual understanding between the Baltic states and Russia and their surmounting of the postimperial confidence crisis.

In the West, the occupation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union in 1940 is a recognized fact. For example, the United States has never acknowledged the annexation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union. The latest statement on that was by President George W. Bush during his visit to Vilnius, Lithuania, right after NATO summit in Prague in November 2002.<sup>4</sup>

The official rhetoric of Russia on the issue of 1940 has increased the problems in the relations between the countries in the last decade, especially proceeding from the psychological background of those relations.

### **Cold War in Baltic-Russian Relations**

Thus, history has substantially influenced the relations between the Baltic states and Russia in the last decade. Different understandings, sometimes totally contradicting historical cognition, have nourished prejudice and stereotypes. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, rhetoric spread like a virus among the political elites of both parties and relations deteriorated.

In the Baltic states, forces supporting national independence came to power and from the mid-1990s directed reforms that put the countries on a steady course toward integration into the economic-political and security structures of the western world. The reluctance of Russia to discuss the problems through negotiations as equals deepened anti-Russian sentiments among both the political elite and the society on a whole. Illusions of finding quick solutions with Russia collapsed. Personal contacts did not work, as relations quickly became negative. The contradictions became especially evident during talks over the departure of the Russian troops and the border negotiations.

In its Baltic policy, if this may be so called, Russia has tried to force Baltic

countries into international isolation and through this make them more easily influenced by Russia. It wanted to use the Russian minority issue to keep Estonia and Latvia especially out of European human rights structures. The attitude of Russia toward the Baltic states in 1990s has been mainly influenced by the following factors:

- The Baltic countries former status as part of the Soviet and Russian empire
- Different perceptions and cognition of history
- The large Russian community in the Baltics, especially in Estonia and Latvia
- The dispute over the Kaliningrad enclave
- The conflict of interests between the Western countries and Russia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union tens of thousands of Russians, most of whom had come for the building construction at the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s, stayed on in the Baltics, especially in Estonia and Latvia. In Estonia in 2001, there were 403,925 people of Russian nationality (28.1 percent of the population), and in Latvia there were 693,382 (29.4 percent).<sup>5</sup> Quite understandably, in the beginning of 1990s those populations became the source of the biggest controversy in Russian-Estonian and Russian-Latvian relations. The politicians of Estonia and Latvia working to restore the nation states found establishing a clear principle of legal succession in granting citizenship to be the only possible solution. This left tens of thousands of inhabitants without citizenship. Establishing a zero version similar to Lithuania was out of the question in Tallinn. (Lithuania gave citizenship to every inhabitant in 1991. That was not an option for Estonia, where more than 30 percent of the population were so-called Russian-speaking people, as compared with 8 percent in Lithuania.) That would have made protecting the national interests of Estonia and Latvia during the crisis periods in the early 1990s largely impossible. The parliaments would have become more Russian centered, which would have substantially hindered the development of the countries.

At the same time, in nationally minded political circles of the Baltic states the hope emerged that the people left without citizenship might leave Estonia of their own free will. That attitude could still be encountered in the mid-1990s, although even then it was clear that the majority of Russians living in Estonia and Latvia did not intend to return to Russia. For example, in an opinion poll organized in Estonia in 1995 more 90 percent of Russians questioned said that they did not want to return to Russia.

The wish of the political elite of Estonia to mitigate relations with Russia led to efforts to find a continuous positive line for the normalization of relations. The best example here was Estonia's not reclaiming the territories established in the Tartu Peace Treaty in the course of border negotiations.

From the beginning of bilateral negotiations, Russia, on the other hand, tried to use the issue of citizenship in Estonia and Latvia in its political interests. The official rhetoric of Russia became more rigid and emotional year by year, increasing Estonian and Latvian sensitivity. Russian pressure often clearly contradicted generally accepted diplomatic customs. The mood in diplomatic corridors in the

middle of 1990s has been vividly described in the recollections of the Estonian ambassador in Moscow (1995–99) Mart Helme. He stated that by 1996 three conflicts had developed in Estonian-Russian relations.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the objective factors resulting from the collapsing of the Soviet Union, the abrupt deterioration of relations in the middle of 1990s can also be explained by the fact that communication between the countries was restricted to their foreign ministries. The situation was even more complicated by the fact that in January 1996 Yevgeny Primakov became the foreign minister of Russia. Known for his extremely rigid attitudes toward the West, Primakov excluded all constructive dialogues between the countries.

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In essence, the Foreign Ministry of Russia prohibited direct contacts with the Baltic states in all public sectors. All steps had to be coordinated with the officials of the Foreign Ministry, who often constrained the solving of problems.<sup>7</sup> The border negotiations between Estonia and Russia, especially their final stage, serve as very expressive examples here.<sup>8</sup>

The agreement along with accessory annexes was first initialed in November 1996. In March 1999, on the request of the Russians to add minor technical amendments, the heads of the Estonian-Russian border negotiation delegations, Raul Mälg and Ludvig Chizhov, initialed the Estonian-Russian border agreement again in St. Petersburg. The signing of this agreement is anticipated and, thereafter, ratification by the parliaments of both countries. The signing is a matter currently dependent on Russian political will. Estonia has made every effort to facilitate the conclusion of the border agreement. On the practical level, the Estonian-Russian border is demarcated, and the present border control system is functioning effectively.

The double customs tariffs established for Estonian goods by Russia in 1995 and the ruble crash in 1998 made trade relations between the two countries very unstable. Also, the ability of Estonian and Russian business interests to influence political attitudes decreased. Although Latvia did not have the problem of double customs tariffs with Russia, tension in political relations prevented establishment of normal economic relations.

As indicated in table 1, political and economic relations are clearly interdependent. If trade exchange with Russia is not among the first priorities of Estonia and Latvia, for Lithuania the situation is different.

With Estonia and Latvia, Russian foreign policy is focused on the protection of the rights of Russian minorities. With Lithuania, where this card is useless, Moscow has developed more subtle tactics.

Moscow has consistently used Lithuania as an example to other Baltic states

**TABLE 1. Share of Russia in Exports and Imports of Baltic States, July–August 2002**

	Export		Import	
	%	Rank	%	Rank
Estonia	3	10	6	4
Latvia	6	5	9	3
Lithuania	13	2	22	1

*Sources:* Statistical Offices of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

of how to communicate with Russia. At the same time, Russia does not hesitate to use its influence on the Lithuanians. For example, the Lithuanian-Russian border agreement has not yet been concluded.

Constant negative propaganda concerning the Baltic states, especially Estonia and Latvia, has made public opinion about Russia quite hostile. At times the propaganda war became so acute and targeted that Russian authorities were not afraid to lie. Here I refer to the information “leaked” by the Russian press on the activity of women snipers of Baltic descent against Russian troops in the North Caucasus during the first Chechen War. Naturally, those accusations were not confirmed. Yet, the propaganda had achieved its goal.

Hence, it is no miracle that in a public opinion poll in summer 2001 Russians considered the Baltic states, together with the United States, to be their number-one adversaries.<sup>9</sup>

Yet making settlement of humanitarian issues or the rights of Russian minorities a precondition for solving all other questions has taken Russia to a dead end. Although Russia has postponed the conclusion of several agreements (border agreements, economic treaties) with the Baltic states, referring to a better “foreign political climate” and hoping for the fulfillment of their constant demands, an opposite effect has been achieved. Russia’s rigid pressure has contributed greatly to quick withdrawal of the Baltic states from the Soviet heritage and accession to the military and economic-political structures of the West. If we assume that the goal of Russia was to retain as much influence as possible over the Baltic states, it has been totally unsuccessful.

#### **NATO and EU as Icebreakers in Russian-Baltic Relations**

During her visit to Tallinn in November 2002, Russian Vice Prime Minister Valentina Matviyenko began her speech at the plenary session of the Estonian-Russian inter-government committee by reading a familiar line of demands.<sup>10</sup> The Estonians listened in silence. Matviyenko’s introduction was an obligatory part of the Russian foreign political arsenal. Unfortunately, such dogmatic messages,

already doomed to failure, sounded outdated, especially in light of the changes in international relations after September 2001.

As stated above, during the time Yevgeni Primakov was foreign minister, foreign communication was for the most part coordinated by the Foreign Ministry, then after Vladimir Putin was elected president, the situation completely changed and the decision center of foreign policy became the Presidential Administration.

According to Kremlin insiders, the Foreign Ministry has changed substantially—into a state institution merely fulfilling orders or running from old inertia; sometimes notifying the foreign minister about new ideas or initiatives is even “forgotten.”<sup>11</sup> The entire governing agenda is implemented by President Putin and his team.

Under Putin, the secret service, especially the Russian foreign intelligence service, is increasingly important in foreign policy. The career diplomats of the Foreign Ministry and the officials of the foreign intelligence service have always been public rivals in foreign embassies. The Russian Foreign Ministry has simply not been flexible enough in the globalizing and rapidly changing world. That concerns not only Russian-Baltic relations, although they are a vivid example, but also the behavior of the Russian Foreign Ministry in several other directions (for example, the Near East).

The Baltic states' accession to the European Union and to NATO will open new possibilities for a positive rather than a negative background for resolving the differences between Moscow and the Baltic capitals. The political fight for geopolitical affiliation of the Baltic states should not be seen as a loss to Russia and a victory for the western countries. On the contrary, the Baltic states, which have been left to their fate all through their history, are about to become part of an area producing stability and welfare.

NATO's summit in Prague was a historic event for the Baltic states. For the first time, as independent countries, geopolitical affiliation with military-political union is determined by their own free will. To join NATO and the European Union has been a main priority in the foreign policies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. On one hand, the process has pushed candidate countries for more vigorous internal reforms, without which the successful movement toward NATO or the European Union would not have been possible. On the other hand, it is important from the foreign policy viewpoint that the three Baltic states join NATO and the European Union simultaneously.

In 1997, only Estonia of the three Baltic states was invited to negotiate with the European Union. And for a long time only Lithuania was considered eligible for NATO membership. Such a division would have been a strategic mistake and would certainly give Russia an opportunity for geopolitical manipulations. Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, in his memoir *The Russia Hand*, vividly described how in spring 1997, during the meeting in Helsinki, Russian president Boris Yeltsin offered to his American colleague, Bill Clinton, a gentlemen's deal. According to this deal, the United States had to give at least a verbal promise that NATO would never expand to the ex-Soviet territory. Clinton politely rejected the proposition.<sup>12</sup>

Clarifying the border issues will bring long-awaited stability to the relations between the Baltic states and Russia. The chairman of the Russian Federation Council's Committee for International Affairs, Mikhail Margelov, giving a speech in a workshop organized by the Baltic Center of Russian Studies in March 2002 in Tallinn, said that the time of emotions in the relations between the two countries had to be put to rest.<sup>13</sup> Of course, it is not easy to dispel the stereotypes described above. We should not forget that as recently as in 1996, 93 percent of Russians were in favor of using military-political measures if Baltic states were accepted into NATO alliance. So it is not surprising that during last years the Russian official rhetoric when describing the aspirations of the Baltic states toward NATO, has been pronouncedly negative. But even here, especially during the last year, remarkable changes have occurred.

A speech of President Putin in September 2001 (just before 11 September), during a joint press conference with Finnish President Tarja Halonen, can be considered a breaking point. "It is their own choice, though we see no objective reason for NATO expansion," said Putin to the journalists when commenting on the Baltic states' aspirations toward NATO.<sup>14</sup> That was the first time the head of the Russian state actually agreed with NATO enlargement to include the Baltic states.

In recent times, the rhetoric of Russian official representatives has been guided mainly by President Putin's thoughts. The president repeated his position again on 22 June 2002 during a press conference in the Kremlin. Answering the question of an Estonian journalist Putin declared: "I think it would be a tactical and strategic mistake to obstruct Estonia's entry into NATO. If Estonia wants to join, then let it, if it thinks that it is best for it. I don't see it as any kind of a tragedy."<sup>15</sup>

The head of the Kremlin's information department, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, during a meeting with an Estonian journalist at the end of October 2002, introduced a new aspect to the Russian official rhetoric, namely that NATO enlargement will actually create conditions for the improvement of bilateral relations. "Inclusion of Baltic States into NATO will free Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from the fears of the past and that will have positive influence on their relations. As I understand, the NATO membership is for you a question of psychological security," said Yastrzhembsky, adding that "this gives you an opportunity to deal with Estonian-Russian relations more calmly than so far."<sup>16</sup>

The deputy undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, Harri Tiido, called Yastrzhembski's statements a positive sign: "This shows that in Russia the psychological phobia concerning NATO enlargement to its western borders is decreasing . . . [and] certainly increases Estonia's feeling of security and that always helps to organize better international relations."

When talking about NATO enlargement to the east, Yastrzhembsky did not once use negative expressions; to the contrary: "Estonia as a NATO member will communicate with Russia on a new level, but Estonia must place itself into the frame of relations between NATO and Russia that are already established," he declared.<sup>17</sup>

Serious psychological barriers are falling down. This is evidenced, for example, by the workshop "Regional Security and NATO Expansion: Outcome for



Baltic States, Scandinavia, and Russia's Western Border Areas" that took place 17–18 October 2002 in Pskov, situated few miles from the Estonian and Latvian borders. The workshop was organized jointly by the Russian Federation Council Committee for International Affairs (Mikhail Margelov represents Pskov oblast as a senator) and the NATO Information Office in Moscow and was the first workshop of this type in Russia. Not very long ago, such a workshop would have been impossible because of Russia's rigid opposition to NATO expansion. Now the emphasis on NATO-Russia relations has changed and includes questions concerning the alliance's expansion to the east.

The only concern of Russia's officials, coming mainly from the representatives of Defense Ministry, is that the Baltic states are not among those European countries that have joined the Conventional Armed Forces Treaty. But even here the rhetoric has nothing to do with the NATO enlargement process and could rather be interpreted as Russian generals' implied consent to NATO expansion to the Baltic states.

During the workshop in Pskov, the representative of the Russian Defense Ministry was out of arguments when he was told that the Conventional Armed Forces Treaty was not open to new members due to purely legal reasons.

Indeed, enlargement of NATO and the European Union to the east coast of the Baltic Sea gives a strong impulse for stability in that region. The Baltic states that, because of their geopolitical location, have always been a buffer between the Western countries and Russia can finally abandon the status of buffer countries. By removal of that geopolitical dimension, the economic attraction of the region will undoubtedly increase. It is hoped that will be the determining factor in overcoming the prejudiced behavior models that have prevailed since the collapse of the Soviet empire.

Russia now has to seriously review its policy in the Baltics. If in the 1990s Moscow viewed the Baltic states as "near abroad" (read: the territory of the former Soviet Union), toward which permissible and impermissible diplomatic pressure methods could be applied, Russia now must consider the interests of the European Union and NATO as a whole. Quite probably resolving key issues in the relations between Russia and the Baltic states will become easier and less painful. According to Russian vice prime minister Valentina Matviyenko, the admission of the Baltic states into NATO and the European Union will create a new dimension in bilateral relations between the Baltic states and Russia.

As a member of NATO and the European Union it is much easier for Estonia to communicate with Russia. Political forces in the three Baltic states no longer have to weigh their every political step in relation to Russia, which until now was directly connected to the achievement of those priorities. At the same time, it should be realized that the problems accumulated through years and the general crisis of trust in Baltic-Russian relations do not provide possibilities for rapid breakthroughs.

### **What Next?**

The expansion of NATO and the European Union into the Baltic States is a good precondition for the normalization of Baltic-Russian relations. Already the offi-

cial reactions of Russia to those crucial decisions provide a clear sign of the ending of the cold war era in relations with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Naturally, those processes are supported by the general situation in international relations, including the warming of relations between the western countries (especially the United States) and Russia induced by anti-terrorist war. In fact, never before during the past decade has the situation in Baltic-Russian relations been as hopeful as it is now.

So far the Baltic-Russian relationship has, more than anything else, lacked dialogue. If both sides can leave behind the disturbing images of the past (assuming that there is no point in expecting that today's Russia will do penance for earlier actions in the Baltic states) there is the chance that the relations left over from the cold war will be dominated by mutually advantageous trade rather than continued hostility.

Above all, the border agreements concluded and ratified between Russia and the Baltic states become the main indicator of the bilateral relations. As mentioned above, those agreements have waited for years for a favorable political time. The signing of border agreements is technically not that important, as the borders function despite a formal agreement, and the lack of such an agreement does not hinder the accession of the Baltic states to NATO and the European Union. Yet these agreements are important from the psychological dimension. Baltic-Russian relations have lacked expressions of good will, mainly from Russia, and finalizing the border agreements depends on the political will of Russia. The border agreements would also give a boost to the solution of many other problems, above all agreements regulating economic cooperation.

Under the present conditions, it is not easy for Moscow to proceed to settle the Baltic issue. Russians will be busy with election campaigns in 2003 and early 2004. Elections to the Russian Duma will be held in December 2003; in March 2004 the presidential elections will take place. It is quite likely that nothing will happen until then. Russia simply will not have the time for the Baltic states.

However, after the possible re-election of President Putin and the entering into office of the new administration (Putin's team) the Baltic issue could become one to be solved on a routine political basis. This requires the political circles of Russia and the Baltic states to take steps to increase trust between them.

#### NOTES

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2. *Postimes*, 19 January 1998.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Postimes*, 25 November 2002.

5. Sources: Latvian Register of the Population and Statistical Yearbook of Estonia 2001. See also Marko Mihkelson, "Russia's Policy toward Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Baltic States," in *Toward an Understanding of Russia. New European Perspectives*, edited by Janusz Bugajski (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2002), 97–115.

6. Mart Helme, *Kremli tähtede all* (Tallinn: Monokkel, 2002).

7. *Ibid.*, 199.

8. A very good case study about Estonian-Russian talks on border is *Eesti tähendused, piirid ja kontekstid*, edited by Eiki Berg (Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2002).
9. Polit.ru, 6 June 2001.
10. *Postimees*, 8 November 2002.
11. Author's interview with a high Russian diplomatic official in Moscow.
12. Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand. A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 238.
13. RIA-Novosti, 25 March 2002.
14. *Helsingin Sanomat*, 3 September 2001.
15. *Postimees*, 22 June 2002.
16. *Postimees*, 29 October 2002.
17. Ibid.