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RUSSO-BALTIC RELATIONS AFTER THE SOVIET UNION

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Summary

From the very beginning of the Soviet regime, Baltic states had a different place and issue in the Russian agenda. They had reacted harshly Soviet practices although they have some inevitable links with Russia from the political, commercial, sociological points of views. Unlike other Soviet republics, these states are members of NATO and the European Union. These affiliations have added some new dynamics in the relationships that are worthwhile to scrutinize. The study tries to trace the causes of concerns and interests of the Russia- Baltic relations.

Keywords: Russia, Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Soviet Union, Post-Soviet Era, European Union, NATO.

Introduction

I prefer to study on this issue for tracing the legacies of the Soviet regime by taking Baltic states that are on the verge of the Europe. Unlike Central Asian republics under the Soviet rule, they were able to build their states and nations in more accurate way. They did not embrace strong political figure, in other terms, one-man rule, rather they adopted parliamentary democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union. That's why, I think that Baltic states must be in detailed analysed in order to stabilize and consolidate the Russian and Baltic transformation process.

The article firstly and briefly overview the commonalities and differences of three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. At the same time, from the sociological, economic and more importantly demographical points of views, it gives some different tendencies among three

Baltic states. Then, it is vital to examine the short history of Baltic states from the very beginning of the Soviet rule and German experience on the territory. Here, it can be argued that they declared their independence for a short time by taking the opportunity of turmoil in the Soviet Union and Germany. In fact, the period determined the following developments in the countries that pave the way for real independence after the fall of the Soviet Union. These parts of the study can be regarded as first phases of the maturation that would consolidate through the membership in NATO and the European Union. In this stage, we must consider other elements in the Russia- Baltic relations such as Russian minority in the Baltic, commercial ties, administrative rearrangements thanks to European Union. The study will seek to cover all milestones which have left marks on the agenda in past and today, even future. And finally, the study will combine all important data which are acquired in the paper in an attempt to find out the facts in politics and attitudes.

Commonalities and Differences

There were some remarkable peculiarities of the Baltic states as compared to the other Soviet republics. They were not exposed to direct military attack or provocation by Russia, more accurately, Russia's eschewal from intervention in contrast to as it did in some Soviet Union republics, such as Caucasus, Moldova differentiates the Baltic countries from the others which had experienced the Soviet period. Moreover, the three Baltic states have unique language and culture, they had an interwar period of independence movements during the Gorbachev period. Also they have advanced impressively toward strong parliamentary democracy.^[1] Likewise, this peculiarity set apart the Baltic countries from other Soviet republics which adopted strong presidential regime around a commanding political figure in Central Asian states after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For these reasons, Russia has paid utmost importance to the region both in past and future. It will be probable to attach importance to the region in the future. These peculiarities and its geographical location on the verge of Europe draw all attention towards the three Baltic states.

Since the very beginning of the emergence of the Soviet Rule, Baltic countries followed a different path from the other components of the Soviet Union. Their cultural values, nation-building structure and European dimensions are some of the various aspects of the three Baltic countries. The three Baltic countries and Poland were sticking points between Germany and the Soviet Union.

Today, the stability of the region is vital for Western Europe as well as Central and Eastern Europe. As it was in the past, these states have experienced Soviet tradition on one hand, European values on the other one. "In the recent stormy years and perhaps even more so in recent months, the future of the three Baltic Republics, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, has been causing deep concern to those dealing with and responsible for the establishment of international peace, lasting friendly relations, and collaboration at the end of this war between the great western democracies, on one side, and the great Soviet totalitarian State, on the other"^[2].

The Soviet legacy became a sensitive issue for these states for their future after their independences. The point here is that as being components of the former Soviet Union republics, the Baltic countries desire to keep themselves out of Russian control and they did not prefer to be members of the Commonwealth of Independent States because of the hatred their Union-membership in Soviet period. As the other hot issue in the Russia-Baltic relations, considering a remarkable number of native Russian people in Baltic countries, especially in Estonia and Latvia obliged to Russia to protect them against titular people and Russian political figures have claimed that they had a natural right to interfere with the ingenious policies on citizenship through the near abroad policy which means major neighbour country Russia has still adopted the region as a sphere of influence. For Baltic

countries, this attitude is contrary to the desire of being independent from Russian influence and hegemony.

There have been some outcrying issues in the relations between Russia and Baltic countries, the installation of Russian troops and Russian authority regards the withdrawal of these troops as a bargaining chip in order to get greater political rights for the Russian minority in the Baltics.^[3]

Likewise, after the fall of the Soviet Union, two Baltic countries in which most Russian minority have resided passed important legislative acts favouring rights of homeland-titular nations rather than those of the Russian. I mean that they introduced political and electoral rights stipulating proficiency in state language policies.^[4] It can be claimed that these policies were against the Russian people in Estonia and Latvia. Particularly, for most Estonians, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought an opportunity to restore and secure the linkage between their cultural identity and the state, that is, an opportunity to 'Estonise' the state they live in by means of citizenship and language policies.^[5] More accurately, the policies serve the purpose of excluding Russian people who have resided in Baltic countries since the Soviet era and depriving them from citizenship and electoral rights as an indication of feeling of mistrust. These problematic issues heightened the tension and antagonism against Russian hegemonic desire on the Baltic population. Especially after the Soviet occupation on the Baltics in 1940-1991, they began to build their national identities on rejection of Russian dominance and humiliation of Russia as "non-European state which has repeatedly colonized its weaker European neighbours"^[6] They have fostered to form their identities around common Russian opposition but common values around Europeanness. In spite of all differences in three states, all of them achieved to form common identity around Western values and norms. In the wake of greater enlargement of the European Union in 2004, the identity formed around Europeanness and dynamics of the relations with Russia will be in detailed scrutinized in the following parts of my study as member of the European Union.

After the Communist rule, the Baltic states content with some hardships such as lacking their own political, economic, diplomatic institutions inherited by the Soviet administrative apparatus. In fact, they had lacked their own institutions as a constituent of Soviet Union, but these institutions were orchestrated by the Moscow as departments of the 'All Union' ministries were solely appendage of the real conductor. For that reason, each institution had to be constructed largely from scratch.^[7] This administrative system will have converted into new management model as I will examine in the following part of my study.

Meanwhile, Russian government could not far away from the transformation process of the Baltic states via European Neighbourhood Policy. As for the identity formation around the triangle of European, Baltics and Russian formations, it can be argued that European Neighbourhood Policy which aims at creating and promoting prosperity and stability and clinging to European values in the eastern part of the Union converged on the Baltics with Russian "Near Abroad Policy" which connotes prolonged Russian influence by regarding Russian minority in other countries as Russian political appendage. Within the Soviet period, Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia were so high that forty-eight percent of the Latvian population and forty percent of Estonian population were non-titular population^[8] while this ratio was not so high in Lithuania according to census conducted in 1989. In this respect, although Russians live all around the world, the Russians living in the post-Soviet space are singled out and they are the ones who need to be defended.^[9] Between two different path followed by two different international actor as the European Union on the one hand and the Russian Federation on the other, the Baltic countries led to a stalemate. But, in reality, as I have mentioned before, Russia has adopted different attitude towards the three Baltic countries by being solemn for Baltic policies. But, it different manner of attitude does not show the

inferiority of them on Russian political agenda, on the contrary, it asserted the inevitable place of them in burning problems in today's Russian political and military security.

Frankly, it prioritizes the strategic location of the countries since they are seen as exit point to Baltic Sea and gates towards to the core of the Europe. For that reason, Russia preferred to take initiative in Baltic affairs by declaring its concerns on energy, security policies and minority issues in an attempt to impede the accession process of these states in international organizations that would pose worrisome threats against Russian sphere of influence. By and large, one of the fundamental underlying causes of the Russia-Baltic states is the overdependence of the Baltics on Russian economic inputs and Russian gas as in the case of the European Union, today. Yet, I will not deeply examine the economic dependency of Russo-Baltic relations so that not get off the general course. Rather I will convey some general situation about energy and economy field since these are far-reaching issues that must be in detailed handled separately in other study. For that reason, I would like to narrow my focus on heated topics such as minority issues, the European Union and NATO enlargement and their repercussions on Russia-Baltic relations.

Up to now, the article tried to briefly evaluate the lingering agonies in the Russia- Baltic relations. Before coming to the point, it is vital to look at the Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and taking the facts into account from the historical point of view.

Three Baltic Countries: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

History in Brief

Up to 1918, three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, were parts of the Russian Empire, then they became a part of the Russia in 1940. The invasion can be seen as the first Soviet invasion. In fact, they were exposed to Russian invasion for two times and German invasion for ones. For three Baltic countries, the year of 1917 signalled an opportunity for independence. I mean that Russia strove hard to consolidate power after the Bolshevik rule and German defeat in the World War I granted the opportunity for the Baltic countries. The international arena was suitable and fruitful for such an act.

They were able to manage putting some concrete steps in internal affairs. Although they were able to make progress in some fields such as land distribution, education cultural autonomy for minorities, they were not able to manage to find effective solution for their nations' security.^[10] By 1920, a "cordon sanitaire," as established by the Western Powers^[11] in order to draw a line and hinder the expansion of the Soviet Communism through the Eastern and Central Asia.

Another important date for them was the August 23, 1939 when Ribbentrop- Molotov Pact was signed by the Russia and Germany. The world was stunned by the announcement of a Soviet-Nazi pact of "neutrality and non-aggression" on August 23.^[12] In line with this Pact, two parties would be neutral in case of an attack or threat posed against one of two countries. And more strikingly the eastern half of Poland and the three Baltic Republics, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were under the influence of the Soviet Union. By doing so, Poland, Finland and three Baltic states were divided between two major powers. Before Soviet Russia was forced into this war by Hitler's unprovoked attack, the Soviet Russia had converged on the division of the region with Germany by which Germany recognized Soviet Russia's annexation of the Baltic States and the eastern part of Poland, while Soviet Russia recognized Germany's incorporation of Memel into the Reich and the annexation of the remaining part of Poland^[13] Through this Pact, Soviet Russian was granted some important opportunities what it wanted to do in the region. Furthermore, important privileges of

Russian deployment on garrisons and air bases were given to Soviet Russia through a series of treaties with the Baltic States. In 1940, pro-Soviet governments were installed and as part of the Soviet Union, newly-elected parliaments of three Baltic countries applied for becoming parts of the Union as Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic and Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. Yet, Nazi Germany could not prepare to sacrifice the Baltic States to the Soviet rule. For that reason, the region was under the Nazi invasion between 1941-1944. But three countries were preoccupied by the Soviet Union in 1944. From then on, they were ruled by the Moscow rule to their independences.

The Baltic States as Soviet Republics

The brief scrutiny on the history of the Baltic states prove us the importance of the Baltic states for major powers. The geography have witnessed the fervent ambitions of Germany and the Soviet Union. Especially, the Soviet experience made mark on the past and fate of three states. In this part, the article will handle some of the Soviet practices by taking some outstanding political figures both in Moscow rule and Baltic states. It will seek to find out to what extent the Communist rule could manage to consolidate its regime and by which means local people reacted against them.

The Baltic region was located on the target path of the Soviet expansion by spreading the Russian Revolution through the Western countries. Likewise, the Baltic was seen as barrier against Soviet expansion through the core of the Europe. Under the auspices of some pro-Soviet spear heads, such as Colonel Jukums Vācietis, Pēteris Stučka, Jēkabs Peters, Augusts Voss from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania formed the backbones of the Soviet repercussions in three Baltic countries in addition that they tried to lay the foundations Bolshevik regime in Russia. These political figures held the authority and carried out the orders of the Moscow rule as each of them to be loyal to Russification policy in Baltic countries for a long time. Alongside of the Russification process as it did in other Union republics, linguistic policies were tried to be carried out although the Baltic countries were unduly attached to their own traditions and language. As Augusts Voss, Communist Party first secretary, stated: “ Everywhere people very much strive for mastering for Russian language, and this striving manifests itself more and more widely. Therefore the party organizations and Soviet bodies constantly have to see to it that all conditions are created to satisfy the wish, which in our country is caused by the objective logic of the building of communism.”^[14]

As for the Soviet policies on the Baltic region, it is vital to grasp the extent and impact on the local peoples. Frankly, confiscation of lands and restricted lands to be left for private ownership was directly contrary to the Baltic dream of every peasant owning his own family farm.^[15] This agrarian policy induced the low level of production, but in the aftermath of Stalin rule, economic central structure was loosened through the political thaw and this policy resulted in increase in agricultural production in the Baltic countries even if Union republics had to adhere to rules of the Moscow based State Planning Committee. In fact, this economic thaw for farmers was not only vital for their survival, but also creates an autonomous space for them in the Soviet system.^[16]

The Communist reality in the Baltic countries entered a new period with Khrushchev's authority in the center after the suffocating practices of Stalin. Concretely, nationalized banks and industry, Soviet practices on monetary policies of the Baltic states in the very beginning of the Soviet rule. However, Khrushchev period was associated with the Sovnarkhoz system that brought about territory-based economic management. Henceforth, for instance, control of 80 percent of Estonia's industry passed to a Regional Economic Council, whereas previously three quarters of enterprises had been in the hands of sectoral ministries in Moscow.^[17] That course reversed again by Brezhnev

in 1964. The Moscow rule continued to regard the Baltic countries as laboratory for their economic experiments, by the end of 1960s, it paved the way for increasing income for the Baltic countries than other Soviet countries.

According to western authors, Baltic countries were "helpless victims of Soviet expansionism ...which ...had no alternative but to submit."^[18]

In sociological terms, the first years of the Soviet rule marked a quiet number of deportations of people suspected of being opponent to Soviet rule. Roughly, 39.000 Lithuanian, 35.000 Latvian and 61.000 Estonian citizens were deported in 1940-1941. These numbers did not cover those of imprisoned people.^[19] Although imprisonment on political grounds continued until the 1980s, the number of arrests was on a much diminished scale: tens of individuals annually in each Baltic republic, rather than thousand arrests.^[20] However, within the thaw period of Khrushchev those deported people were allowed to go back even if they were not able to return their home in 1950s.

All in all, these states were imposed by the Soviet regime, but their Soviet legacy has not easily lost its influence. For the statements by the Russian government, the current dispute between Russia and the Baltic states is whether the Baltic countries voluntarily joined the Soviet Union or not in 1940s. According to Russian government, these states invited Soviet troops to occupy their territory at the beginning of the 1940s. On the other hand, three states blamed on Russian government since it did not apologize for the crimes in the Soviet periods as a successor of the Soviet Union. Yet, Moscow did not come to terms with any responsibility for that period. They declared that post-Soviet Russia should not be held accountable for the crimes of the Soviet regime.^[21]

Post-Soviet Era, New Tendencies towards the European Union

In this part of the study, it will seek to find to find path followed by the three Baltic countries towards the European Union as democratic league after the coercive and central Soviet regime. It will try to cover to what extent the dynamics of the legacies of the Soviet regime had stamp its imprint on the region and to what aspects these mixture of legacies will play important role in the fate of three countries. Naturally, it will be paid utmost attention to Russia-Baltic relations regarding Western affiliations of these countries. The part will firstly cover the changing atmosphere in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania within the European Union. Administrative reform process and breaking old structure will be examined by regarding commonalities and differences in that process. Concomitantly, in what aspects these changing dynamics have left its mark on Russia-Baltic relations.

Membership negotiations were began with firstly Estonia, and then with Latvia and Lithuania and completed in 2002. Moreover, all three Baltic states gradually continued to adapt the European legal and political system in that process. As for the reactions from Russia on this new enlargement process, one can claim that the European Union was considered as economic union rather than security organization that would pose threat to Russia as in the case of NATO. Along these lines, Russian thought that the circumstances of the Russian-speaking people residing in the Baltic countries would be altered and ameliorated through regulations on language and citizenship issues. In fact, the Russian-speaking people were more enthusiastic for the European Union membership as compared to titular people in the Baltic. The Baltic states can thus become some kind of bridge between Europe and Russia, contributing to the integration of Russia with Russia.^[22]

Although Russian political figures declare that they have right to protect the Russian people in the Baltic states through near abroad policy, the underlying cause of this interventionist

declarations demonstrate that they have still see the region as Russia's sphere of influence. Furthermore, hawkish declarations on NATO enlargement towards the Baltics by Russian politicians have been issued in mid-1990s. In a similar vein, same political stance has been continued ever since through the National Security Concept in 2000. On the other hand, threat perception calmed when presumptive membership to the European Union and the NATO. As in Eastern Europe countries, the Baltic countries regarded this improvement as "return to the West". EU referendum conducted in 2003 forced people to prefer one of these two options, namely being members of the Western organizations, affiliation to these Western organizations or being perpetually dependent on Russia.^[23]

All three states desire to get rid of the Soviet legacy and alter their courses towards the Western world. Three Baltic countries have disposed to realize reforms somewhat similar ways. In line with this aim, they began to change their public administrative structure in the second half of the 1990s. It means to get rid of entrenched Communist nomenclature in the system. They have themselves to New Public Management (NPM) Movement and also established institutions for new system rather than old Soviet bureaucracy. In spite of all efforts, some realities cannot be underestimated in order to fully cover the issue. Namely, for instance in Lithuanian case, new direction towards to the European Union cannot be easily determined because of the high-dependency on Russian energy, trade and also it had to struggle against corruption in living up the requirements of the Copenhagen Criteria. With a view to overcome this problem, Lithuania cooperated with Poland which has important links with the major European countries, such as French and Germany. Like in the Lithuanian case, Latvia, which was the most industrialized republic in the Soviet Union, unfortunately highly depended on Russia trade and raw materials. As for the Estonian case, it enthusiastically tried to apply European rule in transforming its public administrative and economical sector unlike other two Baltic countries did because it seemed more eager to adapt the European Union against probable threat posed by Russia.^[24]

As for Russia-Baltic relations, one can argue that Russia had to change its course, the policies towards the Baltic countries after their independence and their affiliations to key international organizations and also as Russia loses its superior power and being a regional power, it has become an obligation rather than a preference. Yet Russia acquired something vital for Baltic policies and European Union. Blatantly, energy issue has been used as a trump card by Russia against Baltic countries and accordingly against the European Union. By doing so, increasing the dependence of the Baltic on Russia would be useful for Russian ambitions on Baltic and bargaining power in world politics. Overtly, Russia regards the countries as pawn and agent in the Euro-Atlantic institutions leaving the Baltic states weak, isolated and subservient neighbours, maintained as peripheral players inside NATO and the European Union.^[25] What the membership of the Baltic countries accounts for Russia? In practical terms, rules and regulation of the European Union would put some restrictions on Russian influence on the region regarding trade because of EU market regulations and visa requirements for Russian people.

Whatever the future path taken, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have experienced a more profound process of democratization and are, since May 2004, members of the European Union.^[26]

Post-Soviet Era, New Tendencies towards the NATO

Here, the article will try to elaborate the NATO expansion in the Baltic countries and by which means and what aspects this issue forms one of the backbones of Russia- Baltic relations. To attain this aim, it will handle the accession process of these three states into the organization as a security union. This part explores the impacts of Baltic membership in NATO.

The scheduled withdrawal of the Russian troops from the Baltic expedited the normalization process in the region after the Soviet rule. As in the case of European Union, they had to modernize their militaristic capacities from the scratch to live up to standards of NATO forces. As I mentioned before, they had no capacity for military or police apparatus since the Soviet period.

With regard the attitudes of the people of Baltic states, public support for NATO membership is also strong in all three countries. In Latvia, a poll taken in December 2002 showed that 68.5 percent of the population supported membership in NATO. Polls in Estonia consistently show support for NATO running about 70 percent, while those in Lithuania indicate that over 75 percent of the population support Lithuania's membership in NATO.^[27]

The first thing to say is Russia did not assess and look optimistically the NATO expansion towards the Baltic as it did in European Union enlargement. For Russia, NATO was found against Russia and suspicious attitude toward this organization may continue to occupy the agenda in Russia-the West relations and Russia-the Baltic states relations unless it convert into a political organization rather than a security one. In that vein, according to some authors, accession of the Baltic states to NATO should be a step for both the Europe and Russia for transformation, promotion of democracy and it may pave the way for conversion into political organization from a security organization. The delicate process has to be run by the Western authority. In attain to this aim and in order to create more stable foreign policy in Baltic and narrow the Russia's maneuver, it would be plausible to invite all three Baltic states together to be new members in the 2002 summit in Prague.^[28]

In fact, NATO was reluctant for the Baltic states to be members of the organization because of the fear of touching the interests of Russia in the region. However, the security and entry into the organization had to be prioritized by the Western authorities regardless of the Russian concerns. But, as the time went on, NATO and Baltic states launched some attempts with a view to calm Russian concern. Namely, they declared that it would not deployed any nuclear weapons or troops in the region unless there is threat perception in Baltic region.

At the end of the day, three Baltic states affiliated NATO on the March 29, 2004. This development has a broad repercussion in Russian government. I mean that some governmental authorities state that they have to rethink the Russian foreign policy and deploy Russian troops in the region in order to assure the security of the Russian borders. In fact, Russia would use its card against especially Estonia and Latvia in which host quite number of Russian minority by putting their minority rights forward on the NATO-Baltic relations as in the European Union-Baltic relations. In that sense, it can be said that Russia did not admit the entry of Baltic states in NATO, yet it took the advantage of blackmailing these states. However, today, three Baltic states have been able to adapt their electoral and citizenship laws in accordance with the European Union norms. Again, today, what is more to the point here is that Russian minority see their future in European Union and NATO, rather than under the surveillance of Russia. It fetters the Russian ability to use Russian minority issue in Baltic agenda.

Indeed, one cannot deny the inevitability of the Baltic states in European and Russian security in case of probable insecurity would pose threat against other littoral states in the region and whole Europe. For that reason, Russia and three states share a responsibility in protecting stability.^[29]

“Conversely, the preservation of their non-bloc status (and this does not necessarily mean neutrality) would be able to create a basis for bilateral and unilateral steps, and quite concrete ones, capable of dispelling the apprehension for security which is still lingering in the Baltic states.”^[30]

In a nutshell, the Baltic states have determined their path toward the West by affiliating

NATO in 2003, and the European Union in 2004. Although, Russian concerns and desire of influence cause some disturbances on three states, they are able to make progress in their administrative and militaristic apparatus. These positive developments have brought about a variety of alleviations of violations in minority rights and also transformation in public administrative and legal system.

Conclusion

Nowadays, the Baltic states think that they have returned the home as the other Eastern bloc countries did. They see the Soviet period as scourge of God for two times. In contrast, Russian governmental authorities declared in some statements as if they are still under Russian sphere of influence. Furthermore, as I mentioned in my study, they expressed that Soviet invasion was voluntarily invited by the Baltic states. In fact, this contradiction show us the desire of independence of the Baltic states from the very beginning of the Russian Empire and the Soviet rule. And it also shows the stubbornness of the Russian authority in foreign policy for the Baltic states. Russia adopts plausible policies against trends in which Russia itself does not involve. Namely, for Russia, whatever and whoever plays his card on the region, Russia gets suspicious about different political configurations. These obsessive attitudes pave the way for taking Russian concerns into account by the European Union and more importantly for NATO. Under these circumstances, one cannot imagine unilateral foreign policy in the region. Rather, it is plausible to foresee and conduct multilateral foreign policy by involving Baltic states, the European Union, NATO, and surely Russia. Recent developments in the region have demonstrated the concerns of Russia as in the case of deployment of the missile shield on the verge of Europe neighbouring Russia. This is just one of numerous examples in that issue.

Even if Baltic states do not remind the Soviet past, relationship between Russia and Baltic states have been on the brink of transformation and two parties can not sacrifice and ignore the interests of each other. All they need to do is to draw the priorities of their foreign policy titles and keeping the stability of their region for their mutual aim.

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