

The Baltic-Russian History Controversy: From war to diplomacy

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It is routine for countries to send their heads of state to participate in important celebrations in neighbouring states. There was nothing routine, however, about the Latvian and Estonian presidents going to Moscow to take part in Victory Day events on May 9.

To appreciate how big this news was, one only has to recall the Estonian ‘bronze soldier’ crisis in 2007, on the threshold of the same anniversary. The Estonian government’s decision to relocate a Soviet-era WWII memorial and war grave from a busy spot in the centre of Tallinn to a nearby military cemetery caused outrage among the country’s Russian-speaking population and in Russia. The affair spiralled into an international incident with riots in the Estonian capital (one man was killed) and physical assaults on Estonian and Swedish diplomats in Moscow. The crisis shook the vulnerable ethnic calm in Estonia that the country and its Euro–Atlantic allies had invested so much in creating; as a retaliatory step, Russia diverted a sizeable share of its transit routes away from Estonian ports and railways; the Estonian governmental websites came under cyber attack – most likely originating from Russian hackers (and, some believe, endorsed by the Russian secret services). The crisis became an international embarrassment for Russia, while the EU was faced with a conflict that looked very much like a security issue on a European scale.

The events of 2007 were just one culmination in a protracted history war between Russia and the Baltic States. Although political opportunism and populism on both sides contribute to the intensity of this war, at the root of it are genuine differences between Baltic and Russian perspectives on their common 20th century history. The Balts see Russia as a successor to the Soviet Union and want it to apologise for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the ensuing Soviet takeover of the Baltic States in 1940. The official Russian position until recently has been to decline any discussion of these uncomfortable issues, pointing out that today’s Russia and its people cannot be held responsible for the misdeeds of Stalin’s regime. Even more disturbing to the Balts has been the broad tendency to whitewash Stalin and his policies in Russian state-dominated media, public space and education (e.g., a recently published teachers’ text book hailed Stalin as an “effective manager”).

Russia has also found enough to criticise in the Baltic States’ approach to history. The annual events honouring Latvian and Estonian SS legion veterans as freedom fighters (neither condemned nor condoned by the authorities) have received plenty of negative coverage in Russia, and if the Balts have never been too eager to talk about the local accomplices’ role in the Holocaust on their territories during the Nazi occupation, Russian media have more than compensated for this taciturnity. The majority of Latvians,

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Lithuanians and Estonians now interpret the Soviet period as something alien, imposed and universally bad; many of them make no distinction between ‘Soviet’ and ‘Russian’. Russians take offence at such an approach and see it as Russophobic.

Nothing, however, has angered Russians more than the use of the Soviet occupation in 1940 to justify the exclusion of the majority of Russian-speakers from Latvian and Estonian citizenship, which was re-established at the beginning of the 1990s. Although citizenship laws have been liberalised since then, both countries have so far failed to reach genuine reconciliation with their Russian-speaking minorities. Such an application of historical casuistry to disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of people has made Russians all but deaf to the Baltic complaints about Soviet occupation.

On both sides, the political institutions have become part of the history warfare. The Baltic countries have had official commissions calculate the damage from Soviet occupation and the natural next step would be to take Russia to international courts to demand reparations. Returning the favour, some Russian politicians have suggested that a commission be formed to count the Soviet-time investment in Baltic industry and infrastructure – due to be paid back. The European institutions, such as the European Parliament, the European Court of Human Rights and OCSE have been under growing pressure from the Baltic countries demanding that Soviet ‘totalitarian Communism’ be condemned on an equal footing with Nazism and from Russia, which denounces this as a sign of ‘fascist revanchism’ in the Baltic States.

History shapes foreign policy perceptions on both sides, as well. The Balts tend to believe that whatever Russia does is explained by its ineradicable imperialistic instincts. (‘The Molotov-Ribbentrop pipeline’ has become a popular nickname for the Russo-German Nord Stream project in the Baltic countries.) For the Russian political establishment, the Baltic peoples’ swift defection from the collapsing Soviet Union to the EU and NATO only confirms these nations as incurably Russophobic.

Against this background, the May 9 commemoration is one more divisive issue. For Russians – including those living in the Baltic countries – Victory Day is about Europe’s liberation from Nazism; for many Balts, May 9 is about renewed Soviet occupation rather than liberation. For Russians, the day has become a unique moment of national pride. The majority of Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians may understand Russian feelings, but still see themselves as victims rather than victors in the war and do not feel like celebrating. At least both sides agree that the defeat of Nazism was a good thing. Approached from this angle, commemoration of the end of WWII (on May 8 in most of Europe, on May 9 in many post-Soviet states) is a good place to start with historical diplomacy, which, as the events of 2007 demonstrated, is much needed.

This explains why this year, the Latvian and Estonian presidents defied domestic critics and seized the opportunity to break new diplomatic ground as well as some ice in relations with Russia. (President Grybauskaitė of Lithuania stayed at home, confident that her country’s relations with the big neighbour are already good enough for her to dodge the controversial journey without offending Moscow.) Mr. Zatlers and Mr. Ilves are no trailblazers: Latvian Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, alone of the three Baltic presidents, went on a similar visit to Moscow in May 2005, but the no-show of two of her colleagues and her own hawkish way of justifying the decision to go almost overshadowed the visit itself. This time round, the two Baltic presidents’ trip to Moscow was tempered by a reconciliatory tone on both sides. In an interview on the eve of the visit, Mr. Zatlers said that Latvia’s commemoration of the defeat of Nazism and of the victims of WWII on May 8 is fundamentally the same as Russia’s Victory Day. President Medvedev’s denunciation of Stalin has resonated positively with people in the Baltic countries and made it easier for Mr. Zatlers and Mr. Ilves to justify their presence in Moscow.

Another auspicious sign was the fallout of the domestic Russian clash over the figure of Joseph Stalin that accompanied the Victory Day celebrations. Russians are still ambivalent about the man: Stalin is a mass murderer for some, restorer of Russia’s imperial glory for others, confusingly both for others. To the Balts, even such ambivalence is offensive; in their books, Stalin and his regime are evil through and through. An initial plan by the Moscow authorities to put Stalin on Victory Day posters only fuelled the Balts’ darkest fears about the Russian leaders’ true worldview and intentions. Fortunately, Mr. Zatlers and Mr. Ilves were not confronted with images of Stalin while watching the victory parade in Moscow. Perhaps because the people in the Kremlin have finally realised what a dismal reputation the creeping rehabilitation of the dictator has been giving their country; the plans to put Stalin on display among WWII heroes were therefore scrapped.

The new round of history diplomacy between the Baltic States and Russia reflects a mutual desire for more normal, if not yet cordial, relations. Baltic politicians seem to be recognising that Russia is an important

economic partner and that history battles mean lost opportunities for their crisis-ridden economies. They have also discovered that their Euro-Atlantic partners prefer a much more pragmatic stance towards Russia and that most Europeans have some reservations about the Baltic take on WWII history: while sympathetic to the plight of the Baltic peoples under the Soviet occupation, they have no appreciation of the annual commemorations for Latvian and Estonian SS legion veterans. The decision of the two presidents to go to Moscow reflects the understanding that maintaining friendly composure when dealing with the big neighbour is best for the national interests of their countries.

Moscow's approach has become friendlier, too. This is part of a more general trend to return to cooperation with the West and the realisation that Russia's relations with the EU require better relations with Poland and the Baltic States – countries that Russian foreign policy has for a long time discarded as being too Russophobic to be worthy of courting. Finally, the Kremlin may be seeing that making its neighbours fear Russia does not bring the international influence and respect that the Russian leadership so craves. Russia still considers its neighbourhood a zone of special interests, but seems now to be focusing on positive incentives. These range from inviting the Latvian team to play in the Russian hockey league to proposing investment in Baltic energy infrastructure (Russia-sceptics smell a rat of course). Ongoing history warfare does not fit into this scheme.

These pragmatic moves towards rapprochement on both sides cannot bridge the genuine gap of identity and historical memory between the Russians and the Balts overnight, but they could bring reconciliation over history a little closer. Much effort will be required for both societies to stop stereotyping each other, avoid blowing up perceived differences and learn to live with the real ones. Now that even Russia and Poland are groping their way towards reconciliation, it is not inconceivable that the Balts and Russians do the same.