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## Baltic States' Foreign Policies vis-a-vis Russia, in Light of the Ukraine Crisis

By Gediminas Vitkus, Vilnius

### Abstract

Due to their geographical position between Europe and Russia, the Baltic states have always had, and still have, two theoretical development possibilities—either to become a center, a bridge between the East and the West, or to remain a periphery, a border outpost. However, it is likely that the notion of the Baltic states as “a bridge” between the East and the West, between Europe and Russia has to be postponed for better times; meanwhile, at the top of the agenda, is the not very pleasant fate of a border state that has to arm and look for political support to counterbalance imminent threats.

In spite of the fact that many in Russia think that the Baltic states are unfriendly and continually seek to cause damage to its great neighbor, there is a sound basis to suggest that the Baltic states, out of all countries, are particularly interested in good EU and bilateral relations with Russia. Due to their geographical position between Europe and Russia, the Baltic states have always had, and still have, two theoretical development possibilities—either to become a center, a bridge between the East and the West, or to remain a periphery, a border outpost.

This is more than confirmed by changeable turns of the development of economic relations between the Baltic states and Russia over the last two decades. During the periods of relatively good relations between Europe and Russia, the Baltic states could not only themselves trade uninhibitedly with Europe and increase their exports to Russia, but also benefit from the goods transit through the territory of the Baltic states in the directions “East–West” and “West–East”. This was a very significant supplement to their economic growth, because, until the crisis in Ukraine, as much as 80–90 per cent of the Baltic states' foreign exports to Russia consisted of goods that were not produced by them; it was a re-export of goods imported from Europe, as well as the transit of Russia's raw materials and goods to Europe (Mauricas, 2014).

The crisis in Ukraine, the EU sanctions against Russia and in return Russia's embargo on food imports from the EU has inevitably impacted on the economies of the Baltic states, because in 2013 19.8% of Lithuanian, 16.2% of Latvian and 11.4% of Estonian exports were directed towards Russia (Mauricas, 2014). It was the producers of foodstuffs and the transport sector that suffered the most after the closure of the Russian market. Though the latest statistics do not indicate that the GDP of the Baltic states have stopped growing, the economic prognoses—which previously had optimistically stated that these countries would maintain the highest GDP growth rates within the European Union—are now much more modest. Though at the beginning of

2014, the European Commission forecast GDP growth in the Baltic states for 2015 as 3.9% for Lithuania, 4.3% for Latvia, 3.6% for Estonia, by autumn of 2015, these indicators were correspondingly decreased: for Lithuania to 1.7%, for Latvia to 2.4%, for Estonia 1.9% (European Commission, 2014, 2015). The fact that growth is still predicted is due to increasing internal consumption, investments and export to other markets. Consequently, the economic sanctions war that began between the EU and Russia due to the Ukraine crisis, has by no means ruined the economies of the Baltic states; however, it is obvious that economic growth would be much better and more impressive if the crisis and the sanctions had been avoided and relations with Russia were normal and business-like. Therefore, it is natural that, under such circumstances, business could hope for and should get assistance from politicians and diplomats. However, in this case, the logic of politics completely contradicts the logic of business.

Though the relations between the European Union and Russia before the crisis in Ukraine were neither open-hearted, nor at their best, a certain element of partnership still existed. Leaders of EU states (particularly the major ones) used to regularly meet with President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, in varied formats, while twice per year the EU-Russia summit meeting took place, and negotiations concerning a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement were underway (Haukkala, 2015). Meanwhile, relations between the Baltic states and Russia have always been of a much poorer quality. Excluding a short period of time at the beginning of 1990s when the Baltic States and the Russian Federation were political allies in fighting against the disintegrating Soviet empire, relations between the Baltic states and Russia have been permeated with distrust, the roots of which lie in the history of Soviet occupation and diametrically contradictory interpretations of this history.

Until the present day, the societies and political elites of the Baltic states consider that they have no guarantee that history will not repeat itself, whereas the leaders of Russia have never so much as attempted to dis-

pel that distrust. It never even occurs to them that in order to restore trust and friendly relations, it is first of all necessary to apologize for the wrongs committed in the past or at least to show an elementary respect. So far, no president of Russia has visited a Baltic State since the restoration of their independence. Visits by the leaders of the Baltic states to Russia, or meetings with Putin in other locations, have until now been a rarity. Meanwhile, lower rank Russian politicians, such as the deputy of the Russian Duma, Vladimir Zhirinovski, or the key executor of the trade wars with the Baltic States, the chief of Rospotrebnadzor, Gennadi Onishchenko, on the contrary, have more than once demonstrated their disdainful attitude towards the Baltic states (Socor, 2013). In other words, the relations between the Baltic States and Russia even before the Ukraine crisis were essentially permanently poor, with all consequences ensuing from this.

Since good relations cannot even be hoped for, it becomes important to establish whether the poor relations are only poor or very poor. Until the Ukraine crisis, the Baltic states slightly differed in this respect. The political command of the three states adhered to different diplomatic tactics concerning their complicated neighbor. In essence, it was a choice between a consistently critical and a reasonably pragmatic attitude towards Russia. The first choice would mean that the political regime, the state of democracy and foreign policy of Russia are estimated and commented upon openly and critically. In the second case, this would mean diplomatically refraining from any public critical statements and seeking to bargain over solutions to practical problems.

In comparing the attitude of the three Baltic states before the crisis in Ukraine, it is easy to notice that Latvia and Estonia were much more moderate and avoided an open confrontation with Russia, whereas Lithuania adopted a more critical position and did not believe that a pragmatic attitude towards Russia would yield any benefit. As early as 2007, the authors of the European Council of Foreign Relations study "A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations" took note of this difference and named Lithuania, then also alongside Poland, as "cold war warriors" and attributed Latvia and Estonia to the group of "frosty pragmatists" (Leonard & Popescu, 2007).

This division is not difficult to explain. Latvia and Estonia sought to maintain a bilateral dialogue with Russia, because in spite of becoming NATO and the EU members in 2004, they had yet to conclude agreements concerning border demarcation with Russia. Besides, Latvia and Estonia have numerous Russian minorities that Russia could mobilize for anti-state activities in the case of crisis, as was demonstrated in 2007 by the inci-

dent of the removal of the sculpture the "Bronze soldier" from the center of Tallinn. Besides, in Latvia, the impact of interest groups supporting more pragmatic relations with Russia is palpable.

The more pragmatic position of Latvia, nevertheless, has yielded certain results. The border agreement with Russia was signed and ratified already in 2007. It was the beginning of a certain breakthrough in their bilateral relations. Later, by imitating in a peculiar way the idea to "reset" relations with Russia, raised by the new USA President Obama, Latvia also started a kind of "reset" process of its relations with Russia. From 2008, the Interstate Relations Commission started operating on a regular basis and in 2010, the President of Latvia, Valdis Zatlers, for the first time went on an official visit to Russia, where he met with the then President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, signing a number of bilateral agreements. In fact, having improved relations with Latvia, Russia in a way also benefited, because Latvia, unlike Lithuania, postponed its plans to implement the Third Package of the EU energy policy, and thus to essentially limit the dominance of Gazprom in the gas market (Zagorski, 2015, 233–238).

Estonia, also seeking to improve its relations with Russia after the "Bronze Soldier" crisis in 2007, attempted to focus the bilateral dialogue on practical issues and to avoid criticizing Russia openly. On 9 May 2010, President of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, alongside President of Latvia, even participated in the celebration of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Russia's victory in the Second World War in Moscow.

It should also be mentioned here that the pompous parades arranged by Russia every five years to celebrate the victory of the Soviet Union in the Second World War, and the invitations sent to the leaders of the Baltic states to participate in them, always cause disproportionately great controversies, since the end of this war is no reasons for celebration to these countries, but marks the beginning of a new occupation. Therefore, the decisions taken by the leaders of the Baltic states to go or not to go are widely discussed and talked about by the public, since they not only represent their attitude to the past relations with Russia, but also delineate a perspective for their future development.

It should be noted that the Baltic states have never managed to agree upon this symbolic issue. For example, in 2005, then Presidents of Lithuania and Estonia, Valdas Adamkus and Arnold Rüütel, did not accept the invitation, yet the President of Latvia Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga did go to Moscow. As has already been mentioned, in 2010, the invitation was accepted not only by the Latvian, but also the Estonian President. On the other hand, it most likely contributed to the resumption of the com-

plicated negotiations between Estonia and Russia over the agreement on their border in 2012. Eventually, the agreement on the Estonian-Russian border was signed on the very eve of the annexation of Crimea—on 16 January 2014. However, due to Ukraine crisis and worsened EU-Russia relations, it remains unclear when and if at all the agreement will be ratified.

Meanwhile, the position of Lithuania in bilateral relations has remained consistently critical. Besides disagreements over history between the two countries, relations are tense due to the political decision of Lithuania to prevent the Mažeikiai Oil Refinery from being governed by Kremlin-controlled companies. When eventually in 2006, a decision was made to sell “Mažeikių Nafta” to the Polish company “PKN Orlen”, an “irreparable” failure occurred shortly afterwards to the oil supply pipe “Druzhba”, through which oil had been supplied and the supply to the enterprise was stopped. Lithuania was unable to reach an agreement with Russia on this issue. Partly because of this, in 2008, Lithuania vetoed the decision of the Council of the European Union to give the European Commission a mandate for negotiating a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia. Lithuania was seeking to use these negotiations with the European Commission to oblige Russia to negotiate on the resumption of oil supply by “Druzhba” (Pavilionis, 2008).

The situation at the beginning of her first term in office as President of Lithuania, whereby Dalia Grybauskaitė sought to develop more pragmatic relations with Russia, did not last long. Her meeting, in February 2010 in Helsinki, with the then Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, did not provide any impetus to improve relations. Indeed this meeting was not just a mere failure, but led to a more serious divergence with Grybauskaitė becoming the most consistent and radical critic of Russian policy, even before the crisis in Ukraine.

Of course, Lithuania “paid” the price for that—at the end of 2010, Russian gas became 15 per cent more expensive to Lithuania, as compared with the price for Latvia and Estonia. Furthermore, Lithuania regularly encountered different kinds of embargos. If the entire European Union faced Russia’s embargo on food products only in the second half of 2014, Lithuania had been experiencing such sanctions as early as October 2013, when with no warning the export of Lithuanian dairy products to Russia was cut short. In this way, a clear signal was sent to Lithuania—presiding at that time as the president of the Council of the European Union—that it should stop so zealously seeking the signing of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine.

On the other hand, Russia’s energy blackmail pushed Lithuania to act consistently enough, first of all in seek-

ing to undermine the monopoly of Gazprom, in order to fully implement the EU Third Energy Package. And, to finally build an LNG terminal in Klaipėda, which is now essentially changing the entire situation in the gas and overall energy market of the region. It is possible to state that Gazprom, by charging the highest price in Europe at \$460–\$490 per 1,000 cubic meters in 2013, compared with the EU average of \$370–\$380, helped Lithuania attract potential LNG suppliers (Krutainė & Sytas, 2014).

The crisis in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the shooting down of the Malaysian aircraft, as well as the war in Donbas, came as a great shock to the entire civilized world. This confirmed the assumptions voiced by the politicians of each Baltic states, particularly by Lithuanian politicians, regarding the increasingly aggressive policy of Russia, and that they claims were not merely a consequence of their historical russophobia. This obvious violation of international law and manipulations made an impression even on skeptics and for some time silenced the so-called “Russlandverstehers”. This could not but affect the bilateral relations between the Baltic states and Russia. In this respect, Lithuania’s position changed the least, signaling yet fiercer and more open criticism from Grybauskaitė on every occasion. The assessment of Russia as a terrorist country, as voiced by Grybauskaitė, had wide repercussions in the world’s press. On November 21, 2014 during a joint press conference with the NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, she said: “Today we see in Eastern Ukraine Russian soldiers, Russian troops violate the State itself, negates it blatantly. The State orders its troops to take off its insignia, and to act without insignia, such a State has all the characteristics of a terrorist State. That’s all what I can say” (NATO, 2015).

A little more moderate, yet essentially very critical towards Russia is the tone coming from the President of Estonia. Toomas Hendrik Ilves was one of the first EU heads of state to compare the annexation of Crimea to Nazi Germany’s annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938 (Ilves, 2014). In January 2015, also a consistent critic of Russia, a representative of the center-right Green Party, Raimonds Vējonis, was elected as President of Latvia. He had until then held the post of Latvian Defense Minister and had been directly concerned with NATO involvement in the defense of the country and region.

Though the Ukrainian crisis did not bring about any essential changes in Lithuania’s “Russian policy”, it nevertheless shifted some emphasis within Estonia and Latvia’s policy. Pragmatism in bilateral relations has been replaced by increased concern over the country’s security, and criticism of Russia, which is openly voiced alongside other European countries, as well as provid-

ing principled and unconditional approval of EU sanctions on Russia, in spite of the obvious economic losses to their countries. The existence of relatively large Russian-speaking communities in Daugavpils (Latvia) and Narva (Estonia) has given rise to speculation that, by manipulating these minorities, Russia may, after Ukraine, seek to do the same in the Baltic states. If Lithuania's leaders have long since stopped fostering illusions about the possibility of normalizing relations with Russia, Latvia's willy-nilly policy has had to acknowledge that the "reset" of the relations between Latvia and Russia has failed. And, the only thing that Estonia has to do is to resign itself to its fortune, since it is impossible to predict what fate is awaiting the ratification of the Border Agreement signed already for the second time.

Also, the increase in the Russia threat has made a considerable impact on the defense policy of the Baltic states (especially Latvia and Lithuania). Lithuania and Latvia, whose defense expenditure before the crisis made up only 0.8 and 0.9 per cent of GDP respectively (although as NATO members, they should allo-

cate at least 2 per cent), have been hastened to change their casual attitude and have committed themselves to a gradual increase of defense expenditure aiming to achieve the NATO 2% indicator by 2018 (Adamowski, 2015). Lithuania has decided to reinstate conscription (it was abolished in 2008), increase military personnel and purchase new armaments—artillery systems, mortars, modern infantry fighting vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles. While, even Estonia, which never abandoned conscription and was one of only five NATO members whose defense budget exceeded 2 per cent of GDP, has allocated 40 million euros extra to accommodate forces from NATO allies (Tambur, 2015).

Thus, it is likely that the notion of the Baltic States as "a bridge" between the East and the West, between Europe and Russia has to be postponed for better times; meanwhile, at the top of the agenda, is the not very pleasant fate of border states, which have to arm themselves and look for political support to counterbalance imminent threats.

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## ANALYSIS

## The Baltic States’ Foreign Policies: Relations with Russia and the Impact of the Ukraine Conflict

By Ilvija Bruge, Riga

### Abstract

The Baltic states’ relations with Russia have never been easy. Despite the convergent attitudes towards their eastern neighbour, more often than not it is hard to speak about a joint Baltic approach in any policy area. The crisis in Ukraine, however, has set the stage for closer cooperation among the three countries at least on military matters, and led to an increase in their defence spending—a long needed step for these small NATO members.

Although the international community often perceives the three Baltic states as an integral unit, the cooperation among these countries is rather limited. Despite their common interests and geopolitical situation, cooperation between Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania is restricted and lacks a joint stance. Russia, on the other hand, is one aspect that has always brought the three states together. The common fear from its neighbour’s potential aggression, as well as the active propaganda measures that Russia carries out in the Baltics are the main integrating factors among the three Baltic states.

Soon after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the restoration of independence for the three Baltic states, these countries decisively set integration in NATO structures as a foreign policy priority. Since the Baltic states’ aims for NATO membership were in a clear contrast to Russia’s plans for the Commonwealth of Independent States, this has remained a controversial issue in Russian-Baltic relationship. It has to be noted, that the chosen course of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia and, indeed, most of the Eastern European countries was

clearly based on historical experience and the consequential mistrust in Russia’s security guarantees. That, in addition to other disagreements, such as border agreements, minority issues and contrasting historical interpretations, has provided for an unproductive and mutually suspicious relations between the three Baltic states and Russia. Yet, building rational and productive relations with Russia has been part of the official Baltic states’ foreign policy strategy since the restoration of independence. However, in practice all three countries have been actively expressing their concerns over undemocratic developments and potential aggression from Russia; and along with Poland have often been labelled as “Russo-phobic”.

From the perspective of these countries’, the mistrust has not been in vain. Approaching and even after achieving their membership in NATO, all the Baltic states experienced increased Russian military activity near their borders. Furthermore, war in Georgia in 2008 was another powerful signal demonstrating that their concerns have had reasonable grounds. Finally, the annexa-

tion of Crimea, Russia's hybrid war strategies and ongoing military turmoil in Eastern Ukraine, have succeeded in swaying the international opinion against Russia, giving approval to the Baltic states' cautiousness. Furthermore, the Ukraine crisis has opened doors for closer cooperation among the three Baltic and other countries in the region—to an extent that would have been unfeasible even during the war in Georgia.

### Military Defence

Until recently, the cooperation among the Baltic states, to a large extent, was limited to the EU institutions and NATO, where they had been pursuing somewhat similar policies. It has also been characterised by the above mentioned perception of Russia as a threat. However, in bilateral relations with Russia, the three countries have taken a rather varied stance, stemming from their individual economic and political interests, which even during the Ukraine crisis delayed them in setting out a common strategy and response. Furthermore, the presence of large Russian ethnic minorities in these countries has also impeded the internal formation of a coherent political stance towards Russia.<sup>1</sup>

The common element among all three Baltic states has been the fear of similar developments, as the ones that have taken place in Georgia and Ukraine, occurring in their states. This sentiment has been further promoted by Russia's informational campaign, aimed at causing frictions in these societies. Although the Kremlin propaganda is not a new occurrence in any of the Baltic countries, it has currently been intensified, leading the regimes to become even more wary about Russia's potential aims. This attitude has been long perceived as overly dramatic by Western countries, which did not see Russia's direct military intervention as a plausible scenario. However, the crisis in Ukraine demonstrated that Russia can and does use information warfare as a strategic tool to justify hybrid military intervention.

NATO is seen as the central guarantee for the maintenance of peace and statehood of the Baltic states. Its seeming inability to take a concerted action towards such hybrid threats threatens to weaken public trust in the organisation. The Russia threat has finally intensified the discussion on increasing military spending in each of the Baltic countries. Until now, Estonia is the only Baltic country that has met NATO's general requirement of contributing 2% of their budget to defence. Lithuania and Latvia have never met the requirement and due to public pressure have decreased the spend-

ing even further during the recent economic crisis.<sup>2</sup> The crisis in Ukraine has intensified pressure from NATO and raised concern among both Lithuanian and Latvian political elites and societies, leading to the adoption of resolutions to increase defence spending to 2% by 2020.<sup>3</sup> In truth, the US rather than NATO is seen as the main guarantor of the Baltic states military safety. To put it more precisely, like elsewhere, NATO is often equated to the US. During 2015, the Baltic states along with other Eastern European countries agreed to the deployment of the US troops and heavy weaponry in their territories<sup>4</sup>, hence ensuring US involvement counterbalancing the Russia threat.

The perception of Russia as a threat following its military involvement in Ukraine has spread in the wider Baltic Sea region. It has induced military cooperation initiatives outside NATO structures not only among the three Baltic states<sup>5</sup>, but also with Scandinavian countries. In June 2015, the Nordic Defence Cooperation Partnership (Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark) moved forward with an initiative to give the three Baltic states access to Scandinavian training and armaments. The countries also discussed the creation of a joint missile defence system that would cover the whole Baltic Sea region.<sup>6</sup> Although, in reality, only a few

1 Joanna Hyndle-Hussein, "The Baltic perspective on the crisis in Ukraine", *The Baltic Times*, 13 February 2015, <[http://www.baltic-times.com/the\\_baltic\\_perspective\\_on\\_the\\_crisis\\_in\\_ukraine/](http://www.baltic-times.com/the_baltic_perspective_on_the_crisis_in_ukraine/)>

2 "Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence. Communiqué PR/CP(2014)028)", *NATO Public Diplomacy Division*, 24 February 2014, <[http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_topics/20140224\\_140224-PR2014-028-Defence-exp.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_topics/20140224_140224-PR2014-028-Defence-exp.pdf)>

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4 "ASV izvietos smago bruņojumu Centrāleiropā un Austrumeiropā", *Žurnāls Ir*, 24 June 2015, <<http://www.ir.lv:889/2015/6/24/asv-izvietos-smago-brunojumu-centraleiropa-un-austrumeiropa>>; Eric Schmitt, Steven Lee Myers "U.S. Is Poised to Put Heavy Weaponry in Eastern Europe", *The New York Times*, 13 June 2015, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/14/world/europe/us-poised-to-put-heavy-weaponry-in-east-europe.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/14/world/europe/us-poised-to-put-heavy-weaponry-in-east-europe.html?_r=1)>

5 Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Russian Menace Spawns E. Europe Cooperation", *Defense News*, 24 April 2015, <<http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/training-simulation/2015/04/24/east-europe-training-cooperation-russia-joint-baltic-ukraine-exercise-poland/25726065/>>

6 Christopher Harress, "Amid Russian Hostility, Baltic State Leaders Discuss Joint Defense Buys And Begin Nordic Military Cooperation", *International Business Times*, 10 August 2015, <<http://www.ibtimes.com/amid-russian-hostility-baltic-state-leaders-discuss-joint-defense-buys-begin-nordic-2046201>>; Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Russian Menace Spawns E. Europe Cooperation", *Defense News*, 24 April 2015, <<http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/training-simulation/2015/04/24/east-europe-training-cooperation-russia-joint-baltic-ukraine-exercise-poland/25726065/>>; Gerard O'Dwyer, "Sweden Proposes Aggressive Nordic Defense", *Defense News*, 10 February 2015, <<http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/>>

consider Russia's military intervention in the Baltic or Scandinavian countries as a plausible scenario, Russia has been active in organising ambiguous training activities near its borders and has violated the airspace of several countries in the region.

Aside from an actual military threat, the three Baltic states have long been concerned about Russia's propaganda efforts, especially in relation to their large Russian speaking populations. Since the 1990s, by manipulating information on the situation of Russian minorities in Baltic countries, Russia has aimed at discrediting their ruling elites both domestically and internationally, influencing election results by fuelling social tensions.<sup>7</sup> The changes in Russia's foreign policy doctrine (2008), permitting Russia to unilaterally defend its citizens abroad has definitely added to the Baltic states' wariness against Russia's aims. And rightfully so, as the pretext for the annexation of Crimea and maintenance of the military turmoil in Eastern Ukraine was the protection of the ethnic Russian population. In response to these informational attacks, Estonia and Latvia have been actively pushing for creation of a new Russian language TV channel.<sup>8</sup> However, this effort is often seen as futile, especially taking into account the sheer size of the financial resources that Russia is investing in its propaganda machinery and its global reach.

Military or, in fact, any other type of cooperation among the Baltic countries has never been strong. Russia's aggressive foreign policy and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, along with its propaganda and appeal to the large Russian minorities in the Eastern Europe, has resulted in ever closer cooperation among the three Baltic states and other countries in the region. Such developments as joint military training and the building of missile defence system would not have taken place if the Russia threat was not seen as real. Besides, the three Baltic states are no longer perceived as unreasonably paranoid over Russia's military interests, and have gained international support, even outside the NATO institutions.

### Economic Relations

The three Baltic states, for whom Russia is one of their main trade partners, were among the most avid supporters of introducing the sanctions regime against Russia.

Embargos are not a new occurrence in Russia-Baltics economic relations, as Russia has applied sanction previously as a political tool in its relations to its trade partners. During Soviet times, the markets of the region's countries became deeply integrated and centralised around Russia. Therefore, the dependence that the three Baltic states experience in their economic relations with Russia is fully understandable. Russia is a very important export market for Baltic agriculture products—dairy, meat, vegetables, fish etc. Simultaneously, the transit of Russian goods through the Baltic states is a very valuable source of income. Russia is well aware of the situation and has used it in order to influence the policies of the three states.

Accordingly, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia have experienced the largest impact on their trade balance due to sanctions between Russia and the EU. Lithuania, for whom Russia was the main export destination and represented 16% of its total export, has experienced the most consequences. According to the data about 2013, the value of Lithuanian goods banned from entering the Russian market was EUR 927 million—the largest among all the EU countries. It represented over 2.6% of Lithuania's GDP and 3.7% of its total export. In Latvia and Estonia, the share was much lower: EUR 70 million (0.3% of GDP) and EUR 75 million (0.4% of GDP) respectively. This is still a considerable number, taking into account the small size of their economies.<sup>9</sup> Baltic transport companies, sea ports and cargo railway, which deal with Russian exports and transit, have also experienced a decrease in their turnover.

The reorientation of the Baltic states' exports is highly complicated due to the specifics of trade. However, such attempts have been made and, in the longer term, they have also been successful. Similarly to other EU exports, a certain share have continued to reach Russia, via the transit route through Belarus. Simultaneously, the Baltic states have finally been forced to begin a long-needed diversification of their trade and to look for partners elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, China has demonstrated its growing global economic power and has become increasingly active in Eastern Europe.

What is still missing is a joint Baltic foreign economic policy—like with many other policy initiatives, Baltic cooperation is largely limited to the framework

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7 Joanna Hyndle-Hussein, "The Baltic perspective on the crisis in Ukraine", *The Baltic Times*, 13 February 2015, <[http://www.baltictimes.com/the\\_baltic\\_perspective\\_on\\_the\\_crisis\\_in\\_ukraine/](http://www.baltictimes.com/the_baltic_perspective_on_the_crisis_in_ukraine/)>

8 "Estonian and Latvian new Russian TV channels planning to cooperate", *The Baltic Course*, 1 April 2015, <[http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/markets\\_and\\_companies/?doc=104438](http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/markets_and_companies/?doc=104438)>

9 Ashifa Kassam, Kim Willsher et al., "Russian food embargo leaves Europe with glut of fruit, pork and mackerel", *The Guardian*, 15 August 2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/15/ukraine-europe-news>>; "The Russian Embargo: Impact on the Economic and Employment Situation In the EU", *European Parliament, Employment and Social Affairs Briefing*, 2014, <[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2014/536291/IPOL\\_BRI%282014%29536291\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2014/536291/IPOL_BRI%282014%29536291_EN.pdf)>



of international institutions. Nevertheless, like with the increased military cooperation in the region, the sanctions between Russia and the EU have forced the Baltic states to take the first crucial steps towards diversification of their markets, little by little decreasing their dependency on Russia. Should the trade limitations stay in place for a longer period of time, the three states are likely to further distance themselves from Russia and, by doing so, diminish their reliance on their unpredictable neighbour.

The Baltic states' relationship with Russia has never been easy due to historical and geopolitical reality, Russia's continuing interest in the region, as well as its dif-

ferent interpretation of history. While, in general, the three states do not cooperate closely with one another and rarely attempt to formulate a common stance in their foreign policies, the fear of Russia's military aggression and its propaganda is serving as the main integrating factor for relations between the Baltics. The ongoing military turmoil in Ukraine has boosted long-needed military cooperation among the three countries and in the wider Baltic Sea region. Although it is doubtful that the Baltic states will manage to form joint Russia policies in domains other than the military, widened defence cooperation is a fundamental step towards promoting deeper cooperation among the three countries.

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## ANALYSIS

# Poland's New Government in a Period of Russian Resurgence and European Union Crises

By Ray Taras, New Orleans

## Abstract

After 25 years of democratic politics and nine rounds of legislative elections, Polish voters have finally given a political party a majority in Parliament. Why then is the government formed in autumn 2015 by the conservative Law and Justice party viewed by many observers in Western and Central Europe as a threat to democracy and as a wildcard in Europe's international politics? Focusing on recent Polish foreign policy on Russia and the prospects for change under the new government, this article argues that the pro-Brussels, pro-Berlin policies of the outgoing government may be replaced by a new equilibrium in Poland's relations with Berlin and Moscow. As Vladimir Putin looks elsewhere to increase Russia's influence, Angela Merkel's unconvincing responses in 2015 to the Eurozone crisis, the conflict in Ukraine, and the large migrant flow into Europe have Warsaw's Eurosceptic leaders concerned. In these conditions Jaroslaw Kaczynski's party may forego trotting out classic Russophobic rhetoric and instead join other states disillusioned with the EU's undemocratic governance in propelling a new European centrifugalism.

The day after the Polish conservative party Law and Justice (PiS) won a clear majority of seats in the Polish parliament in October, iconic iconoclast Adam Michnik commented on the result: 'This is going to stir up xenophobia, megalomania, antipathy towards the European Union, and probably rather irresponsible redistributive policies'. He expressed concern that PiS would follow Victor Orban's path, but left unclear if that would include the Hungarian premier's openness to Russia despite the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine.

In litany of woes that Michnik predicted as a result of the victory of Jaroslaw Kaczynski's party, there was no mention of worsening relations with Russia.

Poland's altered image and role in the EU following the election appear to be of greater importance than how the PiS majority government works with, or against, Vladimir Putin. Has PiS's allegedly all-encompassing xenophobia put its particularistic Russophobia in the shadows? Or has Russia—and anti-Russian sentiments, rhetoric and policies—become of less salience by late 2015?

## Political Change in Poland

The political climate in Warsaw that I encountered on my visit to observe the 2015 legislative elections was dramatically different from that which I experienced in the winter of 2013–14, when the Maidan protests in Kiev had become the daily focus of the Polish public and its politicians. Back then, Polish hawks invoked the mortal danger that Poland itself faced after Putin had annexed the Crimea and intimated that he wanted to construct a land called *Novorossiya* on largely Ukrainian lands west of Russia. Poland's national interests and security were under threat by these moves. But, many Polish leaders and citizens took a Ukrainophile position, stressing that it was enough that Ukraine was being torn apart for Poland to counter Russia's aggression. Though not mutually exclusive, each of these positions reflected a so-called Promethean vision of Polish foreign policy dating back to a century earlier, in which Poles were to spearhead a bloc of nations that had been oppressed by Russia to weaken the empire at its peripheries. Under communism, influential Paris-based thinker Jerzy Giedroyc developed this strategy further on the pages of his 'thick journal' *Kultura*. Today, it has been adopted by PiS and reflected in the discourse of recently-elected Polish President Andrzej Duda.

If we turn over some stones, we do find that policy towards Russia has been and will be of central importance to the new government. To be sure, it did not influence the election result: by autumn 2015, Russia had ceased being a valence issue for most voters and various reasons can explain its reduced salience. Many Poles had become disillusioned with supporting Ukraine, because of the strategic risks and costs of confronting Russia. Ukraine's internal politics were turbulent and the World War II Polish-Ukrainian conflict surfaced in the Polish media. In mid-2015, Poles were divided down the middle about attitudes towards Ukraine, about one third having a sympathetic view, an equal proportion a negative one, and the remainder with no opinion. The feverish concern with Ukraine of a year earlier had died down and with it the urgency of stopping Putin.

The shooting war in Donbas had been winding down as a result of great power agreements reached in Minsk, Belarus, that produced ceasefires. Putin's opening of a new front in Syria made Russian aggression less palpable from a Polish perspective. In addition, Germany and its open-door policy on migrants emerged as a divisive issue in Poland. If PiS in opposition and the Civic Platform (PO) in government did not differ significantly from each other about the need to stand up to Russia, they did react differently towards German and EU policies. PiS advocated greater political independence from Brussels and economic independence from Ber-

lin; Angela Merkel's migration policy added a political dimension that elevated PiS's skeptical approach to its Western neighbor to a higher level.

Chancellor Merkel's media image in much of the West began to approach that of Mother Teresa of Calcutta—but not in Warsaw. Her government's shaming and naming of Central European and Balkan countries that resisted her migration policy resulted in pushback in the region. In the Polish Parliament, Kaczynski dramatized the differences with Germany by listing the health hazards migrants brought with them. He finished up by calling Germans the mortal enemies of Poland.

A more traditional, cautious, and patient foreign policy was foreshadowed by Duda's surprise victory over the Civic Platform-backed incumbent in the May 2015 presidential election. A Member of the European Parliament, Duda presented the fresh modern face of PiS, while representing much of its conservative policies. Following his election, he announced the goal of founding a partnership block stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the Adriatic. To symbolize this priority, his first official visit was not to Brussels, Paris or Berlin, but to Estonia.

## Poland's Aspirations to Shape EU Policy on Russia

A Polish-led group of EU states seeking to weaken and fragment imperial Russia was a strategy that had been tried, with little success, against the Russia of the Tsars and the Bolsheviks. It had also been pursued, in a different guise, by Civic Platform governments by way of the Eastern Partnership (EP) initiative. The EP was set up within the EU's Neighborhood programs in 2009. Advanced by then Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski and his equally bombastic, Russo-distrustful Swedish counterpart Carl Bildt, it embodied a Promethean vision too. Launched under the bland slogan 'Bringing Eastern European partners closer to the EU', it targeted Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the three former Soviet republics in the South Caucasus for special EU proselytizing.

After Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008, Sikorski contended that NATO should not give ground to the Kremlin. In Washington, he announced a Sikorski Doctrine calling for NATO military action should Ukraine at some later date also be invaded. But, he renounced the doctrine a year later, when he sought the post of NATO Secretary General and needed to shake off the image of being just another Russophobic Pole—a recurrent Western stereotype since the Great Emigration of Poles to Paris following the failure of the 1830 insurrection in Warsaw.

Sikorski, in particular, found this stereotype difficult to overcome given his proneness for making alarmist statements. For example, a 2008 telegram from the United States embassy in Warsaw (published by Wikileaks) cited his warning that a Russian attack on Poland was likely within the next fifteen months. In 2011 in Berlin, he went to a different extreme by lavishing adulation on Germany. He asserted: 'I fear Germany's power less than her inactivity'. Then, in 2014, he was secretly taped in a restaurant saying, using a vulgar metaphor, that the US was a worthless ally of Poland's. Sikorski tarnished Civic Platform's image and its foreign policy coherence, contributing to the inevitability of a PiS electoral sweep in 2015.

By mid-2014, Poland's Foreign Minister lost the trust of German leaders who stopped inviting him to 'road map' meetings on Ukraine of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France. In spring 2015, the EU, in turn, undid Sikorski's Promethean work. In a document titled 'Towards a new Neighborhood Policy' presented at an EU summit in Riga, EU foreign policy head Federica Mogherini expressed concern that 'our region is in flames'—both southern and eastern EU neighborhoods had been torn apart by internal conflicts. The document suggested that the ENP's 'current geographical scope' needed to be modified, so as to 'allow for more flexible ways of working with the neighbors of the neighbors'—like Russia.

Poland's relations with Russia became more nuanced after Grzegorz Schetyna replaced Sikorski as Foreign Minister in late 2014. In a speech to the Sejm, he contended that 'a critical assessment of Russia's policy does not alter the fact that we will remain neighbors and economic partners. We believe that Polish-Russian relations can be good'. He added that Poland's foreign policy on Russia 'will be inscribed in the larger strategy of the European Union. By pooling our resources with the other 27 Member States, we can really achieve more'. In March 2015, Schetyna distanced his foreign policy even further from Sikorski's, by arguing that NATO membership for Ukraine would make the security situation in Europe worse and 'could cause a real international problem'.

Poland's geopolitical setting constrains its ability to shape wider EU policy. Fundamental disagreements with Germany will be especially hard for a Kaczynski-inspired government to overcome. Thus, Berlin has long opposed permanently stationing NATO troops in Poland, because it would irritate Moscow and violate a 1997 agreement between NATO and Russia. President Duda's foreign policy discourses have been well received but it seems unlikely he can forge an EU-wide approach towards Russia any more than Sikorski had.

In November 2015 Witold Waszykowski, a former academic with considerable diplomatic experience

and appointed the new Foreign Minister in the PiS government, called for scrapping the 1997 NATO-Russia agreement in order to allow the siting of permanent bases on Polish soil. The Russian foreign ministry condemned the proposal as 'extremely dangerous' because it can 'bring down the existing European security system'. In turn, the German Foreign Minister gave Waszykowski a polite if not effusive welcome on his second foreign visit as Minister after a trip to Stockholm. These first diplomatic forays may foreshadow what Poland's international politics will be like for the next four years.

### **Poles' Russophobia Today: The Dog That Doesn't Bark?**

At the height of the military conflict in the Donbas, in June 2014, Poles' negative attitudes towards Russia reached a high of 81 percent, from 54 percent in 2013. The increase was more dramatic in the United States, from 43 percent to 72 percent. Britain, Spain, Germany, and Italy also recorded high increases (about 20 percent) in unfavorable images of Russia among their populations.

But, there is a bigger picture of Poles' purported anti-Russian sentiments. In 1993, 17 percent of Polish respondents expressed a liking for Russians; this figure doubled by 2010. In 1994, 59 percent of Poles expressed antipathy to Russians, a total nearly halved (to 31 percent) by 2010. Even at the height of the conflict in Ukraine, in 2014, slightly more Poles believed that it was more important to maintain good relations with Russia (38 percent), than to engage in close cooperation with countries of the former USSR, such as Ukraine and Georgia (34 percent).

When PiS last governed Poland, 2005–2007, Jarosław Kaczyński's twin brother Lech embodied hostility towards both Russia and countries deemed soft on Russia, like Germany. Polish–EU relations were strained and Poland positioned itself as the lightning rod in the EU's relations with Russia. How to deal with Russia became an issue polarizing Eastern and Western European states. If Western European members gave the appearance of being appeasers, Central European ones seemed belligerent towards Russia. In some measure, this divide disappeared when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Lech Kaczyński might have got it right in 2005, when he said: 'We are not a party of Russophobes. Good relations with Russia would be highly beneficial for us. However, we know history all too well'.

By 2007, Poles had had enough of PiS exclusionary xenophobic nationalism and voted the party out of power. They had had enough of its overcharged nationalist discourse, of its 'Smolensk religion', preaching that a Russian conspiracy had brought down Kaczyński's airplane in 2010 killing the Polish political and mili-

tary elite. In its 2015 election campaigns, PiS prudently shifted the electorate's attention away from these subjects.

### PiS's Challenges

In voting PiS into power this October, Poles were not having second thoughts on PiS's xenophobic nationalism. More important was that they had become disillusioned with Civic Platform's seemingly uncritical approach to the EU, in particular at a time when the EU entered into a disastrous series of crisis management fiascos: failing to resolve the Ukraine conflict; disagreeing on common sanctions on Russia; selecting, not electing, three Presidents of the EU (its Commission, Council, and Parliament); contesting the German-imposed formula on solving Greece's debt problem and stabilizing the Euro; and reaching no common policy on the migrant crisis and its takedown of the Schengen system. When Donald Tusk resigned as Poland's Prime Minister in 2014

to take up the post of European Council President, he snubbed the country's liberal electorate. His change of jobs unequivocally symbolized how the EU, not Poland, had become of primary importance to Civic Platform's supreme leader. Distrust of Moscow had become less palpable for Poles, than discontent with Brussels. It is an attitudinal shift that the astute PiS leader Kaczynski caught. Turbulence with Brussels, and Berlin, may well come to the fore under the PiS government.

Polish statesman and strongman Jozef Pilsudski supposedly said that Russia is never as strong as it appears or as weak as we would like it to be. The challenge to PiS today is this. It is relatively easy to take on a Russia whose foreign policy behavior can be characterized as straight from the Dark Ages, and serves as an anti-model in international politics. PiS's more difficult task is to challenge Germany's policies, which are justified in EU terms as enlightened and exemplary.

#### *About the Author:*

Professor Ray Taras has authored or edited over twenty books—on the collapse of the USSR, Russia's identity in international relations, the rise of liberal and illiberal nationalisms, the internationalization of ethnic conflicts, the menace of xenophobia, the critique of multiculturalism, and the impact of social fears on European foreign policy. He has served on the faculty of universities in North America and Europe, including Harvard, Stanford, Michigan, the European University Institute, Malmö, Sussex, and Warsaw, where he was Fulbright Distinguished Professor in Politics in 2012–13.

#### ANALYSIS

## A Complicated Three-Cornered Relationship: The Russophone Minority Between Estonian Home Country and Russian Mother Country

By Yves B. Partschefeld, St Gallen

### Abstract

Since the second half of the 2000s, relations between Russia and Estonia have been steadily declining. This has also had an effect on the relationship between the Estonian majority and the Russophone minority in Estonia. Additionally, the situation is negatively affected by the influence of the Russian media. The Russian-speaking minority, however, is not to be viewed as a mere agent of Moscow in Estonia, but appears as an independent protagonist in a three-cornered relationship.

### Frontline Situation

Over the course of a decade, Russian-Estonian relations have increasingly deteriorated, reaching a new low-point with the ongoing conflict between Russia and the Ukraine. The eastern Estonian border marks the boundary between Russian and NATO territory, a zone where the resurgent confrontation between East and West, as well as the Russia's potential influence on the

“near abroad” (Safire 1994), becomes manifest. An incident along the Russian-Estonian border in the vicinity of Luhamaa that occurred on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014 is indicative of the aforementioned development: According to Estonian media, an Estonian Internal Security Service officer, Eston Kohver, was illegally apprehended by an unidentified group that forced him over to the Russian side of the border. He was on duty at the time,

performing his obligations regarding the prevention of cross-border crime (Niitra 2014). However, Russia officially considered this to be espionage, leading to a conviction in August 2015, with Kohver sentenced to 15 years in prison (Lenta.ru 2015). After international protests and negotiations between Estonia and Russia, an ‘exchange of agents’ enabled the return of Eston Kohver to Estonia. Russia received the former officer of the Estonian security police, Alexei Dressen, in exchange for the return of Kohver. Dressen had been convicted in Estonia of transferring secret documents to Russia (BNS, I 2015).

### The Russophone Minority

The fact that up to one third of Estonia’s total population is Russophone (Stat.ee 2012) adds another dimension to the current tense situation between Estonia and Russia. Tensions between the Estonian majority and the Russophone minority have been building since Estonia’s independence in 1991, because of the way the latter group was dealt with by the new state, especially concerning the restrictions placed on the granting of Estonian citizenship to members of the Russophone minority. The increasing influence of Russian media since the 2000s has exacerbated this problem. The result, today, is a partial divided society, even down to the level of separate settlements, with the population centers of the Russophone minority located in the country’s northern and northeastern regions (Partschefeld 2013). This fuels the fear of secession in parts of the Estonian population, particularly following the Ukrainian crisis. This fear was reinforced by a rejected referendum concerning the national-territorial autonomy of the Narva region in the early 1990s. The Russophone minority is viewed as Moscow’s “fifth column”, and its solidarity with the Estonian state is often disputed (Wistinghausen 2004).

### Historical Development

The Russophone minority is not just a product of Soviet settlement policy or a relic of the Soviet Union—its roots are much older; they mirror the common history of the two countries.

Since the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the territories that form today’s Estonia have been subject to frequently changing rule, which led to waves of immigration. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russia managed to become the dominant force in the eastern Baltic Sea area, gaining power over the Baltic States via the “Treaty of Nystad”, until the first Estonian independence in 1918. As 8.2 percent of the population, the Russian minority at that time already represented the second largest section of the population in this Republic of the interwar years, yet it remained in the background. The German

minority, which had formed the local upper-class since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, was dominant and sought to defend its influence within the Estonian republic. This pursuit led to tensions with the Estonian majority and to anti-German sentiment among Estonians that remained prevalent until the German minority was relocated in 1939 and 1940, according to resettlement treaties between Estonia and the German Reich. These treaties were part of the context of the secret protocol of the Hitler-Stalin Pact (August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1939), and assigned Estonia to the Soviet sphere of influence. A pact of collective defense between Estonia and the Soviet Union—exacted via military threats—cemented the political situation. This marked the beginning of a forceful incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union. In 1940, Moscow sent Andrej Zhdanov to stage the “voluntary annexation”. In the wake of purges and mass arrests of up to 10,000 people per day by the “NKVD”, staged demonstrations of the “will of the people”, and a show election, Estonia formally requested admission to the Soviet Union (Garleff 2001).

### Dividing Lines

Although the roots of the Estonian Russophone minority reach back many generations, the developments after the Second World War and the Soviet history of the country form the basis of the present-day societal situation. The war and the incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union laid the foundation for patterns that remain relevant today. These include primarily the demographic change in Estonian society. The Russian minority, which formerly constituted around 8 percent of the population, reached almost 40 percent in the USSR due to waves of Russophone settlers, transforming Estonia into a poly-ethnic country. The, hitherto, almost conflict-free relations changed as a result, with the Russian minority filling the negative “vacuum” left by the German minority. The Estonian side blamed the Russian minority collectively for their suffering during the Second World War, as well as for the Stalinist apparatus of repression imposed thereafter (Partschefeld 2013).

The reasons for the remaining dividing lines of today can be found within that timeframe, but need to be differentiated chronologically. A distinction between phases of structural, ethno-national, and socio-economic division can be identified.

The structural separation between Estonians and Russians is rooted in the Soviet political, economic and social system, particularly in terms of the regulations governing education, work and habitation. Estonian society has been (and still is) experiencing the impacts of an earlier division of society along linguistic lines. This separation is created by a subdivision into Russophone

and Estonian education, beginning as early as kindergarten. This may help explain the lack of inter-ethnic contact, given the relatively long time spent in educational institutions. Another divisive pattern in this context was the Soviet working environment, since under Soviet rule (and continuing, in part, today) the fields of work differed between the various ethnic groups. Most workers in heavy industry, for instance, were Russian, while agriculture was an Estonian domain. This was reinforced by a settlement policy that created mono-ethnic regions and territories. Nonetheless, there were also aspects of commonality, despite such structural divisions, characterized by similar educational, working and living conditions. This also applies to the Soviet attempt to instill a supranational identity, above national and ethnic identity, among the USSR's whole population around the idea of the New Soviet man (Partschefeld 2013).

However, this attempt was only partially successful, as it conflicted with Soviet nationalities policy, which institutionalized the nation and established a hierarchy in which certain nationalities enjoyed certain privileges. Thus, Soviet policy did not eliminate nationalism, but simply reinterpreted it and interlinked it with policy and society. Estonians were, thereby, closely tied to their national territory, since they could expect advantages as the titular nation. It was also possible for the nationalities to unfurl, to some degree, within the Soviet-Estonian structures that were created, providing that they adhered to the premise "national in form, socialist in content". However, this situation changed during the 1980s, due to the Soviet Union's obvious decline and the erosion of socialist topics in societal discourse. The second half of this decade saw the rise of an Estonian national movement—enabled by Gorbachev's reforms—that filled those topics with new meaning. Estonian nationalism is, therefore, not to be seen as a new creation or reawakening, but rather as a reinterpretation or emancipation from Soviet topics. It heralded a new phase in societal divisions based on ethno-national awareness. This was not true for the Russian nationality, however, which had yet to take this step. The reason for this was their exceptional position within Soviet nationality policy: Some of the Soviet institutions and facilities were congruent with the Russian ones. The Russian language as *lingua franca*, spoken throughout the Soviet Union, played another important role. Aside from these structural aspects, the propagandized role of the Russian people as the vanguard and elite of Soviet society, and particularly their union-wide importance accounted for their exceptional position.

The Estonian territorial claim that emerged in the course of this rise of Estonian nationalism, especially at the beginning of the 1990s, collided with those sen-

timents. This altered the societal positions of the Estonian and Russian groups in society, involving a loss of reputation for the Russian minority, as their social standing was inverted during this time of change. Once the vanguard of the new Soviet society, they were reduced to second-class citizens in a newly independent Estonia. The loss of the old system, as well as the separation from Estonian nationalism led to uncertainty and disorientation, which were reinforced by the restrictions on granting Estonian citizenship to the Russian minority. These initial conditions combined with a (in some cases total) devaluation of their economic and social capital, became the basis for the socio-economic dividing line that can still be observed today (Partschefeld 2013).

## Relations

The aforementioned disorientation and their relationship to Soviet heritage remained formative for the Russian minority in Estonia until the mid-1990s. It was not until the second half of the 1990s, that a diaspora identity emerged, based on a Soviet/Russian interpretation of 20<sup>th</sup> century history. This identity rests on both viewing the Second World War as a heroic moment, achieved through great sacrifice, and the outstanding role of the Russian language (Vihalemm 1999). This view of history diverges significantly from official Estonian historical discourse, in which the Estonians take on the role of the victims and the Russians represent the offenders. For Estonians, the end of the Second World War does not only mark their liberation from fascism, but also the beginning of a new era of occupation and terror (Zubkova 2011).

This potential for conflict is reinforced by a complex pattern of relationships: Estonia ("nationalizing state"), the Russian minority ("national minority") and Russia ("external national homeland") face each other as independent protagonists with both common and conflicting goals. At first, the nationalism of a rising Estonian national state was met solely by the belatedly cultivated diaspora identity of the Russian minority. However, since the end of the 1990s, particularly since Vladimir Putin's inauguration, Russia has grown more and more into a powerful patron of the 25 million Russian diaspora, who live in other former Soviet territories. As part of a reformulated foreign-policy, Russia has claimed influence on the "near abroad" (Brubaker 1997). The already established Russian media influence on the Baltic States and the Russophone minority in Estonia has constituted a suitable way to pursue these goals. The Russian media's further nationalization across the 2000s, served as a further reinforcement to this trend (Zveleva 2009). Especially since Estonia's declaration of its explicit allegiance to the West and its positioning dur-

ing the Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" in 2004, political tensions between Estonia and Russia have become more apparent. Moreover, their differing interpretations concerning the Second World War have become more and more visible and have been exploited by Russian media. The media conflict regarding the interpretation of history led to the "Bronze Night" in 2007, a controversy surrounding the relocation of a Soviet war memorial in Tallinn that caused the most intense riots in recent Estonian history. The Russian media played a key role in the incident's escalation. Beyond the media exploits of both sides, the riots in Estonia's capital and the north-eastern part of Estonia were only partially fueled by each sides' different interpretations of the Second World War; another issue was the status of the Russian minority and its waning importance in Estonian society since 1991. In this context, the Russian minority is often viewed as first and foremost an agent of Russia, and Moscow's foreign policy goals. However, the majority of the Russophone minority did not take part in the riots, and did not even endorse the events (Münch 2008). This further stresses the independent role of the Russian minority in Estonia, as an autonomous protagonist in the aforementioned three-cornered relationship.

## Recent Developments

In the wake of the Ukrainian conflict, particularly in light of the additional military element due to the Russo-

Georgian war (2008) which showed first signs of hybrid warfare (Nass 2015), skepticism towards the Russophone minority dominates headlines again. An attempt has been made to repel the influence of Russian media by launching the public access Estonian TV channel ETV+ in Russian. Up till now, three quarters of Estonia's Russophone minority get their information via Russian channels (Kund 2015). Indeed, the creation of ETV+ is just a small step, compared to the media funding provided by Russia, and its success remains questionable. For now, Estonia's answer to the aforementioned aggravation of the societal tensions by Russian media and the new confrontation between East and West is to a call for an increased NATO presence. Besides the already established protection of Baltic airspace, the deployment of NATO ground forces is now being discussed, with the intention to secure and further stabilize the area (BNS, II). The key to Estonian stability, however, lies not only in its involvement in a strong military, as well as economic and political, alliance with the EU and NATO or the launching a media counter-campaign, but in state and societal treatment of the Russophone minority and the need to increase efforts to integrate them into Estonian society.

### *About the Author*

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## ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (<[www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de](http://www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de)>), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Zurich (<<http://www.hist.uzh.ch/>>), the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University, and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russland-Analysen (<[www.laenderanalysen.de/russland](http://www.laenderanalysen.de/russland)>), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (<[www.css.ethz.ch/publications/RAD\\_EN](http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/RAD_EN)>), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2015 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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