

# **RUSSIAN BALTIC POLICY: THE SONG REMAINS THE SAME?**

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In February 1997, the press service of the President of the Russian Federation published the document titled "A long-term line of Russia towards the Baltic countries". The paper, introduced as the official guidelines of Russian Baltic policy, defined the "strategic goal" of Moscow in the Baltic region as the "promotion of a constructive model of relations based on principles of encouragement of regional economic integration and bilateral economic cooperation, indivisibility of security of the states, respect of human rights and rights of national minorities". A number of important factors helped to design these guidelines. First of all, the formation of a more or less precise political line concerning the Baltic countries was promoted by the occurrence of a certain consensus in Russia regarding the basic directions of its external policy. Within the framework of the concept of a "multipolar world", which in 1996-1997 emerged as an official Russian foreign policy doctrine, Russia is considered as an independent "pole" with its own interests, not necessarily fitting those of the Western countries. The concept has gained the support of the Russian political elite, and Moscow's firm stance on a number of issues in Russian-Baltic relations – such as the situation of the Russian speaking minorities or eventual NATO membership of the Baltic countries – can be explained in part by the political mood inside the country.

Secondly, the experience of the first half of the decade has proven that the main problems in Russian-Baltic relations will remain on the agenda for a number of years to come. With the withdrawal of Russian troops completed in August 1994, the principal issues are the status of the Russian-speaking population, economic cooperation, and problems of Baltic security. An important impulse has come from the international environment. When the process of NATO enlargement entered its practical phase, policymakers in Moscow realized the necessity of remedial actions, including in the Baltic region. This resulted in the increased attention Moscow began to devote to its relations with the Baltic States.

Bearing in mind all these considerations, one can differentiate at least four principal factors or levels of Russian Baltic policy: prevailing perceptions with regard to directions of foreign policy inside the country; bilateral relations with the Baltic states; their regional framework; and the wider European and international context.

It is in this light that this paper discusses the major problems of the Russian Baltic policy. Will a new period in Russian current history, which apparently started developing after Boris Yeltsin's resignation and Vladimir Putin's appearance as the new Russian President, bring changes in Moscow's policy towards the Baltic states? With the long-term perspectives of the Russian-Baltic relationship remaining difficult to predict, its near future seems to be more determined, if not always suggesting an optimistic mood.

## **1. Domestic Debates Over Foreign Policy: "Geopoliticians" and "Modernists"**

Though it is difficult to predict what would be the foreign policy of President Putin, certain conclusions on how it can evolve can be drawn from the ongoing debates over foreign policy issues in Russia.

In this regard, 1999 appeared to be a year of crisis of the "multipolar world" concept, introduced in 1996 by then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov. The concept claimed that after the end of the Cold War the system of international relations was becoming increasingly multipolar, with the emergence of a number of distinct "poles". In such a "multipolar world" relationship should be based on cooperation, collaboration and interaction. These relations will better serve Russian interests than those of the type of "leader and follower". Pursuant to

the aim of promoting the "transition to a multipolar world", Russia should develop its ties with all emerging "poles" while maintaining pragmatic and stable relations with the major Western powers.

The concept of a "multipolar world" was designed in response to dilemmas left unresolved during Andrey Kozyrev's time as Foreign Minister. Following the line of major Western powers, Kozyrev was unable to secure what was perceived to be Russian interests (for example, full-fledged participation in the emerging new European security system), and in the later part of his time in office he operated almost in a vacuum as far as internal support of his policy was concerned. On the contrary, the "Primakov doctrine's" appeal to aspirations of a great power status and a greater role for Russia in the international arena won it large support inside the country. In May 1998, speaking at the collegium of the Foreign Ministry, President Yeltsin even declared that "the long discussion concerning the priorities of our foreign policy is over. The conception of Russian foreign policy has got precise outline and as for its basic elements, relies on growing consent among different social and political forces of the country".

The Primakov line was not much altered by Igor Ivanov when he took the post of Foreign Minister in September 1998. But his task was complicated by events such as the Kosovo crisis, money laundering scandals and the antiterrorist campaign in Dagestan, and then Chechnya. All that turned the year of 1999 into probably the most difficult year for Moscow's diplomacy since the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-1989).

These events also revealed the drawbacks of the concept of a "multipolar world". Most of them should be attributed to objective problems of the country in a period of transformation rather than to a failure of diplomacy.

First of all, in terms of global economy, Russia can not be considered an independent "pole", and most probably will not be "pole" for a number of years to come. Russian economic weakness and financial dependency on Western aid hampers its ability to conduct an independent foreign policy. Examples of this, such as Russian claims for equal relationship with NATO, considered to be a foundation of European security but not matched by allocation of necessary funds, abound. In view of this economic weakness and lack of resources, Russia is unable to maintain the status of a superpower with global interests attributed to it within the framework of the "multipolar world" concept.

Secondly, the differences between major "poles" pointed out by the concept appeared to be overestimated. Certainly, relations between, say, Europe and America are not immune to problems, and tactically playing them up, as pretended by the "Primakov doctrine", could be effective, especially in the short term. However, in cases where strategic interests are at stake, as was the case in Kosovo, these controversies do not really matter. This point seems to be missed in Moscow, and though Russian analysts stressed the lasting and strategic nature of transatlantic relations, almost unanimous European support of American strikes against Yugoslavia caught them by surprise. In an effort to reconcile reality and perceptions of it, Russian diplomacy sometimes exceeded the bounds of formal logic, charging NATO for aggression in Kosovo and "forgiving" the EU for it.

In claiming a "multipolar" character of the system of international relations after the Cold War, Russian diplomacy missed another important tendency – progressing globalization. The global spread of communications leads to a growing interdependency between the states. By the forces of these changes the very notion of state sovereignty is being redefined. Other players of international relations, such as corporate, non-governmental or individual ones are becoming increasingly vocal. As a result, the states more and more frequently can not act on their own, advancing only the national goals; economic, humanitarian and other interests are placed high on the agenda. The emerging new system of international relations resembles more a global, multileveled, dynamically changing network rather than a "multipolar" world. Some Russian analysts argue that by basing its foreign policy on the concepts of American

theoretical school of "realism", from which the notion of "multipolar world" has been borrowed, Russia appeared to be a hostage of the geopolitical thinking of the 19th century. Any objective observer should also admit a leading role of the United States in the existing global system, endorsed by its technological superiority and military power. Against this background, Russian efforts to promote "a multipolar world" concept in practice often turn out to be nothing more than just a rally against the USA and its allies. Russian partners in such a risky endeavor – Serbia or Iraq – are poor and unreliable; besides that, they seem to benefit from Russian advocacy much more than Russia itself gains.

Generally, as Dmitry Trenin from the Moscow Carnegie Center noted, over the past years Russian diplomacy has learned how to balance, but still has not found a new role for the country. The search for this new role will probably be the essence of Russian foreign policy during the presidency of Putin.

To a great extent, the results of this search will depend on the progress of the internal transformation of Russia. In the short term, however, possible shifts in Russian foreign policy can be determined by interaction of the existing influential groups. In this connection, the following groups can be described.

Few, if any representatives of the Russian political elite now hold the opinions proper to Kozyrev's time as Foreign Minister, and their influence on Russian foreign policy is insignificant. The two major groups that could be discerned within the Russian elite are the "geopoliticians" and the "modernists".

The "Geopoliticians" believe that Russia is an independent and self-sufficient historical and geopolitical entity or civilization, which has its own destiny and historical mission, and thus does not need to embrace Western liberal philosophy. This group includes representatives of a "real sector" of the Russian economy (industry), intelligence and special services, some diplomats, nationalistic factions in the State Duma, etc.

These views are especially diffused in the military. To the military, the geopoliticians' conclusions, such as presentation of a weak Russia as a challenge to European security, logically translate into a further reliance on military means for ensuring the security of the country. Soon after the Kosovo crisis, the Russian military doctrine was reviewed and edited in a tougher version. In June 1999, military exercises "West-99", designed "to work out interoperability in case of aggression from the West" took place.

Certain military officials do not exclude that the ongoing reduction of Russian military personnel in the Kaliningrad oblast could be not only suspended but even reversed.

The "Modernists" are those who base their views on what remains consistent from the concept of a "multipolar world". They recognize that in its current situation Russia should put aside great power ambitions. According to their views, the dilemma of Russian foreign policy consists in choosing between advancement of economic development, which builds the foundation for future influence, and current "virtual prestige".

The "Modernists" argue that today's Russia must embrace a policy of concentration, focusing on internal development and reforms. Foreign policy should be considered as a resource of the reforms.

These views should not be taken as arguments in favor of autarky or isolation. The "Modernists" believe that in the times of globalization the option of autarky is detrimental for any country and that Russia must take every opportunity to grasp the advantages of global economy.

At the same time, they do not mean to exchange Russian political interests for economic benefits. A firm stance should be maintained everywhere where Russian vitally important interests are at stake, but the range of such issues should be reviewed and if possible, reduced to a minimum. In general, the foreign policy line proposed by the "modernists" is termed as a "selective engagement".

In sum, the main problem of Russian foreign policy – how to participate in the formation of a new post-Cold War international system – is addressed by a nationalistic country, even if it is trying to be pragmatic and in step with the technological era. It is in this light that Russian bilateral relations with the Baltic states, and their regional and European aspects, should be approached.

## 2. Russian Bilateral Relations with the Baltic States

In the course of the second half of the 1990s, Russia continued to perform separate policy lines towards each of the three Baltic states. To a certain extent this approach is based on the objective differences existing between the three countries; evidently, Russia can not ignore the issue of the Kaliningrad oblast, physically separated from the core Russian territory by Lithuania, when designing its relations with Vilnius, or the fact that Latvian ports now pipeline 13 to 15 % of Russian total oil export, when dealing with Riga. On the other hand, it is more easy for Moscow to approach each of the three states separately rather than to deal with their concerted position. In addition, in the former case it can benefit from the Baltic rivalry.

Apparently, the principal criteria according to which Russia differentiates between the Balts is their willingness to take Russian concerns into consideration. The situation of the Russian minorities has emerged as a focal point of Russian Baltic policy.

After the initial period of the beginning of the 1990s, when Russian liberals supported the Balts in their independence drive, adoption of rigorous naturalization requirements in Estonia in 1992-93 and in Latvia in 1994-95 which denied citizenship to some 300,000 and 700,000 of their residents respectively, resulted in a major change in the Russian attitude towards the Baltic states. The Yeltsin administration began to perceive them with a sense of having been betrayed. The fact that interstate treaties between Russia and Latvia and Estonia, initialed in January 1991 in the midst of the Vilnius crisis, which stipulated the offer of citizenship to all their legal residents who so desired were later not introduced into domestic law has added to Russian animosity.

Moreover, the situation of human rights in the Baltic States arose in the early 1990s as an awkward issue in Russian relations with the West. Pursuant to the spirit of "strategic partnership" with Western countries, Russian reformers expected support from their newly made "partners" in the case against violation of human rights in the Baltic states, considered in Moscow as a question of common interests both for Russia and the West. However, having refused to recognize the incorporation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into the USSR in 1940, Western countries did not object to Baltic laws on citizenship based on the theory of "legal continuity" of these states during the "Soviet occupation", and did not consider the resulting fact that thousands of Russians and Russian-speakers were deprived of citizenship a violation of their human rights. As a result, according to Russian liberal analysts, the pro-Baltic position of Western countries regarding the issue of the Russian-speaking population in 1992-93 has reinforced anti-Western opinions in Russia and caused a nationalistic shift in its foreign policy.

Today, the significant number of non-citizens in Latvia and Estonia, the slow pace of naturalization and the practice of discrimination against Russians and Russian-speakers in these countries remain to the focus of Russian policy in the region.

Russian relations with Latvia are the most strained ones. Since 1995, when the process of naturalization started in this country, only some 25,000 people have become citizens. Though the abrogation of the "windows" system in the referendum in October 1998 gave the process a new momentum, the rate of naturalization is still extremely low, and the whole process may be dragging on for decades. Today, over 650,000 residents of Latvia remain non-citizens. They are deprived of the right to vote in both national and local elections and prohibited from practicing no small number of professions. There are more than 50 other substantial discriminative differences between the rights and status of the Latvian non-citizen permanent

residents and the citizens in the fields of property, private business activity, social security, etc.

Yet Latvian authorities continue to practice discrimination against Russians. The law on the state language passed by the Saema in December 1999 stipulates exclusive use of the Latvian language in the fields of employment, public information and contacts with state and municipal institutions. Many of its provisions are referential and create conditions for discrimination. The implementation of the law on education, which came into force in June 1999 is aimed at a complete elimination of the Russian language from the educational system. This contradicts the international standards providing guarantees to national minorities to obtain education in their mother tongue.

The situation in Estonia is not much better. 200,000 out of the 1.5 million of total Estonian population still do not possess Estonian citizenship. The rate of naturalization, usually very low, recently slowed down further (in 1999 only 4,500 persons obtained the Estonian citizenship, in 1998 – 9,000). Non-citizens can not enjoy the status of a national minority as this is granted only to the Estonian citizens. The state program of integration of non-Estonians into the Estonian society, adopted in March of 2000 and heralded as a way of solution of existing interethnic problems, is limited to a total introduction of the state (Estonian) language and is being perceived by non-citizens as a vehicle of forceful assimilation. However, being more pragmatic than Latvians, Estonians pursue the policy of avoiding to insult their Eastern neighbor. As a result, Russian-Estonian relations over the past years have been stable though rather limited.

A new worrying tendency with regard to the situation of the Russian minorities in the Baltic States is the trials against the veterans of World War II and former officials of the USSR law-enforcement bodies. In Latvia, for instance, two senior Russian veterans have already been charged, and several other dossiers are said to be under examination in the court. At the same time, Latvian Waffen SS veterans are allowed to gather for their annual processions in downtown Riga, and Estonian officials give awards to persons who fought alongside the Nazis.

Indeed, with these actions the Balts continue their policy of "liquidation of consequences of Soviet occupation", which laid down the foundation for the laws on citizenship of Latvia and Estonia, and their claims on parts of Russian territory.

The Russian position with regard to the events of 1939-40 has both ideological and pragmatic foundations. None of the Russian scholars assesses the events of 1939-40 in the Baltic states as "occupation".

In the early 1990s, when Russia was recognized by the world community as the USSR's "successor state", Russian officials claimed that "the new, democratic Russia, whose peoples became the main victims of the Stalin regime, can not be charged for these crimes". In September 1999, in connection with the 60th anniversary of the beginning of World War II, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a press release, reiterating this position. It should be clear that given the significant number of non-citizens in Latvia and Estonia, recognition of the occupation of the Baltic States in 1940 on the part of Russia in the current situation would simply mean that Moscow admits their status; besides that, it is not excluded that based on the fact of recognition, the Balts can resume with their territorial claims.

Generally, the situation of the Russian minorities in Latvia and Estonia remains a focal point of Russian policy towards these countries. On 18 February 2000, in connection with the case of Vassily Kononov, a 77-year old Russian veteran sentenced to prison because of his participation in military operations against Latvian collaborationists during World War II, Putin stated in the letter to his Latvian counterpart, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, that Russia will continue to take into account humanitarian issues when building its relations with Latvia. On the same day, former Russian President Yeltsin, referring to the situation of Russian minorities in Latvia, refused to accept a Latvian award. The Russian State Duma discusses the

projects of laws on economic sanctions against Latvia. Though all outstanding territorial issues have been resolved, Moscow refuses to sign the border agreements with Latvia and Estonia unless the Balts indicate their will to improve the situation of the Russian minorities. The conclusion of agreements on commercial and economic cooperation and on avoiding double taxation with Estonia is also suspended, etc.

It seems certain that political pressure on the Balts on the part of Russia in order to compel them to improve the situation of the Russian minorities will be continued. As stated in the "Long term line of Russia towards the Baltic countries", Moscow aims in this issue "to facilitate the extension of citizenship to all Russian-speaking residents of these countries who had a permanent registration at the moment of declaration of independence". However, despite the fact that actions of the Russian government in the field of protection of Russian minorities abroad are closely watched by the opposition, it seems that official Moscow will try to avoid extremes.

To a great extent, due to the problems with Russian minorities "it is still impossible to pass to a wide-scale cooperation of Russia with the Baltic states". However, the prospects of an active cooperation are in place. They can be termed as "realistic cooperation on the basis of economic interests". The example of such a cooperation, and not only on the basis of economic interests, is given by the Russian-Lithuanian relationship.

Comparing the relations of each of the three Baltic states with Russia, Lithuania can be termed as Russia's "favorite" among the Baltics. Besides the situation of the Kaliningrad oblast, Vilnius owes its special relations with Moscow to the absence of problems with the Russian minority. Russians in Lithuania account for only 9 % of the total population, compared to 30 % in Estonia and some 34 % in Latvia. That fact allowed an early implementation of a so-called "zero option" in the Lithuanian law on citizenship, adopted in 1989. As a result, Russia completed the pull out of its troops from Lithuania in August 1993, whereas withdrawal from Latvia and Estonia was finalized one year later. In October 1997, the Lithuanian President, Algirdas Brazauskas, was the first of the Baltic leaders to pay an official visit to Moscow, during which the border agreement between the two countries was signed. This accord still remains the unique border agreement among Russia and a Baltic state.

Currently, Moscow seems to continue pursuing the line toward "advanced" cooperation with Lithuania. In June 1999, the Lithuanian Prime Minister, Roland Paksas, came to Moscow for a working visit. During the visit important accords were signed, including agreements on avoiding of double taxation, on promotion and mutual protection of investment, on long-term cooperation of the Kaliningrad oblast with regions of Lithuania. On 9 February 2000, in the Lithuanian town of Nida, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Ivan Ivanov and his Lithuanian counterpart Vigaudas Usackas negotiated the list of common projects of cooperation between the Kaliningrad oblast and Lithuania designed to be implemented in the framework of the EU "Northern Dimension" initiative. Lithuania is still a unique country which has come up with such a joint initiative with Russia. It is reported that another visit of the Lithuanian President to Moscow is under preparation.

Yet Russian-Lithuanian relations are not immune to problems. Some of them concern the sphere of economy. For instance, having sold a 33 % stake in Mazeikių nafta to the American Williams company in October 1999 while refusing Russian LUKoil to participate in the privatization of this major Baltic oil refinery working on Russian oil, Lithuanian authorities demonstrated their unwillingness to take into account Russian interests. Not surprisingly, crude oil transfers to Mazeikių nafta were reduced, which provoked accusations of Russia pursuing a policy of economic coercion of the Balts. The issue had faded away by February 2000, when a new round of negotiations on privatization of Mazeikių nafta had started, this time with participation of LUKoil representatives.

Besides that, the flip-side effect of the advancement of relationship with Lithuania appears to be the progressing rapprochement of this country with NATO. Analysts and officials both in Lithuania and in the West argue that Lithuania's stable and pragmatic relationship with Russia makes its candidacy for NATO membership the least problematic for Moscow. According to these views, Lithuania may be invited into Alliance in the next round of enlargement, probably in 2002.

Given the current negative attitudes of Moscow towards NATO (discussed below in this paper) such a move, if taken, would seriously damage the situation in the Baltic region, and lead to a serious deterioration of Russian-Lithuanian relations.

In sum, it can be stated that in the bilateral relations with the Baltic states much depends on the internal political mood in Russia. Generally, here we observe a nationalistic Russia in an effort to pragmatically implement the old policy of "divide et impera".