



## WEST BERLIN IN THE COLD WAR, THE BALTIC STATES TODAY – RECONSIDERED

By Ivars Ijabs



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About a year ago Edward Lucas, a journalist and political commentator of *The Economist*, invited the NATO and the West to treat the three Baltic countries, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, as they treated West Berlin during the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Indefensible from the military point of view, this part of Berlin served as a proof of the Western commitment to collective defense – and, simultaneously, as a living testimony of the superior development of liberal, capitalist democracies. In Lucas' opinion, the Baltic countries could play the same role vis-à-vis newly resurgent Russia, whose aggression in Ukraine has dramatically changed the security situation in Europe. Does the Baltic-West Berlin comparison have only rhetorical value, or is there real substance to it?

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in early 2014, movement toward a 'West Berlin scenario' can indeed be observed. First of all, Russia's recent behavior has not helped to ease the security concerns of its neighbors. Russian troops are still in Ukraine; extensive military exercises have been conducted along the Baltic borders; the Kremlin's rhetoric is still distinctly anti-Western and threatening towards what it describes as "American puppets" in Europe. Secondly, NATO is expanding its presence in the region. Beginning in summer 2015, the U.S. has begun pre-positioning heavy military equipment in the Baltics; in October, Great Britain decided to station a small number of troops in Poland and the three Baltic states "to deter Russian aggression";<sup>2</sup> extensive NATO exercises are held in the region with a renewed vigor. Thirdly, the Baltic elites themselves also seem to be rather happy about the perspective to become the leaders of the new West Berlin. In their view, this status might raise the international profile of these small and previously rather remote Eastern European countries. The Baltic lands have a long history of serving as an imaginary "outpost" in one direction or another. Now, it seems, this tradition is revived in a new international setting.

Currently, there are few signs of a détente in Western-Russian relations, and the three Baltic States will most probably see more attention to themselves from both sides. Russia will continue to harass the Balts by economic and ideological means. NATO, however cautiously, will reinforce its presence in the Baltics and provide political support. Nevertheless, the parallels between the Baltics and West Berlin of the Cold war era are really thought-provoking. Of course, history doesn't repeat itself. There are significant differences both in terms of place (geography and demography) and time (historical situation).

<sup>1</sup> Edward Lucas, Against Putin, it's Time to Channel JFK, *The Politico*, August 22, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/08/only-obama-can-stop-putin-now-110264>

<sup>2</sup> Britain to station troops in Baltic region 'to deter Russian aggression', *The Guardian*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/oct/08/britain-station-troops-poland-latvia-lithuania-estonia-russian-aggression>

Nevertheless, a comparison with the famous Cold War enclave might be useful to illuminate the problems Baltic States are facing, when dealing with their security problems in the new geopolitical situation. This comparison shows that, when facing a Western long-term stalemate with Russia, the domestic challenges of the Baltics are of no less importance than the NATO military support.

Regarding economics and infrastructure, West Berlin emerged after the almost complete devastation caused by the Second World War. The separation from the Soviet zone was caused mainly by Moscow's attempts to freeze the Western allies out of their Berlin zones of occupation. The Berlin airlift of 1948-49 was the most prominent example. This caused a complete reorientation of West Berlin's economy towards the West. The Baltic situation is different in this regard. The Baltic countries still have significant economic ties with Russia and its allies. Moreover, these ties tend to be asymmetrical, which makes these countries vulnerable to potential blackmail and pressure. In the energy sector, for example, Russia is still the most important source of hydrocarbons for the Baltics. Natural gas, one of the most widely used sources of energy in the Baltics, makes Latvia and Estonia almost exclusively dependent on imports from Russia. Of course, a few initiatives have already been implemented to reduce the Baltic dependence on Russian hydrocarbons – the most prominent being the Lithuanian LNG (liquid natural gas) terminal opened in 2014<sup>3</sup>. Also the EU has been instrumental in diversifying the Baltic energy markets. However, the political lobby of the Russian energy sector is very strong in the Baltics, and complete independence from it is a very far and abstract perspective.

Similar problems also arise with regard to transit to and from Russia through the Baltic States. Transit trade still constitutes a significant proportion of Baltic economies, despite the current Western sanctions and Russian counter sanctions. There is also very little precise information about the size of the Russian investment in the Baltic economies (it is assumed to be quite substantial), and to what extent it could be used as a political tool. If the Baltic States are the West Berlin of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these represent important differences.

There are some basic questions about Baltic economies. The famous German enclave was heavily subsidized. Initially, this was paid for by the Western allies, later, by the Bonn government and its *Berlinförderungsgesetz*. These measures were intended to make West Berlin into a showcase of successful capitalist development despite communist encirclement. Can the Baltic countries play the same role vis-à-vis authoritarian and increasingly isolationist Russia? On the one hand, all three Baltic countries show quite robust economic growth, and wages and consumption levels are rising more swiftly than in most European countries after the 2009 crisis. However, the two largest Baltic countries, Lithuania and Latvia, are among the poorest in the EU, and all three suffer from significant levels of emigration to the more affluent Western EU member states. Although EU financial support has undoubtedly helped to overcome the recent crisis and will help also in the future, Brussels will not subsidize the Baltic economies indefinitely. Therefore, full economic convergence of the Baltic economies with the rest of the EU is not a short-term, but a medium-term perspective, at best.

This leads us to a further difference between West Berlin and the Baltic States. An absolute majority of West Berliners of the Cold War era were convinced of the superiority of the Western way of life. Indeed, many East Germans risked their lives to get into the city. Although one sees increasing middle-class immigration from Russia to the Baltics, the situation there is much more complicated. Latvia and Estonia inherited from the Soviet era their substantial Russian speaking immigrant minorities, which often are weakly integrated in the restored democratic states. It is certainly not fair to treat these minorities as “fifth columns” or potential threats to the Baltic independence. Nevertheless, their geopolitical views and values tend to be rather different from Latvian and Estonian majorities. The Baltic Russophones often sympathize with Putin's Russia. Although they do not want to see the Crimean scenario repeated in the Baltics, their support for the country's integration in the EU, and, especially, NATO is significantly lower among than among ethnic Latvian and Estonian majorities.<sup>4</sup>

This cleavage has become particularly visible with the recent intensification of the informational warfare. For most Baltic Russophones (and for many ethnic Latvians and Estonians as well), the Moscow-controlled Russian TV channels often serve as the only source of information about the world. This leads to growing resentment about Western influence in the post-Soviet space, anti-American sentiments, and various conspiracy theories intended to justify Russia's actions in Ukraine. The Baltic governments have done little to provide Russophone minorities with alternatives to the Kremlin-controlled TV channels. Estonia recently opened a Russian-language TV channel ETV+. But Latvia, the country with the largest Russophone

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<sup>3</sup> Floating LNG terminal "Independence" sails into Klaipėda, Delfi.lt, October 24, 2014, <http://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/energy/floating-lng-terminal-independence-sails-into-klaipeda.d?id=66226156>

<sup>4</sup> Ivars Ījabs, Critical, but not Serious: Latvian Russophones in the Shadow of Ukraine, <https://ivarsijabs.wordpress.com/2015/05/02/critical-but-not-serious-latvian-russophones-in-the-shadow-of-ukraine/>

minority, has not followed its path, because of financial and ideological reasons. Yet this just reproduces the Latvian elite's usual reluctance to deal with the integration issues seriously. Therefore it remains to be seen to what extent these minorities can be made into loyal "West Berliners."

Finally, there is one more significant difference between the Baltic countries and West Berlin: the level of political capacity and democratic commitment. Formally, West Berlin was ruled by the Berlin House of Deputies; in fact, it functioned as the twelfth federal land of the Federal Republic of Germany. This, however, didn't prevent the West Berlin government from enjoying high levels of popular support. In the Baltics, the situation seems to be the opposite: they are fully-fledged sovereign, democratic countries. However, with a possible exception of Estonia, the trust into parliaments and governments is among the lowest in the EU<sup>5</sup>. The low levels of popular legitimacy also affect the political culture of the Baltic States. Widespread alienation from the political life, weak and unpopular political parties, and support for populist and extremist causes – all these phenomena are widespread. Probably the most telling recent example was the Baltic reaction to the European Commission's plan to distribute the Mediterranean asylum-seekers according to quotas. Although none of the Baltic countries rejected the plan in its entirety, reactions were quite telling. The most prominent politician who expressed her negative view on the issue, was the Lithuanian president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, who commented during the June EU Summit that „that she had no intention of contributing to any solution” of the migrant problem.<sup>6</sup> The former liberal foreign minister of Estonia Kristiina Ojuland commented that African and Arab immigrants were “a threat to the white race,” and therefore should not be admitted to Europe.<sup>7</sup> The event that got most international acknowledgment was the anti-immigration demonstration organized by the Latvian far-right “National Alliance,” which is a part of the government of that country.<sup>8</sup> Posters like “No to the Genocide of the White Peoples,” “Down with the cosmopolitan liberalization!” and “We are ready to welcome Swedish refugees when they will run away from immigrants’ demolished Stockholm!” were heard. In short, although the Baltic elites usually are promoting a staunchly pro-Western self-image to the outside world, their commitment to the Western values in domestic politics is often rather dubious. Such discrepancies, as well as a predisposition for populist politics, are hardly among the things a new West Berlin can afford.

It is important to remember that the historical West Berlin was not created according to some pre-given blueprint. It was rather a product of complex historical circumstances and developments, whereby the divided city was only one of the factors in a much larger game. For this reason, all attempts to re-create the “West Berlin model” in the current Baltic security situation seem to be deeply misguided. Nevertheless, there are some obvious lessons the Baltic countries could learn from the Berlin experience. First, it is necessary to root the Baltic economies deeply in the West, at the same time promoting the economic growth as a national security measure of high priority. Second, the Russophone minorities, often seen by Russia as “compatriots” to be saved and patronized, have to be made stake-holders of the sovereign Baltic democracies. Third, it is important to strengthen democratic institutions and the respect for human rights. This is a particularly complicated task, taking into account the upsurge of right-wing traditionalist populism all over Europe. If these lessons can be learned, then the comparison with Berlin has served its purpose.

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<sup>5</sup> See Standard Eurobarometer 83 (Spring 2015), [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_en.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Mediterranean migrants: EU leaders agree voluntary intake after heated talks. *The Guardian*, June 26, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/26/eu-leaders-hash-out-voluntary-system-to-address-mediterranean-migrant-crisis>

<sup>7</sup> “Former liberal MEP Ojuland calls African refugees a ‘threat to the white race’,” Estonian Public Broadcasting, May 28, 2015. <http://news.err.ee/v/politics/society/d9be1eba-8bed-4969-91f7-c90fa17e9a67>

<sup>8</sup> Demo voices discontent over immigration policy from moderate to extreme,” Latvian Public Broadcasting, August 4, 2015. <http://www.lsm.lv/en/article/societ/society/demo-voices-discontent-over-immigration-policy-from-moderate-to-extreme.a140217/>