Russia Pressures the Baltic States

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Nearly three years after all three Baltic States regained their independence, Russia continues to infringe on their sovereignty, intervene in their internal affairs and subject them to coercive diplomacy. Russia's failure to complete the withdrawal of its troops from Estonia and Latvia, a long and varied series of incidents involving the Russian forces, and allegations that Estonia and Latvia have violated the human rights of their Russian-speaking population, are issues that have acquired a particularly menacing aspect in view of Russia's characterization of the Baltics as being within the "near abroad," not as independent and sovereign as other European states--and the recently formulated military doctrine and activist foreign policy that reflect a resurgent Russian imperialism. Since 1991, all these interrelated political problems have been at the center of Estonian, Latvian, and, in some respects, Lithuanian, security concerns and their deteriorating relationship with Russia.

Continued Russian Troop Presence
On 17 September 1991, the day of their admission to the United Nations, the Baltic States were still under "occupation" by another member-state--Russia. An estimated 200,000 troops and support personnel of the Northwestern Group of Forces were stationed in the capital cities of the Baltic republics and in bases located throughout their territories. Russia refused to agree on a withdrawal deadline or on a redefined status of these forces. It was only under persistent Western pressure that Russia withdrew from Lithuania, where it had no significant bases (the only Soviet special
training camp for paratroopers was located near Kaunas), the last 2,500 troops leaving at the end of August 1993. Although the Russians began significant troop withdrawals from the other Baltic States in 1992, there remain an estimated 3,000 troops in Estonia and nearly 17,000 in Latvia.

Russia has been particularly intransigent over the ABM radar installation near Skundra in Latvia. While Western experts consider its equipment obsolete and its early-warning functions transferable to Russia's Mikachevo and Murmansk bases, (1) Russia has been insisting that it would not relinquish the base because of its strategic importance. Now the Clinton administration is urging Latvia to accept a plan, worked out in the course of Clinton's Moscow visit, that would allow Russia to maintain the radar base under civilian control for another four years with an additional 18-month dismantling period. As part of this plan, all Russian troops would be withdrawn from Latvia by the end of August 1994.(2)

The presence of Russian forces has been a chronic source of incidents, the more serious of which have involved violations of Baltic State sovereignty--deploying troops, staging maneuvers, transporting materiel and soldiers, etc., without permission from or advance notice to the host governments and often in violation of specific agreements. In the case of Lithuania, military transit incidents are likely to persist as long as Russia maintains armed forces in the neighboring Kaliningrad oblast'. At the same time, public demonstrations against the Russian military presence, such as Estonians picketing the Russian naval headquarters in Tallinn, are answered by formal Russian protests. The arrest of two Russian generals by a local Latvian official produced the most disproportionate response: a Russian military alert. The incidents and recriminations maintain a constant level of tension between the Russian forces and the governments and people of the Baltic States.

**Exploitation of the Minority Issue**

The most difficult issue facing Estonia and Latvia is posed by their large Russian population. There are two conflicting aspects to the problem: a) Russia's use of
unfounded allegations that Estonia and Latvia have violated the human rights of ethnic Russians--and lately of Russian-speakers--as a means to re-establish and legitimize Russia's imperial dominance over the region, and b) Baltic determination to recover from the effects of 50 years of Soviet control, which was inextricably associated with the influx of Russians.

Russian allegations have been made in very general terms, usually citing unspecified "discrimination" and the denial of the right to vote or acquire citizenship without such requirements as a minimal knowledge of the indigenous national language and a pledge of loyalty to the host state. Russians not only have objected to these provisions, but have insisted on what is virtually a return to the status they enjoyed before Baltic independence: the acceptance of Russian as an official language on a par with Estonian or Latvian, higher education in Russian, and, ultimately, a restructuring of the state into a dual-community system. To bolster the validity of these demands, Russians use an inflated figure of 40 percent "Russian-speakers" in Estonia and Latvia, which includes the relatively small percentage of Ukrainians and Byelorussians, and 10 percent "Russian-speakers" in Lithuania.(3)

To embarrass the Estonian and Latvian governments and undermine their legitimacy in the eyes of the international community as well as to justify its interventionist policies,

Russia has raised the human rights allegations in various international fora, notably in the United Nations and the CSCE, and in bilateral talks with Western leaders. President Boris Yeltsin and Defense Minister Pavel Grachev have repeatedly linked Russian failure to complete troop withdrawals from Estonia and Latvia to an alleged need to protect Russians in the two states. Russia has also used the allegations in attempts to impede Baltic integration into Europe. On the eve of Estonia's admission to the Council of Europe, Russia objected to the admission on the grounds of Estonian human rights violations--the effort proved to be an embarrassing failure.(4)
In spite of the fact that there has been no anti-Russian ethnic violence in Estonia or Latvia, Russia is claiming the role of "peacemaker" and protector of all "Russian-speaking" people in the Baltic region. The history of such claims speaks for itself: Hitler vis-a-vis the Sudeten Germans, or Milosevic vis-a-vis the Serbs of Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina. That the human rights issue is primarily a creature of Russian imperialist ambitions as well as a refusal by Russians in Estonia and Latvia to accept their new status as a minority and the concomitant reversal of their privileged status under the Soviet regime, becomes clear in light of impartial investigations. International human rights observers and several fact-finding missions, visiting at the invitation of the Estonian and Latvian governments--notably those led by Ibrahima Fall, the director of the United Nations Center of Human Rights, and Max von der Stoel, the CSCE High Commissioner for Ethnic Minorities--have found no systematic human rights violations in Estonia or Latvia.(5) However, the Scandinavian and other European governments have been urging the two countries, mainly out of concern about a possible Russian migrant influx into their countries, to adopt liberal citizenship and permanent residency laws.(6) The Clinton administration, as part of its policy of support for Yel'tsin, has taken a similar position.

For the Estonian and Latvian governments the issue of citizenship and permanent resident status, particularly for demobilized or retired military personnel, is politically difficult not only because of the strength of nationalist feeling in the wake of Soviet repression and Russification campaigns, but also because the high proportion of the Russian population is mainly the result of deliberate Soviet policies aimed at assimilating the Baltic peoples into the larger Slavic population of the Soviet Union. Russia's use of Russian minority related issues as a means to intervene in the internal affairs of the Baltic States greatly exacerbates the problem.

Lithuania successfully avoided confrontation with Russia over its relatively small Russian minority by granting residents of the republic automatic right to citizenship. Unlike the situation in Lithuania, where the Russian population is only 8 percent and is "balanced" by the same percentage of Poles, Russians in Estonia constitute 30 percent
of the population, with another 5 percent Ukrainians and Byelorussians, while they make up 32 percent of the population in Latvia, with an additional 8 percent Ukrainians and Byelorussians.' Estonian and Latvian fears of being culturally and linguistically--as well as economically and politically--overwhelmed by Russians stem not only from these high percentages, but also from the fact that the geographic concentration of the Russians makes them highly "visible" in these respects. In effect, it is not multi-ethnicity as such that has become problematic in Estonia and Latvia--both countries have an interwar history of model ethnic policies based on the principle of ethnic cultural autonomy(8)--but the historical context and present position of the Russian immigrants.

**Forcible Demographic Change**

Following their occupation of the Baltic States, the Soviets killed or deported hundreds of thousands of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians while thousands more fled into exile on the eve of Soviet reoccupation in 1944. The policy of locating major industrial plants in the Baltic republics led to an influx of large numbers of Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian laborers and managers. Aside from the occupying forces, communist party officials and KGB operatives also flooded into the republics. The mass deportations and industrialization policies resulted in a significant change in the relative proportion of Russians to Estonians and Latvians. Due to its high birth rate, however, Lithuania preserved its pre-war ethnic equilibrium.

In 1935 the population of Riga, Latvia's capital, was 63 percent Latvian; today it is only 36 percent. In the country's eight largest cities Latvians constitute considerably less than half the population; in the interwar period they comprised between 66 percent and 95 percent of the population. Russians formed only 10 percent of Latvia's population before Soviet occupation, and only 8 percent of Estonia's population. Russians in Estonia today, aside from Tallinn where they constitute nearly half the city's population, are concentrated in the industrial northeastern region of the country adjacent to the Russian border. Not surprisingly they pose a significant threat to the territorial integrity of Estonia. In Narva, which is over 95 percent Russian, over 97 percent were reported to have voted for territorial autonomy. (The Estonian national court annulled the
It might be noted that Estonia is demanding the return of territories in the Leningrad and Pskov regions that were annexed by the Soviet Union in the 1940s and 1950s.

Aside from establishing closer links with the Nordic countries and Europe, mainly by joining various regional organizations as well as being included in NATO's "Partnership for Peace" program, in order to enhance their security in general, the Baltic States are seeking a specific remedy to pressures--European and American as well as Russian--for the modification of their citizenship and permanent residency laws. They seek formal international recognition as Soviet occupied territories rather than as successor states of the Soviet Union.

This would bring about international recognition of Baltic claims that Soviet population transfers were violations of international law regarding occupied territories. As significant as such recognition would be, it would enhance Baltic security only if applied in a broader international context that would deny Russia's sphere-of-influence pretensions concerning the Baltic States.

Notes:
4 Author's interviews with members of the Latvian Parliament's Rights Committee, 9 June 1993.
6 Author’s interviews with Latvian and Estonian diplomats at the UN in late 1993.

8 See Rita Putins Peters, "Baltic State Diplomacy and the League of Nations Minorities System," in *The Baltic in International Relations Between the Two World Wars*, John Hiden and Aleksander Loit, eds. (Baltic Studies Center, Stockholm University, 1988).

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