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## PERSPECTIVE

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# Diaspora-Kinstate Phenomenon in Baltic-Russian Relations

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With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, nearly twenty-five million ethnic Russians became minorities dispersed among the now independent former Soviet republics. In Estonia Russians were nearly a third of the population. They were nearly half of the population in its capital city Tallinn. Estonians were a small minority living among a large Russian population in two northeast areas of the country, Narva and Kohtla-Järve. In Latvia Russians were over a third of the populations with Latvians in the minority in its capital Riga. Five of the largest cities in the country had Russian majorities. Most of the Russians had arrived after the Baltic states had been occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union in the course of World War II. (1)

The fact that the Russian “settlers” were not given automatic citizenship (2)—they could, however, naturalize—became the focal point of a series of related issues, notably language rights and education policies, that Moscow made the basis of the charge that the human rights of the Russians were being violated. Accusing Latvia and Estonia of establishing “apartheid” and preparing for “ethnic cleansing,” Russia asserted a right to protect the “Russian speakers” in the two countries. Thus, the Russians in Estonia and Latvia became part of the diaspora-kinstate phenomenon in the sense that the diaspora was used by Moscow as a means to exert political and economic pressure on the two countries as well as to impugn their legitimacy.

Historically the diaspora-kinstate phenomenon has been linked to coercive diplomacy as well as international aggression. Nazi Germany buttressed its demand for the return of the Sudetenland with allegations of discrimination against ethnic Germans in the region and claims to Berlin's right to protect and defend them. Similar allegations and claims were made against Poland before the invasion of that country. Turkey, in 1974, while claiming that it needed to protect Turkish Cypriots from the Greeks, expanded the Turkish region to over a third of the country. More recently Slobodan Milosevic claimed the right to protect Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina while trying to carve out parts of the newly independent states to recreate a "Greater Serbia"—in the dimension of the mid-fourteenth century Nemanjid Serbian empire. Indeed, ethnic cleansing by Serbs, but also, to a lesser degree, by Croats and Muslims, was justified in terms of the need to protect ethnic kin.

Most recently, claiming that Georgia was perpetrating "genocide" in South Ossetia, Russia invoked a claim of constitutional obligation to protect its citizens—including those residing in other countries—to justify a full-scale invasion (it already had what it called peacekeeping forces in the regions) of South Ossetia as well as Georgia proper. (3) Preceding the invasion in August 2008, Moscow had been actively distributing Russian passports to ethnic Russians in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. After the invasion both of these regions of Georgia declared themselves independent, but were recognized as independent states only by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and, eventually, Nauru. (4)

In all these cases there was not only a lack of evidence for significant threats to the diaspora, but the kinstate used allegations of rights abuses as justification and pretext for aggression against neighboring states and, in many cases, as part of territorial expansion.

In the case of the Russian diaspora in Estonia and Latvia, Russia's approach—alleging violations of rights of the diaspora coupled with assertions of a right to defend and protect its "compatriots"—is consistent with the phenomenon as it has appeared in

recent history. Russia's policy goals in relation to the Baltics, however, are different. The allegations and claims are not a part of territorial expansion or an imminent intent to use military force, (5) but rather of a determination to maintain a sphere of influence over the former Soviet space.

Initially Russia used the diaspora factor in its effort to maintain a military presence in the Baltic states. (6) In 1991 when Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania regained their independence and were admitted to the United Nations, they were still, in effect, under occupation by another member-state: the Soviet Union. Moscow refused to set a deadline for withdrawal of the estimated 200,000 troops in the Baltic Military District (with its headquarters in Riga) unless the Russians living in Estonia and Latvia were assured their "rights." Russia framed the "rights" in terms that would have established a dual-community political system with political power divided equally between Estonians and Latvians and the Russian diaspora in each country. The protracted and acrimonious negotiations over troop withdrawal were punctuated by repeated threats of economic sanctions against Latvia and Estonia as well as of Russian troop reinforcement in both countries. (7)

Once the Baltic states made clear their determination to rejoin Europe, Moscow focused on preventing the Baltic states from joining either the European Union or NATO. Among the conditions for accession to both are settled borders and observance of human rights, particularly of minorities. Although border agreements had been reached with both Estonia and Latvia, Russia refused to sign or ratify them. Moscow linked the agreements to demands for automatic citizenship for the diaspora and the designation of Russian as well as Estonian and Latvian as official languages in the respective countries. At the same time, Moscow continued to accuse both countries of systematic human rights violations against "Russian speakers."

Russia failed to define the Baltic states as an unacceptable liability for either the European Union or NATO. The border criteria were waived by both the EU and NATO as it was clear that there were in fact stable borders. (8) Equally important, both

Estonia and Latvia satisfied the Copenhagen criteria for accession to the EU: they had institutionalized democratic practices and the rule of law as well as human rights regimes and minorities protection. The Baltic states were invited to join NATO in 2002 and joined the EU in 2004.

Indeed, symbolic of the recognition that their human rights and minorities policies were consistent with European norms was the admission, nearly ten years earlier, of Estonia (1993) and Latvia (1995) to the Council of Europe. The organization stipulates, among other things, observance of human rights as a membership criterion. In spite of Moscow's vigorous campaigning for its own admission before the Baltic states, (9) Russia was not invited to join the Council until 1996. The admission had been delayed on the grounds that Russia was engaged in massive and indiscriminate attacks on the civilian population of Chechnya.

Having failed to prevent Baltic state accession to the EU or NATO, Russia insisted on maintaining the diaspora issues on the European agenda. Moscow demanded that the EU-Russia Partnership agreement, intended to foster cooperation on various matters and levels between the two, include monitoring of Latvian and Estonian minorities policies. Although the EU made a limited concession in form—in terms of vaguely defined “human dimension” issues—there was a lack of substance in the process. The Europeans were not interested in pursuing what was generally understood to be a matter of pressure politics against two of their own member-states. (10)

For Estonia and Latvia it has been a constant challenge to be obliged to respond in various international fora to allegations of human rights violations that maintain the same tone and intensity regardless of the situation of the diaspora itself. (11) Indeed, the number of Russiannon-citizens in both countries has been steadily declining. It is significant that the reports of various nongovernmental organizations, notably Human Rights Watch, as well as OSCE and UN officials have failed to support Moscow's allegations of human rights violations in either Estonia or Latvia. (12) Nonetheless the diaspora issues are likely to persist not only because of Russia's sphere-of-influence

ambitions, but also because they serve Russia's domestic political purposes. Moscow's assertiveness over diaspora issues in the Baltic states resonates for those nostalgic for the Soviet Union as superpower and, most resoundingly, for Russian nationalists in and outside Russia.

The most recent source of conflict between Russia and the Baltic states flared up at the time of Moscow's commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Part of the celebration was Moscow's claim to have "liberated" the Baltic states as well as Eastern Europe from Nazi German control. The leaders of the Baltic states, however, insist that the defeat of Germany for the Baltics was also the moment when they were occupied by the Soviet Union. (13) The division between the leaders in Moscow and those of the Baltic and Eastern European states is a reflection of the strongly held views within these countries. In the Baltic states exists an unbridgeable divide between the beliefs of the ethnic Russians and Estonians and Latvians: the Russians are seen as "occupiers" while they see themselves as "liberators."

The commemoration infused a long-standing dispute with new intensity. The Soviet Union and Russia had been cultivating for over a half century the image of the Red Army as "liberator" in the Great Patriotic War. In the Baltics it was not until Soviet censorship was lifted in the late 1980s that this image could be publicly challenged. There ensued a duel of histories. Among the more recent contributions to the argument, *History of Latvia: The 20th Century*, (2006) published in Riga with the support of Latvia's ministries of defense and of foreign affairs, includes a lengthy and detailed account of the Soviet occupation with its massive repression and mass deportations of Latvians to Siberia. In Moscow the book was denounced as "fabrication." As an indication of the seriousness with which Russia takes the issue, Moscow announced the establishment of a center to be devoted to the Russian interpretation of this history. Aside from the nationalist aspect of the history, there are also other equally significant matters to consider. If the Baltic states are to be seen as having been occupied, then, in international law, Russians who settled there after the occupation would be illegal settlers in occupied lands. Those Russians in Estonia and Latvia could not claim

citizenship or Russian-language rights. Moreover, Baltic claims to compensation for the damage in human as well as economic terms would be placed on a serious legal foundation.

The nearly twenty-year history of the contentious Baltic-Russian relationship has evolved through a series of greater and lesser disputes. The constant factor throughout this history has been Russia's use of accusations of abuse of its "compatriots' rights." Beginning with Moscow's refusal to withdraw its military forces from the once again independent Baltic states, moving to Russia's determination to prevent the Baltic states from joining the European Union and NATO, and then focusing on disputes over interpretations of "occupation" and "liberation," the diaspora-kinstate phenomenon has remained at the center of each conflict. It also proved to be ineffective.

Ultimately, Russia has lost its campaign to undermine the legitimacy of the Estonian and Latvian political systems.

**Source Notes:**

(1) Before the Soviet occupation ethnic Russians were 12% of the Latvian and 8.2% of the Estonian population. (For demographic data see: Georg von Rauch, The Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974]

(2) The Russians—and their descendants—who were citizens of Estonia and Latvia before the occupation had their citizenship restored together with those of other minorities as well as the Estonians and Latvians when the Baltic states regained their independence in 1991.

(3) For a succinct statement of the claims of genocide and claims to the right to protect Russian citizens outside Russia, see 26 August 2008 BBC interview with Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev (President of Russia Official Web Portal). For Russian peacekeeping practices, see John Mackinlay and Peter Cross, eds., Regional Peacekeepers: The Paradox of Russian Peacekeeping. (New York: United Nations University Press, 2003)

- (4) Moscow insisted that its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was legitimate and consistent with international law. Medvedev emphasized that Russia's action is the same as that of the West when it recognized the independence of Kosovo. (See BBC interview 26 August 2008)
- (5) The Baltic states and Poland have been seeking NATO recognition of Russia as a potential threat while other NATO members, notably Germany and France, argue that such a move would be counterproductive, an unnecessary provocation. (See, for example, Ahto Lobjakas, "Russia's Military Shopping Spree Raises Specter of Gunboat Diplomacy," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 29 January 2010.
- (6) For an assessment of the linkage of troop withdrawal and "rights" claim, see Rita Putins Peters, "Russia, the Baltic States and the West," in *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. II, No.4 ( Fall 1994).
- (7) Author's interviews with members of the Estonian and Latvian delegations to talks on Russian troop withdrawals, Tallinn and Riga, June 1992. In May 1993 Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev warned Estonia that if necessary it would not take long to reinforce the troops that were still stationed in Estonia (FOREIGN BROADCAST SERVICE, Daily Report, Central Eurasia, 9 May [FBIS-SOV-94-189] p. 11.)
- (8) It should be noted that after the Soviet occupation an area north of the Narva River and the Petseri district in Estonia (5% of Estonian territory) and a part of the Abrene district in northeast Latvia (2% of Latvia's territory) were annexed to Russia by Stalin. (See Ole Nørgaard, et. al., The Baltic States after Independence. [Brookfield: Edward Elgar, 1996], p. 34)
- (9) Author's interviews with officials of Latvia's foreign ministry and members of Saeima (Parliament) in Riga, June 1995.
- (10) Author's interviews with Latvian and Estonian diplomats, New York and Washington,DC, May and June 23 2009.
- (11) Author's interviews with Latvian and Estonian diplomats, New York and Washington, DC, May and June 2009.
- (12) See, for example, Ibrahima Fall, "Summary of the Report on a Fact-Finding Mission to Latvia," 27 November 1992; and FBIS\_Sov\_94-037, 24 February 1994, p. 58.



(13) Serhii Plokyh, "Remembering Yalta," in Ukraine & Russia: Representations of the Past (Toronto: U. P., 2008).

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