

THE BALTICS – A FORGOTTEN FUTURE PROJECT

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Distant ethnic brothers

Historians from the Baltic States like to say that the Lithuanians, Poles and Byelorussians are historical brothers, since they lived in one state for many centuries, whereas the Latvians are only ethnic brothers of the Lithuanians because they lived in German-founded Livonia for some 300 years.

In reality however, we lived with our Latvian brothers in one state for an equally long period of time as we did with the neighbouring Slavs, although that experience has not been actualised yet as the case with the Poles, Byelorussians or Ukrainians has. Furthermore, in Latvian historiography this period is traditionally called the Polish times (*poļu laiki*). This is also because the annexation of Latvian (and southern Estonian) lands to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania went on just before the Union of Lublin; in Polish sources the annexed lands are called Inflanty (a distorted version of Livland), and after the war with the Swedes (1600–1629), Latgale left to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (also known as the Republic of Two Nations) was called Inflanty Polskie.

In discussions about history, it is also emphasised that in the times of prosperity of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania perhaps up to 80 per cent of its inhabitants were Slavs. This is also not quite true. During the rule of Vytautas, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had three main ethnicities: the Balts in the west, the Slavs in the central regions, and the wandering Tatars in the south-east (by the Black Sea). The number of Balts outweighed the others in the times of Žygimantas Augustas, when in 1561 the lands inhabited by Latvians were an-

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nexed to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, i.e. Vidzeme, Latgale and the vassal Duchy of Courland and Zemgale, and Ukraine was taken by the Poles. Latgale belonged to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (from 1569 called the Republic of Two Nations) until the first division of the republic, i.e. as long as 211 years. Being in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania helped the inhabitants of Latgale remain Catholic and receive the writing tradition from Vilnius, and it encouraged the formation of greater linguistic peculiarities. Because of this, some Latgalian consider themselves a distinct Baltic ethnic group.

Regarding the Duchy of Courland and Zemgale, it belonged to the Republic of Two Nations according to vassal rights up to 1795, which is longer than the period during which Ukraine belonged to Lithuania.

We became very distant due to the events in two particular centuries: the 17th century, when most Latvians became Lutherans, and the 19th century, when we belonged to the Russian Empire.

The Lutheran church was especially interested in the peasants being literate, so that they could read Christian literature at home. Therefore, Latvian peasants soon became more educated and more civilised than our peasants. In Lithuania, Catholics published the Bible only in the 20th century. (Latvians published the New Testament in 1685 and the Old Testament in 1689.) Two uprisings against the Tsar (1831 and 1863) only provoked a negative reaction: we lost our university, we lost the right to write using Latin characters, and we lost our Lithuanian parochial schools. The different times of the abolition of serfdom also had an impact. In the German provinces of Russia—Estland, Lifland and Courland—serfdom was abolished in 1817 and 1819, whereas in ethnographic Lithuania (and Latgale) it was abolished only in 1861. Thus Latvian peasants could earlier start sending their children to schools of higher education, and the national intelligentsia and pride in the native language and native ethnic culture began forming earlier. Lithuanians at that time were just looking at the Poles and imitating their “seigniorial” language and manners. The first newspaper in the Latvian language was published in 1822 (the Lithuanian *Auszra* was published only in 1883), and the first international Latvian song festival took place in 1873 (the Lithuanian one took place in 1924).

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the late 19th century Lithuanian peasants were viewed by Latvians as culturally and economically underdeveloped

neighbours. It is probably then that the old ethnonym *leitis* acquired its negative connotation.

For the sake of justice, it should however be mentioned that the 19th century Latvian intelligentsia had a totally different view of Lithuanians. They praised the only past state of the Balts—the Grand Duchy of Lithuania—and its rulers and admired the antiquity of the Lithuanian language, borrowing words from it in order to replace their German words.

The relationship between the intelligentsia of our countries, especially philologists, people involved in theatre, and artists, has traditionally been good and warm. All we have to do is further develop this tradition and expand it to other levels of society. The media on both sides of the border having a positive attitude could do a lot in this case.

Different statehood-related ambitions

Lithuanians have been famous for their military and commercial activities since ancient times, as evidenced by the chronicles of neighbouring countries and Livonia, whereas there are no hints of the Latgalian, Selonian or Zemgalian military activities into neighbouring lands or any active trade. Of the northern Balts, only the Curonians were famous for being as active.

The subjugated northern Balts lost their statehood-related ambitions together with the destroyed or assimilated aristocracy. Soon they became loyal to their subjugators.

The Latvians' statehood-related ambitions appeared only during the First World War. At first, Latvia was viewed as an autonomous unit in Russia ("A free Latvia in a free Russia"); however, after the autumn of 1917 ideas about a state independent of Russia appeared.

After the loss of the state in 1795, the Lithuanian nobility, who already had some experience with statehood, were trying to get it back. The leitmotiv of the Latvian national revival in the 19th century was the nourishing of their national identity, whereas the Lithuanian revival was characterised by a greater variety of objectives, which among others included the restoration of the state. These objectives and priorities and the differences between them are clearly reflected in the national anthems of the two countries, which are pieces created in the latter part of the 19th century: Karlis Baumanis' *Dievs, Svētī Latviju!* and Vincas Kudirka's *Tautiška Giesmė*.

The Lithuanians' unwillingness to serve in a foreign army was demonstrated by the Hitler's unsuccessful plans to create an analogue of the Latvian legion in Lithuania and by the lack of submission of General Plechavičius to the Germans, who instructed him where the local squad lead by him was supposed to go and what it was supposed to do. The much more intensive and longer post-war Lithuanian resistance was caused both by deeper traditions of statehood and by a more radical view about the occupants' army.

Thus the present-day Lithuanian entrepreneurship and Latvian passivity can also be explained by historical traditions: having restored their state, Lithuanians dedicate all their energy to the spheres of "peaceful expansion", i.e. to the development of trade and business, and even emigration (not being satisfied with the present situation), whereas Latvians behave as if they accept things the way they are.

The undiscovered Latvia

One of the unique attributes of the Baltic States often forgotten by Western European and North American politicians and commentators are some multi-ethnic and ethno-political cultural elements that the West itself lacked in the 20th century. One of these is the especially broad cultural autonomy that Lithuania ensured its Jewish community and that Latvia and Estonia ensured their German communities (in Estonia, some elements of cultural autonomy were also noticed in relation to the Russian community).

Latvia became famous not only for ensuring the autonomy of its Germans but also for some of its prominent Germans. The German influence on Latvian artistic and intellectual culture is usually defined as the impulse of Johann Gottfried von Herder to study the ethnic culture and folklore of this country. The Koenigsberg academic impulses are mentioned as well, first of all thanks to Immanuel Kant, Herder, and Johann Georg Hamann.

In European political life, nobody promoted Latvia as widely as the recently discovered Latvian German Paul Schiemann (1876–1944) who worked as a journalist at the newspaper *Rigasche Rundschau* and became the most prominent representative of minorities' rights and the cultural protection movement in the Baltic region, and perhaps all of Europe. The European Congress of Nationalities, which included 40 million members, was established in Riga by

the German Schiemann, who stated that Latvian Germans must be loyal to the Latvian state, yet at the same time maintain their own culture and not submit to Nazi Germany. For his anti-Nazi and anti-totalitarian beliefs (Schiemann strongly opposed both National Socialism and Bolshevism), Schiemann was negatively viewed in Hitler's Germany. He was also disliked by some Latvian Germans who supported the Nazis and had anti-Latvian attitudes; however, Schiemann did not change his behaviour or beliefs. Thus it is important to emphasise that the ideas of loyal minorities and of individual rather than territorial autonomy raised in the late 19th century in Austria were implemented in the Baltic States for the first time in European history, i.e. as mentioned before, in relation to Jews in Lithuania and Germans in Latvia.

Thus the Baltic States have something to say in the EU today as discussions on the issues of minorities and multiculturalism theory and practice are underway.

Does the Baltic region really exist?

The question as to whether the Baltic region is a political and cultural phenomenon that really exists or whether it is just the closeness of the Baltic nations inherited from the Soviet times probably become acute for the first time when current Estonian President and former Foreign Minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves (who held the position in 1996-1998 and 1999-2001) made his famous statement, which has become a classic, that Latvia and Lithuania might indeed be the Baltic States, but Estonia is one of the Nordic countries. And the problem he raised can indeed be substantiated.

The region which was once called the Baltic provinces and which became the point of intersection of the historically-formed interests of the Danish, the Germans, and the Russians had a chance to acquire a significant political weight in inter-war Europe. We should remember that at that time Finland was considered a Baltic state as well, and thus there were four Baltic States. Due to the efficient Soviet foreign policy, which allowed it to successfully manipulate the foreign policy of the new political players in Europe, the Baltic States failed to create any common defence forces (even though such an objective had been set) and formulate a coordinated common political stance. The Baltic States were a category of political geography rather than a socio-political formation with a deeper significance.

By a miracle (and also thanks to the heroism of the Finns), after the Second World War Finland managed to maintain its statehood and independence and started to seek to get integrated into the organisations of the Nordic countries, thus moving away from the occupied and annexed Baltic States. And Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia became the Soviet Baltics, i.e. three prisoners in the same prison of nations, which were united only by the same cell and by their fragile sentiments provoked by the notion of a common enemy.

The weakness of the self-image and self-identity of the Baltic region is often emphasised by the feelings about neighbouring countries and cultures notion in all three states of the region. Latvia and Estonia, Lutheran and historically close to the Nordic countries (especially to 17th-century Sweden, in which Riga was the largest and the most economically powerful city, a great degree ahead of Stockholm for a long period of time, and Dorpat (or Tartu), after the establishment of a university there in 1632, became one of the main academic centres of the Kingdom of Sweden), have a strong and obvious Nordic dimension in their history, as well as in their political and cultural experience. On the other hand, in Lithuania this dimension is much weaker, since after the successful Counter-Reformation, Catholic Lithuania was close to Poland. It is obvious that modern Lithuanian culture has many more Eastern and Central European traits (first of all in Vilnius) than the Latvian and Estonian cultures.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that Estonia has much in common with Finland, which has virtually the same national anthem and national epics, and Latvia, at least in the sphere of historical and cultural sentiments, is closer to Sweden (and at the same time to Germany) rather than to its ethno-linguistic and ethno-cultural sister Lithuania. In the context of resistance to the Soviet occupation and annexation, these ethno-linguistic and ethno-cultural sentiments were indeed important. Whatever the case might be, since the restoration of the independence of the Baltic States, it has become clear that Poland is much closer to Lithuania than the other two Baltic States are. And Lithuania is close to Poland not because of any ethno-linguistic or ethno-cultural characteristics, but due to common modern policies, earlier existence of a common state, administration of international relations, and experience of urban culture.

On the other hand, the logic of state life and common experience should make Finland closer to Sweden or to some extent to Russia. In the case of Fin-

land and Estonia however, it is not only linguistic and cultural links that are important, but also their similar experience of modernisation, national revival, and creation of a modern state, as well as the fact that these events took place in the same period of time. From this point of view, Lithuania, which remembers its previous experience of statehood and has a clear perspective of the Slavic countries and all its neighbours, can be hardly called a country that is close to Latvia. Is it therefore right for us to hope for quick results not through joint political activity and the joint creation of the future in the region, but only by remembering the similarity of languages and customs?

After almost sixteen years of independence, we may ask what the links between the Baltic States are like. If we do not mention some institutions that exist only on paper and some economic cooperation, the Baltic region as a coordinated policy or cooperative unit with common priorities, rather than just a geographic concentration of states, does not show any signs of life today. It is sufficient to compare us and such regional political formation as the Nordic countries. It is well known that the Danish and the Norwegian languages are quite close; therefore, representatives from these countries can talk to each other in their native languages and understand each other perfectly. It is a little more difficult for the Swedes, and even more difficult for the Icelanders, yet people already at school in all Nordic countries are familiarised with the languages of the neighbouring countries so that they can understand them.

Those who had a chance to attend conferences organised by the Nordic countries know very well that the Norwegians, the Danes, and the Swedes (and sometimes even the Icelanders) speak their native languages there. True, this idyll is sometimes changed by the Finns, who prefer English to their second state language, Swedish. The Finns, who belong to the Finno-Ugric group, re-orient such forums to the English language.

How can Lithuania and Latvia be brought together?

Have Lithuania and Latvia ever attempted to achieve anything similar? It is often said that these two countries are the only Baltic tribes that became modern nations. We also know the indisputable phrase about the affinity of our languages. But why have attempts not been made to discuss more seriously in the education systems of these two countries the idea that Lithuanians could

study the Latvian language and Latvians could study the Lithuanian language at secondary school?

Why couldn't we broadcast Latvian television stations, subtitled the programs in Lithuanian? If Latvians did the same and broadcasted Lithuanian television programs with Latvian subtitles, just a decade would be sufficient for some real changes in the two countries' mutual understanding to occur. Soon, a time would come in which young people could talk to each other in their native languages and understand each other perfectly.

For the purposes of professional communication, high-level language skills are undoubtedly required. It is therefore obvious that scholars at international forums will always switch to English. By the way, it should be mentioned that this does not concern our politicians, diplomats or businessmen, who still use only Russian in Latvia and even Estonia. In order for us to become a region with a real political content and common cultural life and not remain just a formation existing on paper, all we need is some political imagination and will.

Finally, should our relations with Russia ever be normalised and become warmer, there is nothing bad in the Russian language together with the English language becoming actively used in the Baltic region—not only because of the Kaliningrad region and neighbouring St. Petersburg, but also because of its possible use as the *lingua franca* in Eastern Europe. Yet in order to arrive at this point, some serious changes need to occur in Russia, and first of all in the attitude of Russian politicians towards the small European nations and to Russia's former colonies.

By the way, relating the future of Lithuania above all with education and multilingualism, we should consider studying the basics of the Estonian language at schools. Of course, this will not begin today, since in order to do that we should first of all start to view languages and culture more seriously and start to develop some respect for education. For the time being, the above-mentioned things are not included among our country's priorities. Lithuania will inevitably change, however, so we can already start thinking about the possible changes.

All this can happen in the future. What we have to do today is to start from basic things such as the expression of our interest in each other. The pace of globalisation does not allow us to quickly understand the current situation and

acknowledge that if we do not make any conscious attempts and do not express our political will, soon when in Latvia we will feel as if we are in a more distant place than the United Kingdom or Ireland.

We have not done one thing yet; we have not used our Baltic dimension to the full. We have not tried to enter the world as the two Baltic nations. Our historical experience links us to the Poles and links the Latvians to the Germans. However, the present gives us a chance to create modern history. And to try what has not been tried yet.