

## **RUSSIAN BALTIC POLICY – COHERENT INCOHERENCE**

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Russia in its policy towards the Baltic States in 1990s employed almost all available tools. It evolved from coercion (economic pressure) through attempts of “engagement and reassurance” (e.g. initiation of Russian security guarantees in 1996-97) to “differentiation” which conditioned development of economic cooperation from resolution of political problems, first of all, status of Russian-speaking minority rights in Latvia and Estonia and respect of Russian interests by Governments of the Balts. Lithuania due to objective conditions was chosen to play a role of a positive pattern of conducting relationships with Russia for other Baltic republics. Alongside with the interdependence on Kaliningrad issue, such vector of Russian Baltic policy provided for stability in bilateral relations independently from the domestic conjuncture in Russia and Lithuania. The latter often was not positive, coloured by different interpretations of history and fuelled by mutual prejudices and misinterpretations of intentions.

The first term of Putin’s presidency affected Russian Baltic policy towards its “pragmatization” and “economization”. The instruments of “differentiation” proved to have been inefficient, while the domestic developments in Russia and the Baltic States and international environment seemed to be benevolent for Russian attempts of normalizing relationships with the Balts. Domestically, Russia was getting stronger economically, while its weight in the world policy at least stopped its decline. In the Baltic States more moderate political forces came to power. Internationally, Russian-West relationships seemed to improve because of certain reconsidering the previous confrontational foreign policy line of Primakov and the growing range of common interests, first and foremost, international terrorism. The EU and NATO enlargement were approaching,

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thus encouraging the Baltic States to pursue less adversarial stance towards Russia. Russia in its turn softened its anti-Baltic rhetoric and expressed readiness to settle old problems – to sign border treaties with the Latvia and Estonia, to intensify economic cooperation with them, and finally recognized the very legitimacy of NATO aspirations of the Baltic States. The elements of strategy “reassurance without engagement” in Russian policy towards the Baltic States strengthened.

Simultaneously, Russia became more persistent in supporting economic activities of its companies abroad and diversifying the routes of oil and gas transit. Such a line was aimed at decreasing political risks of Russian energy export and providing more favourable economic terms for it.

The years 2003-2004 became a certain watershed in Russian-West relationships. Deterioration was catalyzed by Iraqi invasion, YUKOS prosecution in Russia, growing activism of the USA and Europe on the post-Soviet space, etc. At the same time, the Baltic States were looking for their niche in the system of European political coordinates after the end of the previous decade – NATO and EU membership - had been achieved. Instead of becoming a bridge between Russia and the West, they perceived the demand (from the West) and preferred playing a role of permanent critics of Russia on the international arena. The Balts joined the voices of international public on jeopardizing trends of Russian domestic developments, such as growing authoritarianism and state interference into economic life. Simultaneously, the attempts to bring the issues of history into political agenda were undertaken. The Latvian president was the only Baltic leader who positively responded to invitation for celebrations of 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Great Victory in Moscow, making some controversial verbal reservations. The steps of Estonian and Latvian parliaments prevented from signing and ratification of bilateral border treaties between them and Russia. The Baltic States adhered to reinforcement of Transatlantic relationships and raising its regional status through cooperation and assistance to the CIS countries, first of all its European part and the Caucuses, which is viewed in Moscow as a traditional realm of influence, which is of utmost importance for restoring the (regional) great power status.

At the same time, the foreign policy approaches selected by the Baltic States, were not homogeneous. If Estonia opted for inscribing its foreign policy into the context of EU politics, thus willing to channel dialogue with Moscow exclu-

sively through Brussels, Lithuania chose more proactive strategy of its foreign policy, trying to affect policies of the EU and NATO more actively and simultaneously preserving direct dialogue with Moscow. This should help in raising the regional status of Lithuania, producing both economic and image/prestige benefits. The modus of relationships with Russia differed as well. Though in general they could be defined as stable, the quality of this stability for Latvia and Estonia is “negative”<sup>1</sup>, while for Lithuania rather “positive but vulnerable”.

Russia’s policy towards the Baltic States has become even less comprehensive than earlier. On the one hand, as a response to growing anti-Russian critics and activism in CIS Russia employed the “marginalization” option – presenting negative images of the Balts (using such aspects as “heroization” of Nazism, attempts of rewriting history and still problematic situation with integration of Russian-speaking minorities) alongside with dividing “old” and “new” Europe, reinforcing traditional relations with the largest European countries, first of all, through Russia-Germany-France link. It worth reminding such events as celebration of 750<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Kaliningrad without the leaders of neighbouring states but with participation of French President and German Chancellor and signing the agreement on construction of the NEGP.

On the other hand, Russia indicated readiness to respond positively to the signals from the Baltic States aimed at resolving the most painful issues of bilateral relations and widen cooperation with them on political level. There are clear signs of gradual improve in Russian-Latvian relationships, which is to be supplemented by signing border treaty. Russia decided not to exaggerate the meaning of a new spy scandal with Lithuania and the response to the expulsion of the Russian diplomat from Lithuania was rather asymmetric. The head of the Russian parliamentary delegation to Lithuania even appreciated Lithuanian side for not blowing up this issue<sup>2</sup>. Even in relationships with Estonia concerning the attempts of some political forces to utilize the issue of the Bronze Soldier monument in the centre of Tallinn for electoral purposes, initial Russian rigid reaction has transformed into more moderate one. Though some signals of dis-

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<sup>1</sup> Ozoliņa Ž., Rikveilis A. *Latvian and Russian Foreign Policy: Bound by a post-Soviet History // Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions / N. Muižnieks (Ed.). Riga: Latvian University, 2006. P. 87-97.*

<sup>2</sup> ИА «REGNUM». *«С Россией надо говорить культурно». Литва за неделю. 10 13 2006.* <<http://www.regnum.ru/news/721139.html>>

satisfaction were sent to Tallinn (official statement of the State Duma, cancellation of the meeting of the intergovernmental commission on construction of a new bridge through Narva river on the border between Russia and Estonia), the option of introducing sanctions has been rejected (though certain implicit punishment in economic sphere is possible).

Seemingly, there some factors which should objectively pave more positive Russian policies towards the Baltic States. First, the interdependence (which was often perceived as dependence by both sides) on transit vs. fossils present in 1990-ies, has weakened. Russia has diversified its transit facilities, while it is difficult to imagine that its energy leverage for pressing the Balts could be applied, because its limited benefits in relations with the Baltic States will not cover the image costs of unreliable supplier. The energy leverage for Russia is weak because it meets strongly negative reaction in Europe and is harmful for achievement of “Grand Energy Superpower” status.

Second, Russia with account of problems with a number of its neighbours and the growing perception of emerging a *cordon sanitaire* around the perimeter of Russian borders is interested in normalizing relations with the Balts. This is instrumental for decreasing their critical stance towards Russia in framework of NATO and the EU, as well as for developing mutually beneficial economic projects. Natural re-orientation of a part of Russian-European trade flows through the roads of the Baltic States and tense relations with still the main transit country Belarus need mutual efforts for development of road and border infrastructure.

Third, the “democratization of Russia on the part of the EU, or the USA..., has retreated from the political agenda”<sup>3</sup>, while the European common foreign policy (CFSP) is still a policy in-making, which often is unable to help in settling bilateral problems of the Balts through Brussels. So, the demand for critic of Russia from abroad is going to decrease, while the need for establishing direct dialogue between Moscow and the Baltic capitals grows up.

The contemporary Russian policies towards the Baltic States are featured by the following characteristics. First, they are getting less comprehensive, more multi-layered (and lobby-affected) with loose coordination among specific ap-

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<sup>3</sup> Lejiņš A. The CFSP and the PCA: Between Realpolitik and Values // The EU Common Foreign and Security Policy toward Russia: the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement as a Test Case / A.Lejiņš (Ed.). Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2006. P. 5.

proaches towards each country. Of course, objectively the Baltic States and their positions on different issues are still a point of comparison for each other as it happens with the Bronze Soldier monument story in Estonia. Second, economic relationships (except the strategic energy sector) are getting less dependent on the level of political dialogue. Third, the issue of Russian-speaking minorities is not anymore a condition for cooperation development on broader agenda. Moreover, the contacts with moderate political forces in the Baltic States have been intensified. Russia is ready to resolve such issues as border treaties and to set up more active institutional basis for bilateral cooperation. The elements of strategy “reassurance without engagement” are getting more persistent in Russian policy toward the Baltic States.

For Lithuania the consequences of lack of coherent Baltic policy of Russia are ambiguous. On the one hand, Lithuania will be able to benefit less from positive distinguishing in framework of “differentiation”. Some economic interests of Lithuania and Latvia compete and Russia will be able to play on it. On the other hand, the general environment of Russia’s relationships with the Baltic States should improve. Besides, cooperation with Lithuania will preserve its stabilizing backbone – the Kaliningrad issue. Further development depends on readiness of Lithuania to send a signal whether it is going to proceed with resolving the problem issues of bilateral relations. Moscow seems to be adoptive to such signals, while the agenda is well known.