

INTRODUCTION: ESTONIA ON THE BORDER OF TWO CIVILIZATIONS

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Estonia enjoys a very delicate geographic position. It is located not just in the neighborhood of Russia, which is modernizing or Westernizing with fluctuating success, but it is situated strategically on the border of two civilizations reminiscent of Samuel P. Huntington's thought-provoking article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*.¹ However, Estonia has not become a borderland in the classical meaning of the term since the country belongs historically and integrally to the sphere of the so-called Lutheran-German civilization. For centuries this has blocked attempts from the East to incorporate the northern Baltics (which include Finland) into the Orthodox-Slavic Eastern civilization. In the context of conflicting civilizations, each such invasion has been not so much an ethnic matter but rather one of clashing civilizations and of a choice between two competing civilizations. In the last couple of years, Europe has once again witnessed the failure of one more Eastern assault that was launched with the signing in 1939 of the Hitler-Stalin agreement, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

The success of Estonia and the Baltics in breaking away from a dying Soviet Union cannot be ascribed merely to nationalism as a motivating force. The understanding of this process is just as important for the Balts themselves as for the wider public of the world. "Communism was a universal, closed system; there were people who opposed it because it was universal and there were people who opposed it because it was closed. The first might turn into "nadis" [nationalist dictatorships], while the second are the champions of open society. That is what you can observe in Hungary, and to a lesser extent in the Baltic States."² The two years Estonia has been independent have confirmed Estonia's desire to be part of Europe, namely, to be an open society.

On August 20, 1991, the Republic of Estonia re-emerged on the world's political map. It was then that the Estonian Supreme Council declared the restoration of full independence. This signalled the release of the people's desire for freedom that had been suppressed by half a century of Soviet occupation and annexation. At the end of the 1940s Estonia had been smothered with mass repressions, the brutality of which was similar in Europe only to Nazi crimes. At a time when Europe felt relief at the ending of the Nazi nightmare and rebuilt the war-devastated landscape, a bloody war continued in the Baltics and Estonia. By the end of the 1950s, open resistance to occupation ended with the cessation of the guerrilla war that had claimed thousands of lives.

Only at the end of the eighties, contrary to the original ideas of Mikhail Gorbachev, did frequent demonstrations and petitions uniting tens of thousands of people become possible. The so-called Singing Revolution announced to Moscow and the world a dream that was thought to have died. Without the collapse of the Soviet empire, to which the Baltics contributed considerably, the Estonian striving would have been in vain, however. The dramatic stage of the independence struggle (1988–1991) offered the small Baltic nations, who gained access to the corridors of power in Moscow, a rare opportunity to influence developments in Russia and, thus, the course of history.

The self-determination of Estonia in the new circumstances and the world's attitude towards us are by now quite clearly beyond the framework of confrontation between the Soviet Union/Russia and the West. The political focus of interest in the developments of the Baltics has been replaced by smaller but deepening academic interest in trying to interpret and understand what is happening in Estonia and the entire Baltics. New approaches are being searched and old views discarded which in itself indicates development in this sphere.

Treating Estonia as an organic part of the Soviet Union (often done from sheer habit), gave rise to serious cognitive difficulties among Sovietologists in explaining the events of the last six years. The strongest criticism of the Sovietologist view of Estonians as the ungrateful seceders from Mother Russia is in the successful radicalism of changes in Estonia. In comparing Estonian developments with those in Russia and even Lithuania, it becomes more and more obvious that Estonian people are a distinct entity, with their own history, and, consequently, their own logic of development which now displays itself with renewed vigor.

Fifty years of Soviet rule have left its impact on Estonia and not only in the form of 500,000 new, non-Estonian settlers. But fifty years of violence, recovery from which will take time, has not become our authentic history. Within the outer Soviet shell certain powerful processes germinated that found expression in the hidden survival of the economic culture, style of living, demographic behavior, value systems, civic culture, *etc.* These now seem to have become the major modernizing resources that sustain social development.

The place of Estonia and the Baltics in Europe and the development of Europe itself is still subject to intense discussions. The trend to treat Estonia as part of Eastern and Central Europe that is gaining ground in recent years can first and foremost be linked to the paralleling of the transitional processes in those regions. But it must be said that the scholars of Central and Eastern Europe do not see those parallels. The Central and Eastern European identity does not include the Baltics. Indeed, including the Baltics into this region is problematic historically, and, evidently, will remain so in the future. Besides, Eastern and Central Europe itself is undergoing a realignment into Eastern, Central, and Southern regions, raising the problem of where Estonia would belong in this new arrangement.

The problem is the more intriguing as the unity of the Baltics (the Baltic Way declared

in 1989) seems to be crumbling. On the one hand, the Baltics as a geographical term has a tendency for the outsider to widen into a term conveying cultural and linguistic similarity. (A certain role in this is probably played by the indirect analogy of the Northern countries which are joined by linguistic, cultural and historical unity.) The problem of Baltic unity is popular, first and foremost, in the good intentions of politicians thinking in regional and integrationist terms. The geographical proximity of the Baltic nations and the continuing struggle for securing state sovereignty is certain to unite us also in the future. But we are becoming more and more rivals in economic terms.

However, the fact of Baltic identity is a rather weak one. Between the two World Wars when, for the first time, we had the opportunity to shape our own destiny, the development of Estonia and Latvia took on features (economic and cultural infrastructure, legislation, regional policy, *etc.*) similar to those of Finland and the Nordic countries, and close integration would probably have taken place. Lithuania, however, resembled more its close neighbor Poland in particular, and Eastern Europe in general. By today, the divergence amplifying historical development and background has deepened with every passing year. It is expressed in many ways. If the reaction to the visits by the crowned heads of Denmark and Sweden could be characterized as stormy in Estonia and respectful in Lithuania, then the reception given to the Pope of Rome was the reverse. The visit by Polish President Lech Walesa to Estonia in May 1994 was a ritual courtesy call while in Lithuania a detailed agreement on mutual cooperation was signed. In order to understand the potential of development of the Baltic States, that is, every-day developments and future tendencies, one has to dig deeper and deeper into separate and distinct histories.

Estonia is linked to Scandinavia by clear and visible historical sympathies. The Baltic Sea makes the link. Common ethnic roots of Estonia and Finland and shared television programs are factors more important than can be imagined by a Europe which is so enthusiastic about economic integration. But economists, too, point to numerous reasons for closer ties with Finland, predicting that at the beginning of the next millennium the capitals of the two countries, Helsinki and Tallinn, will have turned into twin cities with a common life.

The self-determination of the Baltics in Europe and its place as seen through the prism of the interest and sympathies of its neighbors is only just taking shape. The worst that could happen is the Baltic becoming a peripheral and marginal "borderland" as happened between the two World Wars. A healthy development of Estonia can only be based on the balance of different geographic and cultural identities (Baltic, Scandinavian, Eastern European). One of the measures of a future integrated Europe is the recognition of regionality, of regional integration. Also, the regionality of the countries bordering the Baltic Sea could eventually become a common point of departure on which to base well-balanced relations with Russia. But that time has not yet come. For the immediate future, Estonia will have to concentrate on establishing its place in Europe and on clarifying its role regionally.

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NOTES

1. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, p. 27.
2. George Soros, *Nationalist Dictatorship Versus Open Society. Expanded Version of a Lecture Delivered at the Harvard Club of New York*. November 18, 1992, (New York: The Soros Foundation, 1993), p. 11.