Baltic states vote reluctantly to join European Union

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3 October 2003

Latvia voted by a large majority to join the European Union in a referendum on September 21. The small Baltic country, once part of the Soviet Union, was the last amongst the current wave of countries being admitted to the European Union, as part of its expansion eastwards, to have its entry endorsed by the population. Baltic neighbours, Estonia and Lithuania, along with Malta, Slovenia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Croatia, and Cyprus have already voted in favour of joining. Accession will take place in 2004.

Although the "Yes" camps won by a considerable margin in the Baltic states, much energy was expended by the governments, media, business interests and the EU itself to overcome the suspicions and alienation of large sections of voters from the narrow social elite that stand to benefit most from EU membership. The vote is far from implying that the Baltic populations are signing up enthusiastically to the EU. Rather, they see no viable alternative.

The governments in Riga, Vilnuis and Talinnin are already players in EU internal divisions. Prior to the referendums, all three governments pointedly allied themselves with the "New Europe" of Donald Rumsfeld, and are beholden as much to Washington as to Berlin or Paris for finance and political influence. All three are seeking to join NATO at the same time as they join the EU.

Lithuania voted first, May 11, 2003. All the major parties supported the "Yes" vote call by the government of former Stalinist Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas. Nevertheless, until polling day itself, the result was in question as a successful ratification of EU entry required 50 percent of the population turning out to vote.

Such is the level of general alienation from the country's political leadership, that even in such a crucial and strategic decision, the government and its allies resorted to unusual measures to ensure a turnout. Polling booths were allowed to remain open for two days, and voting was possible after 11 p.m. Arrangements were made for the estimated 200,000 Lithuanians working illegally abroad to vote at the country's diplomatic missions. Footballers and the influential Catholic Church were enrolled, as was a supermarket chain, which offered cheap beer, soap powder and chocolate to anyone who could prove they had voted.

With opposition to the EU divided and incoherent, in the end a massive 91 percent of voters supported the government, with 9 percent against in a 63 percent turnout of the country's 2.6 million eligible voters. European Commissioner Romano Prodi, currently under corruption investigation, offered his "sincere and heartfelt congratulations" while fireworks exploded over Vilnuis.

Shortly after, the government announced an agreement with the EU and the Russian government to allow Russian citizens to transit what will be EU territory to reach the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad without an EU entry visa. Successful resolution of the Kaliningrad problem was linked to EU entry, as was closure of the Ignalina nuclear power station, an elderly Soviet era reactor of the type that blew up at Chernobyl in the Ukraine in 1986. Ignalina currently provides 80 percent of Lithuania power supplies. Currently the Lithuanian government has agreed to close one of Ignalina's reactors in 2005, but are pleading for compensation and support in closing the station's second reactor.

The Estonian vote was held September 14, with Prime Minister Juhan Parts of the Republic Party, President Arnold Ruutel and all the government's ministers supporting entry.

Parts and Ruutel toured the country reassuring people that concerns over higher prices should the country join were exaggerated, and warning that Estonia would be in a "blind alley" if the EU was rejected. Parliamentary speaker Ene Ergma threatened that a "No" vote would do great damage to the Estonian economy. Sixty percent of business ties are with the EU, rising to 80 percent after entry, she claimed.

Playing on the deep-seated fear of Russian domination, arising out of the 50-year occupation of all three Baltic states by the Soviet Union, Parts also sought to equate joining the EU with joining NATO, for which there is considerable support.

Parts breezed over the division between Europe and the US. "The question 'Europe or America' is a question of today's foreign policy. Estonia cannot view this as a dilemma. We are interested in developing partnership with both the US and Europe: although they sometimes have different interests, their values are the same."

A series of international dignitaries visited, including European Parliament President, Pat Cox and Finnish President Tarja Halonen. With major business interests in the Baltic States—neighbouring Finland is Estonia's biggest trading partner—EU membership is viewed as vital to further expand Finnish capital in the region. Finland also hopes that the Baltic republics will vote in line with Scandinavian interests in the EU.

Opposition focused on disparate issues. Amongst the country's farmers, there is alarm that only 25 percent of the subsidies offered

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to EU farmers will be initially available to their Estonian counterparts, while the EU's regulatory structures will be immediately enforced. EU farming is far more efficient, with one worker for 60 cows in the EU compared to a one to ten ratio in Estonia. Inevitably, smaller farmers are going to be ruined in favour of agribusiness.

Much of the country's Russian speaking population was also opposed. Although poverty levels are high amongst all sections of the working population across the Baltics, with only a narrow urban elite benefiting from the destruction of social services and international, mainly Scandinavian, investment, the Russian population has been worst hit. Many Russians have, in addition, been deprived of language and civil rights by the post-independence governments. Russians make up 25 percent of the Estonian population. Many have no citizenship and cannot work in public sector services.

Yet, both "Yes" and "No" camps used fear of the Russian population as a conduit for Moscow's influence during the campaign. "Yes" supporters accused the "No'" camp of being tied to Moscow, while the "Nos" accused the "Yes" camp of being willing to concede language rights to Russians under the EU constitution. As an EU member, Estonian will become an official EU language.

Amongst the major parties, only the Centre Party was divided on the referendum, eventually deciding to call for a "No" vote. The Centre Party also claimed that Estonian "independence" was being sacrificed by joining the EU. The party's magazine editor Helmar Lenk complained that those willing to join the EU "did not face Russian tanks at the TV tower"...a reference to the last days of the Soviet Union, when the Moscow Stalinists tried to bar Baltic secession by force. Other "No" supporters allied with euro-sceptics in the UK complained that an opportunity to build a "free-market" Singapore on the Baltic would be squandered with EU entry.

When the result was counted, 66.9 percent voted for, and 33.1 percent against on a 63.4 percent turnout, although 25 percent of the Russian population had no vote.

Immediately the government announced that taxes on fuel tobacco and alcohol were to be increased substantially to "harmonise" with the EU. Diesel, for example, will go up from 2.55 to 3.84 kroons a litre.

Latvia voted a week later, September 21, with comparable outcome to that in Estonia—67.3 percent voted for the EU, while 32.3 percent voted against, on a 72.5 percent turnout despite warnings that, even according to the country's President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, Latvians are highly suspicious of the EU. As with its neighbours, an alliance of the local elite and visiting dignitaries successfully pushed through a "Yes" by threatening economic suicide for the country if the EU was rejected.

As in Estonia, both "Yes" and "No" campaigners also used anti-Russian and chauvinist rhetoric to push their campaigns, with the pro-EU camp claiming that EU membership would enable Latvia to look Russia squarely in the eye, while "No" campaigners warned that the country would lose its independence and national identity.

Thirty percent of Latvians, 700,000 people, are Russian, having been transferred to the Baltic to increase the Stalinist bureaucracy's grip in the area. Russian dominated areas generally voted against the EU. In Daugavpils, the EU was rejected by the same margin as the rest of the country accepted it. The southeastern corner in Latgalia also voted against.

Indicative of the character of the social layers championing EU entry, the Latvian government fell apart, amidst allegations of corruption and incipient dictatorship, as the referendum results were still being announced. Oskar Kastens, chair of the parliamentary faction of the First Party, one of four coalition parties, demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Einar Repse of the New Times party. Repse retorted by warning the First Party that it was no longer part of the coalition. Commentators suggested that tensions within the coalition had been suppressed to ensure a "Yes" vote, but that the government was now likely to collapse.

Having set so much store on national independence from the Soviet Union, the ex-Stalinists and nakedly right-wing forces who run all three countries, are now subordinating their populations' interests to the demands of the European and US imperialists for cheap labour, new markets and reliable channels for trade with the Russian energy giants. All three economies are currently booming with growth rates of around 7 percent.

In a further irony, all three Baltic governments support US militarism whose chief characteristic is its violent disregard of any national sovereignty that does not coincide with its own interests. Estonia was one of the first members of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme. All three contributed to the NATO Stabilisation Force in Bosnia. The countries have been full supporters of America's "war on terrorism", with small numbers of troops currently in Afghanistan and Iraq.

US strategists support the Baltic republics efforts to join NATO and are aware that NATO forces moving into this area of strategic importance on Russia's doorstep would be a potential flashpoint in Russo-American relations. US policy has therefore been to encourage the Baltic States to join the EU, whereby their security can be overseen through EU defence structures. Thus, the US hopes that between NATO and the EU it will be able to advance its geo-strategic interests to within a few miles of St Petersburg. Additionally, the US hopes that such obedient supporters of US policy as the Baltic republics will continue to act as proxies inside EU structures.

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