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Leila Roos
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Pawns and Paranoia:
Baltic-American Anxiety over Russian Aggression

Pia Polikarpus doesn't consider herself a political person. She would describe herself as more of "an old flower child, I guess." There is, however, one political topic she will readily discuss — the threat of Russian aggression. Though Polikarpus was born and raised in New York, she is very "Baltic-minded" because of her Estonian parents, Latvian husband and Lithuanian nephew.

At 57, Polikarpus has seen Estonia struggle through occupation and flourish through independence. Given Russia's recent provocations, she's starting to wonder if it could go back to how it was in the Soviet times. She'll raise concerns to her insurance firm coworkers, "trying to open their eyes a little, but they don't even know where these countries are" — let alone what happened there.

"I tell them about how Estonia was occupied and no one was allowed to leave during the Cold War. It was a country that would be like ours, except in the third world." The ease on travel restrictions allowed Polikarpus to visit Estonia in 1989. She packed condoms, soap, cigarettes and coffee. A friend brought wigs, suits and crayons. Life in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic was better than it had been in decades, but stores were still missing basic products and the ceilings were still bugged with microphones.

"It was so odd," she recalled, "As we were leaving, I looked back at the people staring at us from behind the glass wall. They had no light in their eyes."

She never thought she would see the day Estonia would be free again. But then, after over fifty years of occupation, the Soviet Union collapsed and the Republic of Estonia declared its independence on August 20, 1991.

The *pagulaskond* – or émigré community – erupted in celebration. Children with no concept of the occupation were jumping up and down, screaming, "Eesti on vaba, Eesti on vaba" – Estonia is free – and the consul in New York ordered champagne with lunch for two weeks straight. But even in celebration, the skepticism remained.

"Anyone who knows the full reality of what happened in Estonia during the occupation years would not be able to remain unconcerned about the potential of a future threat," said Ilmar Vanderer, a board member of the Estonian-American National Council.

Those who knew that reality from experience or inheritance had their fears dismissed as leftover occupation paranoia. The prevailing post Cold War narrative that the West has no conflict of interests with Russia was more comfortable. It was, nevertheless, the narrative of the victors who set up the new status quo.

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama even declared "the end of history" had been achieved with the triumph of Western democracy over communism.

But Russia never accepted the outcome of the Cold War. Some 10 years ago, President Vladimir Putin declared "the demise of the Soviet Union [as] the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."

Putin, who believes that the US has "destabilized the world order of checks and balances for its own gains," sees the regional shift toward Western alliances as

fundamentally anti-Russian, and has repeatedly vowed to protect his country's interests and "compatriots" abroad. From the perspective of the United States and Europe, Russia's leader has been true to his word with his incursions into the former Soviet republics of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine earlier this year. This confirmed the fears of Baltic-Americans like Polikarpus and Vanderer. In their view, the idea that the worst is yet to come is proving to be not paranoia but a sober assessment of reality.

Putin's nostalgic remarks toward a regime that killed an estimated 60 million people were unsurprising to many Baltic-Americans. The existential anxiety of preserving nations in exile hadn't allowed them to let their guard down. They saw Russia's statements and acts of antagonism not as misunderstandings, but as overtures to reoccupation and territorial conquest – an attempt to rebuild the Soviet empire.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – Russia's small but resilient neighbors bordering the strategic Baltic Sea with their own distinct languages and cultures – lost over 200,000 people through deportations to remote regions of the Soviet Union, with 75,000 sent to the brutal work camps of the Gulag. The three countries had been forcibly incorporated into the USSR following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 that carved Europe into German and Russian spheres of influence.

Although the Russian Federation has maintained the Soviet line that the Baltic States willingly accepted Russification, most Western countries viewed it as an illegal annexation of sovereign nations.

Since re-establishing their independence, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have gone on to develop thriving market economies, rejecting Russia's influence in favor of joining the EU and NATO as part of the democratic West.

"Those are perfectly legitimate aspirations," according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former US National Security Advisor and geostrategist. "This is no threat to Russia," he explained in an interview with the WorldPost, "except to those Russians who cannot conceive of Russia as anything else but a dominant empire that rules not only over the Russian people but over those adjoining Russian territory."

"Those Russians," according to Baltic-Americans, are not a scattered handful of backwoods supremacists. They're in the Kremlin, orchestrating Russia's attempts at a return to its former power status — starting with the invasion of Ukraine.

President Putin has repeatedly said, "Statements that Russia is trying to reinstate some sort of empire, that it is encroaching on the sovereignty of its neighbors, are groundless." But Žygimantas Pavilionis, the Lithuanian Ambassador in Washington DC, disagrees.

"Putin has declared his goals very clearly: restoration of the empire – maybe with a different name – and also, of course, with different rules of the game and different principles from the West," he said. "If you want to see what kind of empire it will be, just look to Crimea and the other occupied Ukrainian territories... where the media is shut down and the economy is nationalized."

Pavilionis lived in "that Soviet nightmare" for 18 to 19 years of his life and believes the current crisis in Ukraine is not so different from what he knew.

Despite the protections afforded by membership in NATO and the European Union, some people worry that the three Baltic nations could be next. Rational or not, such fears are unlikely to vanish anytime soon.

HISTORICAL PARALLELS

Ukraine, too, had the aspirations of a closer relationship with the West. When the pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, refused to sign an association agreement with the European Union, he was ousted by the political pro-Western “Euromaidan” movement, a group the Kremlin said was funded and supported by the United States and Europe. The clash between pro-European and pro-Russian factions triggered a covert Russian military intervention, the annexation of Crimea and the virtual secession of predominantly Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine.

Moscow denies playing any role in the actions of pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, but Western governments dismiss those denials and say the evidence that Moscow is supporting the rebels is overwhelming. The U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power summed up the prevailing view of the Ukraine crisis at an August meeting of the U.N. Security Council: “We see Russia’s actions for what they are – a deliberate effort to support, and now fight alongside, illegal separatists in another sovereign country.”

Russia’s president has a very different take on the internationally criticized referendum for Crimea to join the federation. According to Putin, “we didn’t annex it, we didn’t take it away. We gave people an opportunity to have their say and make a decision, which we took with respect. We protected them, I believe.”

The historical parallels have been impossible to ignore, but they’re not just between Russia and its old Soviet self. Putin has been solid on his stance that he will protect the interests of Russian nationals abroad — used to effect in Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 — and at present day in Ukraine.

In her early comments on the crisis, Hillary Clinton said if the justification of “I must go and protect my people” sounds familiar, “it’s what Hitler did back in the thirties,” with the seizure of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. Much of what many Putin critics on social media have dubbed the “Putler” strategy has been the same, from the use of provocateurs to propaganda.

The Russians, for their part, have accused the pro-European government of Kiev of having fascist and Nazi-like tendencies.

Putin, Western officials say, is seeking to guide a fallen empire back to glory, using a nationalistic narrative of a powerful but persecuted people, with the aid of a tightly controlled state media and the repression of political and journalistic opposition. The West’s ineffectual response of appeasement did – and will – have disastrous consequences.

“We run the risk of repeating the mistakes made in Munich in '38,” said UK Prime Minister David Cameron. “This time we cannot meet Putin's demands. He has already taken Crimea and we cannot allow him to take the whole country.”

Were Putin to take “the whole country,” Cameron and others worry, his expansion may not stop at that. The Baltic republics fear that given the considerable size of their Russian minorities – close to a quarter of the population in Estonia and Latvia, and six percent in Lithuania – he would have both the pretext and precedent for intervening.

Comments by a prominent Russian diplomat regarding Estonia’s “mistreatment” of ethnic Russians in the spring led to international headlines asking “Is Estonia Next?” Renna Unt, the Estonian consul in New York, shook it off, insisting the rhetoric has been

there for years and was nothing new. But seeing that rhetoric reinforced by military action in Ukraine adds an ominous dimension to otherwise routine comments.

Jevegenni Ossinovski, Estonia's education and research minister, thinks the situation "is in no way comparable to that in Crimea." Ossinovski told Der Spiegel, "it is possible that there were attempts on the Russian side in the past to stir up the population, but they haven't been successful. I don't know anyone who would say that Putin is their protector. Or that they would prefer to live in Russia instead of Estonia."

Ossinovski, who is Russian, acknowledges that while tensions exist, the relationship between ethnic groups is generally positive.

Sergey Markov, a personal advisor of Putin, has a very different view, saying the root problem is institutionalized Russophobia. He left no room for debate in an interview with Swedish national television station SVT. Stating that the Baltics have "every reason" to fear Russia, Markov said in the event of a broader regional conflict, "it is possible that there will not be anything left of these countries."

This bombastic outcome is all too believable for the Baltics themselves. With a combined population of slightly more than six million, they would be much less capable of defending themselves against Russia than Ukraine, which has a population of over 45 million people. Their greatest fear is that their powerful allies will come around when it's already too late.

"Right now, the US strategy seems to be more reactive than proactive – waiting to see what Russia does," said Karl Altau, the head of JBANC, the Joint Baltic American National Committee.

The prospect of a too-little, too-late scenario was a strong driving factor for Baltic membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which ensures protection by the collective defense principle in Article 5.

Hesitant as the initial American response may have been, President Obama recently gave what is widely recognized as the strongest foreign policy speech against Russian aggression since the Cold War days of President Reagan.

"We'll be here for Estonia. We will be here for Latvia. We will be here for Lithuania. You lost your independence once before. With NATO, you will never lose it again," he said on the eve of the September NATO summit in Wales.

"The defense of Tallinn and Riga and Vilnius is just as important as the defense of Berlin and Paris and London," he added. "Article 5 is crystal clear. An attack on one is an attack on all. So if, in such a moment, you ever ask again, who'll come to help, you'll know the answer: the NATO alliance, including the armed forces of the United States of America, right here, present, now."

Strong and inspiring as his words were, some Baltic experts worry that they are only words. "The US administration has been very resolute, but that's talk," said Altau. "It takes physical evidence to make a difference."

NATO has never had to put its principle of collective defense into practice, and an attack on any one country – at present, now – is only hypothetical.

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves – who grew up in the New Jersey *pagulaskond* – said everything will come down to Article 5: "If it ever fails, then NATO no longer works. Then no one trusts it. There is a big difference between NATO and non-NATO," Ilves continued. "Why is NATO not defending Ukraine? Because Ukraine is not a

member of NATO and we are. The question is not if we believe in Article 5. The question is, does Putin believe in Article 5?”

Two days later, Putin responded – with the abduction of Eston Kohver, an Estonian counterintelligence officer. Kohver had been investigating an incident on the Estonian side of a border checkpoint when he was abducted amid smoke grenades and jammed communication signals.

“Russia plays by a different set of rules — diplomatic niceties aren’t their game,” Altau explained. “We can’t sink to their level, but at the same time, we’re going to have to be prepared to be tough bastards.”

HYBRID WARFARE

An attack on Tallinn, Riga or Vilnius today might not be as obvious as the line of tanks that rolled across their borders in 1940. Though the mentality behind it may be the same, tactics have evolved. Acknowledging that the benchmark for what constitutes an invasion has changed, NATO Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove said the West must prepare for hybrid warfare and to “think along the gray lines that Russia likes to fight within.”

Hybrid warfare can blend more traditional military tactics with propaganda and dirty tricks ranging from energy cutoffs – something Russia has done repeatedly to its natural gas customers – and cyber attacks, to the provocation of minority groups. Russia has used these destabilizing methods against its neighbors for years with little consequence.

In 2007, the Bronze Soldier – a memorial to Soviet troops – was relocated from the city center of Tallinn to a military cemetery. The statue held a metaphoric double meaning: for Estonians, it stood as a symbol of Soviet repression. For the resident Russian community, it represented victory in the “Great Patriotic War,” the “liberation” of Estonia from the Nazis and Russian rights to be in Estonia.

Nashi, a Moscow-based pro-Russian political youth movement, interpreted the undertaking as anti-Soviet and thereby pro-fascist. They released a statement declaring: “The fascist authorities of Estonia act like fascists are supposed to: they defile graves, remove monuments, maim and kill people, to whom the memory of the fallen is dear.”

The move of the statue was met by two nights of organized riots in Tallinn, the weeklong besiegement of the Estonian embassy in Moscow and a three-week wave of cyber attacks on Estonian parliament, ministries, banks and media outlets. The sophisticated cyber-warfare rattled the highly tech-savvy country, and though it couldn’t be directly traced back to the Kremlin, Sergey Markov pinned the responsibility on one of his aides.

Hybrid warfare is unpredictable and difficult to respond to, but it is not impossible to be better prepared for it. The following year, NATO set up the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Tallinn, to conduct research and training on cyber security.

The establishment of the CCDCOE came in response to a direct proposal from Estonia, not as a broader initiative. Investment in NATO is inconsistent. Of the 28-strong alliance, Estonia is just one of three countries to contribute 2 percent of its GDP to defense spending, in accordance to NATO guidelines.

Though Estonia's goal of permanent boots on the ground to face more conventional military threats won't be realized, a 4,000 troop rapid-reaction force should provide some reassurance. Baltic governments hope it will react fast enough to beat Putin's boast to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko that "Russian troops could be, not only in Kiev, but also in Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw and Bucharest in two days."

Meanwhile, Putin continues to test how much he can get away with. According to NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, allied jets have been "scrambled over 400 times" to intercept Russian jets in their airspace — a 50 percent increase from 2013.

"We have to be ready to address something that's hidden — and already happening now," said Pavilionis. "The most effective response to Russia would be a cohesive Western strategy. We have been either too shy or too stupid or too naïve to develop that strategy, and tomorrow it may already be too late."

The US is attempting to coordinate with the EU in the newest round of sanctions — or what Russia sees as hostile, illegal and unjustified "deterrence policies" — against Russian banks, arms suppliers and energy companies. Previous sanctions have played a part in the plunging price of Russian oil and the crash of the ruble, which has lost 50 percent of its value over the past year. Nevertheless, domestic support for Putin continues to soar at rates over 80 percent, according to Levada Center, Russia's lead independent polling agency. The West is far from such a united front, due to different economic, political and security stakes.

In the end, "people still don't believe there's a true threat," said Uku Meri, a 55-year-old IT technician from Queens. "The only ones who understand that fear are those who escaped" — like his mother and father.

Meri's parents made a tremendous effort to get out from under the Iron Curtain and to give their son what they'd had to leave behind. Meri grew up attending Estonian school on Saturdays, Estonian church on Sundays, Estonian camps in the summer, and then playing production assistant to his father, who documented every Estonian event in the tri-state area.

Meri considered moving overseas when Estonia regained its freedom. He imagined that his IT skills would allow him to make a nice life there — but the fear that Russia could take control again would always weigh on his mind.

"Until Putin's out of power," Meri said, "I'd be fearful about living in Estonia. And if I did, I'd have to have some grand plan to get the hell out of there. Putin loves his power; he's already re-elected himself a few times, he's circumvented any laws in his way, taken the freedom of the press in Russia — it's just like Soviet times there."

Meri remembers phone calls with grandparents back in the Soviet times, how they would suddenly hear someone cough and realize a third party was listening in on their conversation. He had to learn to speak in code.