

Workshop: INTERNATIONAL ELITES AND THE FORMATION OF POLITICAL
IDENTITY IN POST SOVIET SPACE.

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**"European dimension in the identity formation in Lithuania, Latvia and
Estonia"**

According to Liah Greenfeld, the national identity within a community emerges in the process of differentiation from another nation, by becoming aware of its own uniqueness and distinctiveness. In the Baltic States the discourse of 'Self' and 'Other', 'we' and 'they' was central in construction of Baltic identity during the late 1980s. This regional identity, however, could be reconstructed only by reference to supra-national identity, the feeling of belonging to Europe. The role of the Radio Free Europe cannot be overstated in this context. With its overall European complexion: West, Central and East, the RFE as an institution recognized the Baltic region as a part of Europe.

RFE/RL Baltic broadcasts commenced in 1975 and were moved from RL to RFE in 1984. Two facts elucidate this move: the USA never recognized the incorporation of the Baltic States in the Soviet Union; the historical religious and cultural traditions made the Baltic States a part of the European, not the Soviet, experience. Hence, through the inclusion in the European sphere the Baltic gained its distinct (from Soviet) regional identity.

It was reported that the RFE listeners in the Baltic States displayed the highest rate of disapproval of official policy of the Soviet authorities and an explicit tendency to see Soviet behaviour in Afghanistan as Russian imperialism. This put them into "we" (the Balts) versus "they" (the Soviets) dichotomy. The views of Baltic peoples on disarmament were also close to the Western position, thus their perception of the contemporary events came to be seen as perceptibly "Baltic" and not Soviet.

Looking from another perspective, Anthony Smith makes a clear distinction between the Western, civic model of national identity and the ethnic one. The civic identity is a spatial and territorial conception and involves "a historic territory, legal-political community, legal-political equality of members and common civic culture and ideology".

The ethnic conception of the nation puts an emphasis on a "community of birth and native culture, language, customs and traditions". At the same time Smith argues that the national identity contains both civic and ethnic elements and is therefore multidimensional.

Under the Soviet rule the ethnic nationalism in the Baltic had never been erased despite vigorous russification policy of Moscow and became a driving force of the quest for state sovereignty. Since the national identity is an underpinning factor of sovereignty, the presence of the civic elements of national identity is indispensable to sustainable stability of the political system.

Because Soviet rule was regarded as illegal and illegitimate, in all three countries there were movements (Citizens' Congresses in Latvia and Estonia, radical members of the Popular Front Sajudis in Lithuania) rejecting recognition or participation of the existing communist rulers as well as the "Soviet immigrants" in the process of transformation and democratization. The legitimacy of the Congresses was based on the argument that only the citizens of the former independent republics had de jure rights. What is more, very strict citizenship policies in Latvia and Estonia outlined in 1991 reflected the perception of Russian

speaking minority as illegal immigrants and bearer of russification without the right of participation in the political process in the newly restored polities. In the parliamentary elections in 1992 in Estonia and 1993 in Latvia the takeover of ethnopolitical power was complete. All 101 deputies in Estonian Riigikogu were ethnic Estonians and 90 per cent of deputies in Saeima were ethnic Latvians. This initial policy could have triggered ethnic tensions and counteracted the development of civic elements of national identity in the Baltic States.

However, the fact that the Western countries had never de jure recognized the forceful incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union and were formally advocates of the restoration of the Baltic independence and democracy gave this restorationist process an international dimension. The “return to Europe” project did not only justify the restoration of the state sovereignty but additionally, the feeling of belonging to Europe facilitated the consistent accommodation to the rules imposed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union (EU) in terms of citizenship and language laws. The movement from prevailingly ethnic to civic identity in both Latvia and Estonia was advanced under the auspices of these two organisations and involved the self-determination of both nations as multiethnic communities.

The OSCE Missions in Estonia and Latvia were created in 1992 and 1993 respectively to enhance dialogue between Estonians and Latvian officials, the representatives of non-Estonian, non-Latvian as well as non-citizen organisations and to prevent low level ethnic tensions. The recommendations and critics of the OSCE and European Commission as regards the naturalization law in both countries as well as the Latvian language law had to be accepted and implemented before the EU accession.

The main theses of the paper would be:

1. Under the Soviet rule, only through the feeling of belonging to Europe could the national identity of the Baltic republics gain its specific regional – Baltic and thus distinct from Soviet (later Russian) – dimension.
2. Through the European awareness the Baltic States (especially Latvia and Estonia) could move from ethnically based identity of exclusion towards the civic identity of inclusion.

References:

Greenfeld, Liah (1992), *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Smith, Anthony D. (1991), *National Identity*, London and New York: Penguin Books.