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'The Baltic states want to strengthen their security and are prepared to make remarkable sacrifices'

The Baltic states have agreed to stop importing Russian gas. Reinhard Krumm explains why we must take smaller states seriously against uncertainties

It's been more than a month since the Baltic states announced they would stop importing Russian gas. What prompted this decision?

Without delving too deeply into the history of Latvian-Baltic or Baltic-Russian relations, the main reason is of course the war. The three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania feel that it is precisely energy imports from Russia that fund the country's war chest. But they also believe that Russia will end up stopping gas exports to them soon anyway. So, it is more about being proactive. The other reason is that the three Baltic countries have their own supplies: there's a liquefied gas terminal in Lithuania and a well-stocked depot in Latvia. Not as much as wanted, but still, there's plenty there.

That doesn't sound like a long-term solution. Are there any plans to secure gas supplies for the future?

Some of the current solutions are already long-term ones. The terminal in Klaipeda, Lithuania, was completed a few years ago, so Lithuania has a good supply of its own gas. Lithuania is also connected to Poland. That route will be extended from Lithuania to Latvia and Estonia. This isn't all that easy, because the three Baltic states were so closely linked to Russia and Belarus for a long time, as part of an interconnected system. Severing these connections and building up a new network isn't going to be a walk in the park. Estonia and Latvia are in the process of building a liquefied gas terminal together or at least exploring an interim solution.

How have people in the Baltic states reacted to the import ban?

Energy prices are expected to skyrocket, as we're already seeing at the filling stations. This is likely to peak in the near future. But there will probably also be a reaction from the people. In the 1990s, the Baltic states underwent a very liberal transformation, with reforms to financial and economic policy that were very market-focused. Because of their Soviet history, however, state intervention wasn't wanted or even possible due to economic bottlenecks. Now, though, we're considering whether there should be subsidies, exactly because it is the people who are likely to suffer. A recent poll in Latvia showed little confidence in both the party and the state.

On the other hand, the people of the three Baltic states hugely support strengthening their security, particularly with regard to Russia, prepared to make remarkable sacrifices, as seen in the 2008 financial crisis, when civil servants' salaries were cut by up to 20 per cent. This is what the people have chosen to do, because they feel that there is no alternative to safeguard their independence, which was obtained over 30 years ago now. But there are one going on two generations now who didn't grow up in the Soviet Union. Whether they will be willing to shoulder similar hardship remains to be seen.

The decision to push for energy independence is also based on the fear that Russia could use others' dependence on its energy imports to exempt political pressure. But the Baltic states' warnings to the rest of Europe haven't been taken seriously. Why is this?

I'm not sure that the warnings haven't been taken seriously. I believe that countries such as Germany have had a different experience, which has also been influenced by the Cold War. At that time, the gas still flowed including when relations were even more strained, such as the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. However, these experiences did not form the basis for policy in the Baltic states, because from 1944 to 1990, they were part of the Soviet Union against their will, and hence, not free and sovereign. Nevertheless, Germany also had difficult relations with the Soviet Union following its partition. But the policy of interdependence also seemed to be politically and economically advantageous for German politicians, being seen a way of ensuring security. Just as Ukraine had acted as a transit country before the invasion.

Moreover, natural gas, which can be obtained directly from a pipeline, is significantly cheaper than liquefied gas alone. Not to mention the environmental costs of transporting LPG by mostly diesel tankers. But, as we can see now, Germany has done relatively little in the field of LPG – unlike Lithuania. This decision was far-sighted in retrospect. Now LPG is in high demand in Germany, this will probably cost citizens a lot of money. The Baltic approach was to

boost security by reducing dependence on Russia. For Germany and other countries, it was the other way round. Interdependence was seen as the way to create security. At least, this approach would guarantee that any sanctions needed would be effective; these would hardly work if there weren't already economic relations between them.

What can other European countries learn from the Baltic states?

If there's anything we can learn from the Baltic countries, it's that we should take smaller states, which have their ear closer to the ground, more seriously against uncertainties. Sometimes, cutting ties is a more effective political instrument. The energy situation shows that this approach was obviously the right one. At the same time, a large country like Germany must look beyond its own security interests. Germany's approach, as well as France's, has made it difficult to ensure long-term security, stability and prosperity in Europe against Russia. Countries in eastern Europe, including Ukraine and Georgia, were meant to have benefitted from this. This principle of indivisible European security formed the basis of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)'s work.

How did the Russians react to the Baltic States' move?

Only the Baltic countries will suffer, according to Russian propaganda. The Baltic market is quite small for the Russians. Moreover, Russia has now stopped supplying gas to Poland and Bulgaria. At the moment, there is such a barrage of disinformation that it is difficult to say exactly how hard the sanctions will actually hit the Russian people. It will have an effect, of course, but this will not happen overnight. According to economic experts, decoupling the West from Russia will disrupt its economy.

What does the Russian-speaking minority in the Baltic states think about the war in Ukraine?

In Estonia, about 26 per cent of the population are part of the Russian-speaking minority; in Latvia, it's about 30 per cent. Around 60 per cent of Latvia's Russian-speaking minority abstained from voting in polls on their views on Russia's war of aggression. About 16 per cent said they supported it, and around 30 per cent support Ukraine. The Russian-speaking minority here is a very complicated population group: on the one hand, there are citizens with Latvian passports and, on the other hand, those who have neither Latvian nor Russian citizenship. They carry around a document recognised by the Latvian constitution that allows them to travel to both the EU and

Russia but does not grant them political rights such as the right to vote.

What does the decision made by Baltic states' say about their perception of Russia?

Much can be attributed to history. Since the Great Northern War under Peter the Great, the now Estonian and Latvian territories became part of the Tsardom of Russia and were long under German-Baltic administration. The story is different in Lithuania, because its territory was part of the Lithuanian-Polish Empire, so its history took another course. Nevertheless, it too had been part of Russia since the end of 18th century. Following secret agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union, the latter invaded the Baltic states in 1940. After the Second World War ended, all three republics remained part of the Soviet Union against their will, until 1990. While there was peace in Western Europe during the Cold War, the Baltic states paid the price with their lack of freedom. The Baltic identity is always associated with its aversion towards Russia. Moscow stood not for freedom, but for oppression.

So, their relationship with Russia is understandably strained. Latvia, as the geographical centre, was particularly affected by Sovietisation, where larger industries were located and whose products were exported to the entire Soviet Union. For the Russians, the Baltic region was a part of the West within their own borders, used as a backdrop for films purportedly shot in Paris, Prague or Berlin. Lithuania had only a small Russian minority, so there is hardly any Russian spoken on the streets there today. There is also a historical reason for this. In the 14th century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania joined forces with the Kingdom of Poland to resist the Muscovite Empire. Polish divisions put an end to this rivalry. We don’t always look so far back into Baltic history, but it is often said that the three states could have developed quite differently, were it not for the Soviet Union stopping and preventing any further economic development.

Are we witnessing the emergence of Baltic values, if we can call them that?

The three states would perhaps see it as a Baltic adaptation of American values in the sense of a highly standardised foreign policy. Just as the Americans, even if they intervene militarily, they justify their actions. This basis of a value-orientated foreign policy, which the EU also refers to, is taken very seriously in these three countries, especially in Lithuania. Politicians then make decisions rather rapidly,

such as the move to upgrade the status of Taiwan's diplomatic representation, opening themselves up to China's scorn and the consequences that go with it, especially economic ones. One should note that this type of decision-making by the Lithuanian government is not universally popular throughout the country, as there are fears that it could have negative consequences on its citizens' quality of life.

My observation is that the political debate, as well as the public one, is based on a very British and American understanding of international politics. By this I mean a rather casual approach, not the more well-considered approach that the likes of Germany stand for. People prefer to read the *New York Times* or *The Economist* not least because they are easy to read. Of course, these exist in the German or French language too. But the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel* are not widely read.

We should not think in terms of black and white boundaries, though. Baltic values are part of European values and are based on the same historical basis. Their geographical proximity to and their close, common, albeit often not very positive, experience with Russia have made the three Baltic states particularly sensitive to the situation. Germany and other EU states should take this into account and use it to create the basis for Europe's *Ostpolitik* for the future. At the same time, Germany and other western countries must recognise that our experience of history is not the same as theirs. This is not to create dissent, however, but simply to forge a better understanding and form a better policy.

This interview was conducted by Valentina Berndt.



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