

Containing the Consequences of Baltic Separatism. The Collapse of the Soviet Union and Finland's Search for Stability at the End of the Cold War

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Introduction

The position and responsibilities of a head of state are never enviable. While this may be a truism, it is particularly apt when we look at how contemporary leaders were confronted with the course of events leading to the implosion of the Soviet Union and its empire at the turn of the 1990s.

Historical memory gave hardly grounds for optimism when it came to the way in which previous European multinational empires had perished in the past. That a major European – or indeed a global – power would surrender its empire and thereafter oversee its own dissolution in a largely peaceful fashion, was in the eyes of world leaders in 1989 pretty much unfathomable. Yet this is what happened in 1991, when the Soviet Union, stripped from global political influence and its client states in East Central Europe, finally broke up into newly independent states from the Baltic to Central Asia, and into the Russian Federation, its successor state.

We now know how events came to that, and that with the notable exception of the Balkans and the Caucasus, the process saw little violence in the 1990s. But from the perspective of contemporaries, things could hardly have looked different. The rapid changes unleashed by the reformist – and the last – leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, followed an unpredictable course. One of the unintended consequences of the reforms was the fall of the Soviet

Union itself.

For some, the 'acceleration of history' that was coupled with the end of the Cold War, to borrow a phrase from the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, was a golden opportunity to realise long awaited goals, such as national self-determination or reunification.¹⁾ The popular revolutions of 1989 in East Central Europe and German reunification in 1990 bore witness to this and opened prospects of security and prosperity that for decades had remained elusive in a geopolitically divided Europe.²⁾

However, for a world that had become accustomed and had adapted to the frosted stability provided by the Cold War international system, the political chain reaction prompted by Gorbachev in the Soviet Union was also disturbing and opened new concerns. Uncertainty about the ongoing change and the unpredictability where it might lead within the Soviet Union and its immediate neighbourhood was also present in the minds of the Finnish political leadership. Nowhere was this uncertainty more tangible than in the office of President Mauno Koivisto, in whose hands the making of Finnish foreign and security policy rested at the time.

This paper discusses how the Finnish foreign policy leadership, headed by President Koivisto, viewed the changes of the turn of the 1990s in the Soviet Union, and what kind of policies were devised to contain the potential unwanted outcomes caused by the turmoil in the Baltic region in particular. While many of the changes that took place in the Soviet Union and in Europe at the end of the 1980s were highly welcomed in Finland as well as elsewhere in the West, the management of the political and economic transition posed a major challenge. Had events in the Soviet Union taken a turn to the worse, a neighbouring country such as Finland would have felt much of the fall out. Prolonged political instability or a violent conflict erupting close to its borders would have required careful handling in any case, but also in real terms would

1) Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Columbia University Press 1985.

2) For a multi-archival empirical study of the end of the Cold War in Europe see Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989. The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*. Princeton University Press: Princeton & New York, 2009.

in all likelihood have had severe consequences in the form of large scale cross-border population movements. Most of the planning and the discussions about the worst case scenarios took place within closed doors, hidden from the public at the time, and have only recently become visible with the release of confidential documents and the publication of eyewitness memoirs.³⁾

Outward appearances were therefore misleading. What is argued here is that a proper way of interpreting Koivisto's and the Finnish government's behaviour, various initiatives, actions and Finnish foreign and security policy decision-making and goal setting at the time, is to place them under an umbrella of proactive crisis management and *stability policy*, as it was coined soon after the events described here.⁴⁾ In contrast to many contemporary observers and critics of Koivisto's seemingly arm's length and lukewarm attitude towards the Baltics' objectives and desires of national self-determination, the stability policy followed an activist policy design, aiming at maximising Finnish influence in key moments and arenas of international politics of the turn of the 1990s.

The main aim of this policy was not to try to prevent or circumvent the national aspirations of the Baltic peoples altogether, but to maintain the favourable momentum gained by the political changes in the late 1980s and to work in favour of positive change in a stable and diplomatically managed multilateral international system in a post-Cold War Europe. This policy rested upon fairly optimistic assumptions of the potential of the *perestroika* reforms in democratizing the Soviet Union and about its future, constructive place in the European states system. From Koivisto's thinking it is interesting to see how until the autumn of 1991 a politically and economically reformed, responsive and accommodating Soviet Union was considered a key pillar of this new

3) On Finnish views and contingency planning for receiving refugees from the Soviet Union and Russia see the memoirs of the head of the Policy Department of the Finnish Foreign Ministry Jaakko Blomberg, *Vakauden kaipuu. Kylmän sodan loppu ja Suomi*. WSOY: Helsinki, 2011. [Craving for Stability. The End of the Cold War and Finland. WSOY: Helsinki, 2011.], 561–564.

4) Kari Möttölä, *Vakauspoliittikka, konfliktinhallinta ja pelotepuolustus. Turvallisuuspolitiikan toimintaloikat*. UM taustat 1/1995, Helsinki. [Stability policy, conflict management, defence through deterrence. Sectors in security policy, Finnish Foreign Ministry Briefings 1/1995, Helsinki.]

European order. As the Baltic independence movements opened the prospect of the Soviet Union's internal fragmentation, they were considered a destabilising factor not only internally in the Soviet state but also on the systemic level. Therefore the Finnish leadership favoured a solution whereby the separatism of the Balts could be contained within the boundaries of a reformed and democratized Soviet federation. To this end the Finnish leadership utilized its channels of communication with the Soviet and Baltic leaders, opportunities for hosting summit diplomacy and East-West talks, as well as multilateral diplomatic institutions such as the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

Koivisto's stability policy and attitude towards the potential break-up of the Soviet Union was conjoined with a fundamental revision of Finland's own foreign and security policy doctrine and an alignment with the European integration process as a member of the European Union. In existing literature main focus has been on this policy change and on the continuance of Finland's Cold War policy of assurances towards the Soviet Union until 1991.⁵⁾ To understand Finnish foreign policy change in the early 1990s it is, however, also important to look more closely into the nuances of Finland's policy towards Baltic separatism and on how Finland's post-Cold War relations was to be constituted with the Soviet Union, and eventually the guidelines adopted in 1992 in its relationship with the Russian Federation. Of particular interest are the Finnish leaders' views of a future 'post-Westfalian' European order, where the reformed Soviet Union would occupy its place as an equal but constructive member without hegemonic aspirations over other actors.

Facing Baltic separatism

That the Soviet Union was headed towards a change that would revolutionize

5) Juhana Aunesluoma, *Vapaakaupan tiellä. Suomen kaupp- ja integraatiopolitiikka maailmansodista EU-aikaan*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki, 2011, 433–463. [*The Road to Free Trade. Finland's Trade and Integration Policy from the World Wars to the EU-era*. Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki, 2011.]

its very nature as a socialist superpower with global aspirations became clear to the Finnish leadership by summer 1988. As it happened, this was well before the revolutions of 1989 in East Central Europe.

Diplomatic reports from the Finnish embassy in Moscow and analyses conducted at home in Helsinki led to a conclusion that was as startling as it was an obvious outcome of the events that had been unfolding since Gorbachev's ascent to power in 1985. The Soviet Union was about to shed key elements of its ideological underpinnings, such as the concept of class struggle and what consequences this had for its understanding of the very nature of international relations.⁶⁾ Furthermore, Gorbachev and his team were apparently ready for a major new initiative that would deepen the recently established atmosphere of détente with the United States and other Western powers. Domestically, Gorbachev's economic reform agenda, the controversial policy of *perestroika*, was extended towards a careful democratization of the Soviet political system and into a greater openness and freedom of public debate and political organization, known as *glasnost*. In other words, reforms that seemed to have begun to stall on the economic front, paced ahead as political reforms with a potential of transforming the whole country. With luck on Gorbachev's side, the Soviet Union might be able to renew itself and become an ordinary, though geographically still very large and militarily powerful Eurasian state.⁷⁾

Seen from the inside, things did not look exactly the same as from the viewpoint of the Finnish embassy in Moscow or Koivisto's office in Helsinki. From the regional capitals of the Baltic Socialist Republics, Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius, the extension of *perestroika* to *glasnost* opened a prospect of regaining the independence these nations had lost in the Second World War. A break-away from the federation that was the Soviet Union was not only politically feasible given the rapid strengthening of national sentiment in these republics, but also

6) Moscow Embassy Report MOS-437 (Hannu Himanen) to Helsinki, 19 August 1988; Moscow Embassy Report MOS-441 (Heikki Talvitie) to Helsinki 22 August 1988; Moscow Embassy Report MOS-538 (Klaus Korhonen) to Helsinki 25 October 1988, The Archives of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (AFMA), Helsinki.

7) Archie Brown, *Seven Years that Changed the World. Perestroika in Perspective*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007); Andrei Grachev, *Gorbachev's Gamble. Soviet Foreign Policy & the End of the Cold War*. Polity Press: Cambridge, 2008.

justifiable in terms of the Soviet constitution and the new spirit of openness in Soviet politics. To the surprise of perhaps all but few experts of Soviet constitutional law, it indeed allowed for its constituent parts to depart from the federation, if they so wished. A legacy of Leninist rule and the concept of the ongoing socialist revolution, the constitution's fundamental premise had been that all states had joined the Soviet Union voluntarily, and remained in it on their own will.

What had not been generally grasped was that any of the Socialist Republics would try to test the Soviet Communist Party's understanding of the practical meaning of the constitution's exit clause. However, as soon as the spectre of Baltic independence became visible after 1988, it none the less became a major destabilizing factor within the Soviet Union and a bone of contention with Baltic political elites and Moscow. It questioned not only the legitimacy of Moscow's rule in these countries, but indirectly also the authority of Gorbachev and his government as the undisputed rulers of the Soviet Union. If the reforms led to the questioning of the unity of the Soviet federation, also the very rationale of these reforms could be questioned. As it proved to be, this was a major consideration behind the conservatives' opposition to Gorbachev and his political allies, and one of the causes leading to the ill-fated putsch of August 1991.⁸⁾

This was also the reasoning of the risks involved and the possible course of events adopted in Helsinki and by President Koivisto when it came to deciding how to deal with the issue of Baltic separatism. Their concerns and aspirations were legitimate, and appreciated, but no one in the Finnish foreign policy leadership wanted Gorbachev to fail in his reforms. As a form of proactive crisis management, that is, an attempt to forestall an unstable situation from escalating into a full-blown crisis, a two-pronged strategy was devised under Koivisto's leadership to handle the situation.

The groundwork had been done well with Gorbachev. Koivisto, who enjoyed good personal contacts with and access to the Soviet leader⁹⁾, had in the course

8) Brown, 319–324.

9) Mauno Koivisto, *Kaksi Kautta II. Historian tekijät*. Kirjayhtymä: Helsinki, 1995.

of 1989 achieved a major break-through in warming Finnish-Soviet relations. This culminated in Gorbachev's state visit to Finland in October 1989 and the Soviet leader's open praise for Finnish foreign policy of neutrality and its constructive role in world politics in general. While praise for one another had been heard before in Finnish-Soviet meetings, the difference now was its apparent sincerity and the way in which Gorbachev and his foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze and foreign policy spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov elevated Finland's status as a model for others in Europe to follow.¹⁰⁾

The special relationship thus achieved was a form of political capital that Koivisto considered an asset to be used sparingly. Also his correspondence with other European leaders and in particular with President George Bush in Washington, with whom he had established a confidential relationship during his time as Vice-President in Ronald Reagan's administration, may have contributed to Koivisto regarding his position in many ways unique as a bridge-builder between East and West. What is apparent from his memoirs and from his correspondence with Gorbachev and Bush is his apparent willingness to do his utmost for mustering Western support and goodwill for Gorbachev and his reforms in the Soviet Union. With Gorbachev he hoped to be able to explain his views on how he believed Moscow could accommodate the rise of national sentiment and the calls for further autonomy in the Baltic republics.

The second prong in Koivisto's response to the whirlwind into which European politics were drawn in 1989 was much more delicate and rested on far less well prepared foundations. The position of the Baltic states within the Soviet Union had throughout the Cold War been a difficult issue in Finland and in Finnish-Soviet relations. While national affinities and closeness in linguistic, cultural and historical terms connected Finland and Estonia in particular, *realpolitik* considerations had prevented any outspoken expressions of sympathy or criticism from Finland to the Baltic peoples' plight in the Stalinist

173. See also his memoirs in translation as *Witness to History*. Hurst & Company: London, 1997.

10) Bill Keller, 'Gorbachev, in Finland, Disavows Any Right of Regional Intervention', *The New York Times*, 26 October 1989.

era and the rather brutal subjugation of them under Soviet rule ever since. With glasnost in the late 1980s human contacts and exchanges over the Gulf of Finland increased dramatically. As has been revealed in recent research on cultural contacts between Finland and Estonia in the 1980s, Finnish governmental authorities worked rather extensively behind the scenes with Koivisto's blessing to help Estonians reform their national institutions and regain a sense of national pride, identity and nationhood in the Soviet context.¹¹⁾

What was important, however, was that the cultivation of these contacts and the encouragement of Baltic nationalism that originated from Finland – and also elsewhere in the West – was that it fell short of support for actual state independence. Interestingly, this was a line that was very natural for the Finnish leaders to take, as it resembled closely Finland's own history as an autonomous part of the multinational Russian Empire in 1809–1917. Echoing the example and the principles laid out by the father of Finnish foreign policy realism, Johan Vilhelm Snellman in the mid-19th century, what was paramount was not the status of a nation in the eyes of international law, i.e. formal state sovereignty. According to this Snellmanian tradition to which Koivisto adhered to, what was paramount was a nation's identity, self-esteem and the strength of its cultural traditions, not only the way in which it had organized itself politically. Especially in circumstances when full sovereign statehood remained unattainable at least in the foreseeable future, a nation's sense of itself was more important than its outward political appearance. Instead of state sovereignty what was most important was the national identity prevalent amongst a nation. If this identity proved to be strong enough, it could also flourish in the context of a larger polity, such as the Soviet Union.

In Koivisto's and many other Finnish policy-makers' eyes, the Snellmanian vision had proven its worth for Finland in the 19th and the 20th centuries, an experience and a doctrine, that was to prove itself useful again in the rather easy

11) Heikki Rausmaa, "Kyllä kulttuurin nimissä voi harrastella aika paljon". *Suomen ja Viron poliittiset suhteet keväästä 1988 diplomaattisuhteiden solmimiseen elokuussa 1991*. K-Print: Tallinn, 2013. [*One can dabble quite a lot in the name of culture*]. *The political relations of Finland and Estonia from spring 1988 to the establishment of diplomatic relations in August 1991*. K-Print: Tallinn, 2013.]

accommodation of Finland into the supranational polity of the European Union it became a member of in 1995.

This was the 'post-Westfalian' future into which the Finnish leadership wanted to direct the Estonians and the other Balts. According to this vision, post-Cold War Europe would see a benevolent coexistence of nations and national identities freed from geopolitical rigidities of the Cold War international system. In addition to this, the significance of state sovereignty, borders and other dividing lines between nations and states would in any case be in a state of flux, due to the powerful forces of integration at play on the Western half and the centre of the European continent.

Gorbachev's faltering reforms

The Finnish ideas for the future regional order in its neighbourhood accommodating a reformed Soviet Union with Baltic nationalism may have been cleverly designed, but as it happened, became obsolete already by the beginning of 1990. With backing from far more activist sponsors than Finland, Sweden and many other Western countries, the Baltic elites set their sights not to regain their national identity alone, but their full national statehood and sovereignty as independent states. Estonia had already challenged the lawmaking authority of Moscow over its internal affairs in 1988, but the bombshell that set in motion the independence movements in different parts of the Soviet Union was Lithuania's defiant declaration of independence in March 1990. After that, there was no turning back for the Balts to wait and see if a Finnish Snellmanian-type gradual strengthening of nationalism and home rule would eventually bring the same benefits as an outright drive towards full independence.

Simultaneously with the movement in the Baltic capitals towards independence the repercussions of the revolutions of 1989 were felt in Moscow. Especially the prospect of German reunification tested Gorbachev's position in the Soviet leadership. Conservative criticism began to mount against him. To make matters worse for Gorbachev, one of his previous supporters in an earlier

phase of the reform programme, Boris Yeltsin, a luminous and popular political in Russia, challenged his authority in the largest republic of the Soviet Union. As a sign of the distress felt in the Soviet reformist leadership was the Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's resignation in December 1990 with a dramatic warning that a dictatorship was imminent in the Soviet Union.

Koivisto's two-pronged strategy was clearly not enough any longer. As a response a third prong was added into it as an attempt to defuse the situation brewing between the Baltic Republics and Moscow. The Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the CSCE had since the signing of its Final Act in Helsinki 1975 been a pet project for President Koivisto just as it had been to his predecessor, Urho Kekkonen in the late 1970s.¹²⁾ In early 1990 the neutral and non-aligned countries took the lead in the CSCE to prepare a proper, symbolic, but also practically significant closing to the Cold War to be organized in Paris in November 1990.

Whilst the final text of the communique adopted in the CSCE in Paris in the autumn 1990 owed much more to the drafting conducted by and agreed between the major powers, the interest of the smaller European countries to strengthen the multilateral diplomatic framework in European international politics was as visible as ever. This could be seen in the strengthening of the tools the CSCE had in its disposal to try to manage conflicts and establish stability in crisis prone regions.

For many in 1990, and for some years after that, the CSCE was the main frame that could house a truly pan-European post-Cold War security system under its roof. While this optimism of the potential in the CSCE proved to be short lived, it was nonetheless as real an option in 1990–91 as subsequently the enlargement of the European Union and NATO were to be. One has to bear in mind that it was only until the European Community's summit in Maastricht in December 1991 when the doors were opened for the post-Cold War enlargement of the community. As long as George Bush senior was president,

12) Markku Reimaa, *Kekkosen katiska. Suomen toiminta Etykissä 1968–1989*. Edita: Helsinki, 2008. [*Kekkonen's Catch. Finland in the CSCE 1968–1989*. Edita: Helsinki, 2008.]

the prospect of NATO enlargement to the former Warsaw Pact countries also was an anathema. Furthermore, the CSCE was to turn into a permanent organization as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), with an even broader mandate to encompass a wide definition of security and a membership base.

What is significant with the CSCE in Finnish policy towards the Soviet Union and the unrest in the Baltic republics was the ways in which the new diplomatic instruments agreed in it in 1990 were put into practice the next year. The test for the new system and for Koivisto's third prong in his crisis management came very soon after the Paris summit. With violence erupting in Vilnius and Riga in early 1991 with demonstrators clashing with Soviet paratroopers, leaving more than a dozen people dead and hundreds injured, for a while it seemed that the political standoff between the Baltic Republics and Moscow would escalate into a much larger, violent conflict.

As a response to the conflict in the Baltic states, Finland, together with other countries in the CSCE, activated a mechanism in the organization that required Soviet authorities refraining from any further use of force and to provide information on the events that had led to the fatalities. To activate a CSCE crisis management mechanism in this way was a daring thing to do given the Finnish tradition of non-interference in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union. But as a proof that times had indeed been changing, the Soviet authorities concurred with the demand tabled in the CSCE, halted the use of force and launched an inquiry upon the events and decisions that had led to the eruption of violence in Riga and Vilnius.¹³⁾

The intervention from the CSCE also bore witness to the strong belief in the potential of multilateral diplomacy and diplomatic means of crisis management in Europe that were prevalent in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. The experiences that were gained from managing the separatism and the conflicts in the Baltic region in 1989–1991 also laid the ground for further debates and developments in OSCE and the European Union in the course of the 1990s

13) Blomberg, 294–295.

about the nature and demands of crisis management, and especially its diplomatic and civilian dimensions.

Redesigning Post-Cold War Europe

With the failed coup in Moscow in August 1991, the 'acceleration of history' that had begun in 1989 came to a head. The Baltic republics regained swiftly full sovereignty and diplomatic relations were re-established between Finland and them. By the end of the year the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union banned, and Finland was busy in establishing a new relationship with the Russian Federation led by President Yeltsin. In March 1992 Finland handed in its membership application to the European Union and reassessed its Cold War foreign policy neutrality to become compatible with the political goals and ambitions of the post-Maastricht EU. A new, pro-western integration consensus was established and formulated domestically in Finland as the anchor of the new direction its leaders had taken. The uncertainties over the fate of the Baltic republics were replaced by uncertainties of the direction the new Russian state would take in its internal affairs, if not so much in its foreign policy.

What lessons can be learnt from Finland's behaviour during the last years of the existence of the Soviet Union and the conflicts erupting there? A small country, with a strategic location and access to and the confidence of actors on all sides, may prove a useful conduit of positive change, if it plays its hand wisely. In the case of handling Baltic separatism the simultaneous use of various channels, or prongs of policy, proved helpful. Also the ability to combine bilateral diplomacy with multilateral diplomacy in the CSCE, was an essential feature of Finnish stability policy and small-state diplomacy at the time. Also the fact that Finland's own interests remained on the level of its need to maintain systemic stability outside its immediate borders, made it a legitimate mediator in the politics of Baltic independence.

But sound premises and good plans do not necessarily always add up to good policies. Koivisto's simultaneous handling of the several levels and aspects of

the conflict brewing in the Baltics did not take into account the strength of the national sentiment there, and the acute political significance of the sense of historical wrongdoings the Baltics felt the Soviets had subjected them to. Entertaining visions of a 'post-Westfalian' Europe in the future while playing *realpolitik* in the short term found few friends in the new republics that may thereafter have looked at Finland as a less than sympathetic partner for the future. Also Koivisto's assessment of the prospects of Gorbachev's reforms, were far too optimistic. Nor did his policy of fostering mild-mannered Baltic nationalism really take into account the sizeable Russian-speaking minorities in these countries and how they reacted to the new nationalisms unleashed in the 1990s sowing the seeds of new internal conflicts.

In any case, Koivisto did not have too many options from where to choose his line of action. And Finland did have its own interests too. For posterity, he left a legacy of turning Finland around to become a part of the European Union, a path that the Baltic republics were to follow in a less than a decade.

