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How Russia Sees Baltic Sovereignty

By Agnia Grigas

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A recent decision by the Russian Prosecutor General's Office to review the legality of a 1991 decision granting the Baltic states independence from the Soviet Union has irritated the governments of the Baltic states and raised concern among their allies. At the same time, Russian officials confirmed that "the matter has no legal prospects" and no direct implications for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This paradoxical move can be better understood in the context of the other Russian government initiatives of the past two years that have indirectly challenged the sovereignty of the Baltic states. It also reflects a much deeper-rooted view held in Moscow on Baltic statehood and on the Soviet era that is much at odds with the view of the Baltic governments.

Russia's ongoing and frequent violations of Baltic airspace have been well documented, but two other Russian policies have also recently violated international norms of neighborly conduct in peacetime. Both have been viewed in the Baltic countries as a challenge or provocation regarding their sovereignty.

Moscow's first challenge took place in the fall of 2014 and targeted Estonia. On Sept. 5 last year, an officer of the Estonian Internal Security Service was kidnapped by the Russian

Federal Security Service and taken to Russia where he has been charged with espionage. According to Estonia's Internal Security Service, in the course of illegally detaining the Estonian officer at gunpoint the abductors jammed radio communications and threw a smoke grenade. The incident allegedly occurred on Estonian territory (though Moscow claims it was on the Russian side of the border) and marks a significant departure from Russia's respect for Estonian statehood and territorial boundaries.

In September 2014, the Russian government also issued what could be perceived as a challenge to Lithuania's statehood in an effort to enforce old Soviet laws on Lithuanian citizens. Russian legal authorities reopened 25-year-old criminal cases against Lithuanians who had refused to serve in the Soviet army during the 1990-91 period. This affects approximately 1,500 Lithuanian men who avoided or hid from the Soviet draft following Vilnius's declaration of independence in March 1990 until Moscow officially confirmed Baltic independence in August 1991. The Lithuanian government has issued a warning to these men, now in their early 40s, against traveling to Russia or outside NATO countries, lest they be arrested or prosecuted.

Moscow's decision to pursue Lithuanian draft dodgers and to review the legality of Baltic independence is equally puzzling. In both cases the efforts involve review or enforcement of legislation of the Soviet Union — a country that vanished from the world map almost 25 years ago. Moscow's approach in both of these cases demonstrates at a minimum that Russia still perceives itself as a continuation of the Soviet Union.

Moscow's reassessment of Baltic independence is also much in line with the Russian government's perspective on Baltic history and the role that the Soviet Union played in the region. Generally, for over a decade Moscow has denied the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states. Only in the early years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency was there historic accord in Baltic-Russian relations. On July 29, 1991, Russia conceded that Lithuania had been "annexed" by the Soviets (though Moscow avoided the word "occupation") in an official agreement. By the mid-1990s, however, the Russian government started to move away from even acknowledging Soviet annexation.

With the start of Vladimir Putin's presidency in 1999, tensions over the historical record increased. The new regime began to consciously rehabilitate Soviet-era leaders and symbols and the Soviet version of history, and began to deny occupation of the Baltic states. Thereafter, Russian leaders interpreted the Baltic occupation as either liberation from fascism or a voluntary act of joining the Soviet Union on the part of the Baltic governments.

In 2005, the chief of European affairs at the Kremlin, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, declared "There was no occupation. There were agreements at the time with the legitimately elected authorities in the Baltic countries." If Moscow continues to insist today that the Baltic states were legitimately incorporated into the Soviet Union, it follows from this logic to consider whether their independence from the Soviet Union was legitimately or illegitimately granted by the authorities in 1991 who were operating under a different historical perspective.

Since the 2000s, many Russian government officials and pundits have consistently argued that the period of independence and sovereignty of the Baltic states is an "abnormality," as opposed to the "normality" of the period when the region was under Russian or Soviet rule.

Thus the recent effort to reassess the legality of Baltic independence and the efforts to enforce Soviet laws on Lithuanian citizens is very much in the same vein. The politics of history remains a contentious arena between the Baltic nations and Russia and will certainly have consequences for the relations of the two groups going forward. It will determine Moscow's policies vis-a-vis Baltic statehood and may result in indirect challenges to Baltic sovereignty.

Agnia Grigas, Ph.D., is a Truman National Security Project fellow and the author of the forthcoming book "Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire" and "The Politics of Energy and Memory Between the Baltic States and Russia." Follow her on Twitter @AgniaGrigas.

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