

'The Baltic States see European integration as a guarantee of security' from Le Monde (10 December 1997)

Caption: On 10 December 1997, against the background of the enlargement of the European Union, the French daily newspaper Le Monde describes the three Baltic States seeking accession.

Source: Le Monde. 10.12.1997. Paris: Le Monde. "Les Baltes font de l'intégration européenne un gage de leur sécurité", auteur:Bresson, Henri de.

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The Baltic States see European integration as a guarantee of security

‘Russia has put Europe under pressure!’ In Vilnius, Jolanta Jacovskiene, advisor to nationalist warhorse Vytautas Landsbergis and President of the Lithuanian Parliament, does not conceal her dismay at the decision by the European Commission to keep only one of the Baltic states, Estonia, on the shortlist of countries qualified to start membership talks with the EU. For the Baltic countries, the only former Soviet Union countries to be admitted into the circle of ‘Europeanisable’ states, the prospect of accession is, at one and the same time, a badge of recognition, a guarantee of security and freedom, and a justification for all the sacrifices they have been making since the early 1990s in order to move closer to the European model.

Their leaders reminded Pierre Moscovici, French Minister for European Affairs, of this during his visit to their respective capital cities between 3 and 6 December. With a week to go before the Luxemburg Summit, at which the Fifteen will launch the enlargement process, the minister assured them that Paris was excluding no one. He encouraged them not to lose heart and to pursue their adaptation efforts. In Riga, at the end of his tour, he stressed that ‘What matters is not being the fastest, but being the best prepared.’

On gaining independence, the adoption of Western democratic rules and the decision to open their economies to the laws of the market were not, as some had dreamt they would be, magic wands that closed the economic and social gap between their countries and the West. While most of these fledgling democracies have freed themselves from the shackles of a command economy and started building a civil society, much remains to be done to consolidate the gains. The often high social costs mean that there could be some nasty surprises. A gap has developed between economic elites with their flashy lifestyles, a new class of young civil servants influenced by the West, and societies that, deep down, are finding it hard to keep up with the changes and are paying a high social price.

In Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius, Mercedes or other luxury cars have pride of place, and tourists find sparkling new city centres, while pensioners, those left in the cold by Communism, are facing poverty, and the middle classes struggle to keep their heads above water.

However, there is hardly ever any mention of this in discussions with the countries’ leaders, who prefer to talk about re-establishing macro-economic stability. Following the collapse in production and the price hikes after independence, the Baltic republics can boast enviable growth rates, inflation under control and, as star pupils of Brussels and the IMF, stringent budgetary policies that many a European government could well take as an example. The financial crises of 1994–95 provided an opportunity to overhaul the banking sector, and foreign investors are welcome. Estonia set the example with rapid privatisation. Lithuania and Latvia followed suit. At the Ministry of European Affairs in Vilnius, the young deputy minister in charge of privatisation, 29-year-old economist Mindaugas Paunksnis, points out that 75 % of GNP comes from the private sector and the government has launched measures to privatise the remaining 14 major state enterprises.

According to Brussels, Estonia alone is in a position to negotiate EU membership.

There being no available alternative, this shock therapy generates little debate. In Riga, where preparations are under way for the 1998 elections, none of the main parties are challenging the reforms. In Tallinn, the Foreign Minister Henrik Ilnes, formerly of Radio Free Europe and then Ambassador to the United States following independence, insists that Estonia intends to pursue wholesale liberalisation. He tries to project the image of a ‘switched-on’ republic that is open to innovation and the outside world and where more people are connected to the Internet than in France.

Its proximity to Finland has brought major benefits to the small republic, which welcomes hordes of Scandinavian tourists. However, a substantial Russian community representing nearly 30 % of the population places a burden on relations with Moscow, which is constantly asserting its presence. Being a candidate for EU membership is as much a guarantee of security for the Baltic countries as it is an economic necessity, especially since NATO has decided not to admit them for the time being in order not to provoke the Russians. ‘EU membership is now our priority,’ says Mr Ilnes.

The Russian pressure is felt even more in the other two republics. It makes the Baltic people fear that they will become pawns in a power struggle between Moscow and Europe. Vilnius was forced to concede right of passage for Russians to access Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg), which houses major military installations and would become an enclave within the European Union should Lithuania accede.

Latvia, with its three ports, is a hub for Russian trade, particularly for its oil exports. It is the most Russian of the three republics, and the most affected by corruption and mafia activity. The Russian community represents more than half of the population in Riga — where it is in the driving seat, particularly where trade with Russia is concerned — and more than 40 % in the rest of the country. It has problematic relations with the Latvian authorities, who impose draconian conditions on its integration. The Government, led since July by the nationalist Prime Minister, Gunters Krasts, faced reprimand from Brussels, which fears abuses that would hardly be compatible with membership.

The fragile situation in Latvia illustrates the risks that enlargement holds for the Europeans, forced to take on major responsibilities without always clearly knowing where they are going. 'Thank God we have the European Union as a target to aim for. It is the only remedy to keep us on the road to a market economy and democracy. Were we to lose it, it would be an economic and political disaster,' sums up Latvia's first Foreign Minister since independence, Janis Jurkans, who along with four MPs now leads one of the parties in opposition to the nationalists. It is now up to the Europeans not to disappoint.

Henri de Bresson