

Can Small Nations Still Feel Secure after the Annexation of Crimea?

Written by Heiko Pääbo

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HEIKO PÄÄBO, APR 4 2014

Estonia is a very small country on the EU-Russian border whose people are observing the events in Ukraine very carefully. Opinions vary, but the general public discourse condemns the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and at the same time tries to assure the population that, despite some similarities with Ukraine and continuing militant Russian position, "Estonia has never been as strong as it is today"[1] and therefore Estonians should feel secure. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of uncertainty and nervousness in the air. The actions, rhetoric, and imperialist ambitions outlined by Putin evoke memories from the 1930s, when Nazi Germany justified its expansion through concern for its compatriots (e.g. Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia) or forced smaller nations to accept it by force (e.g. Klaipeda/Memelgebiet in Lithuania). Memories from the eve of World War II, when Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union made a deal to divide part of Europe, including Estonia, are particularly sensitive.

The Russian aggression has explicitly challenged the post-Cold War international relations that aimed to overcome geopolitical divisions, respect the choices of small nations, and set diplomacy and cooperation far ahead of military intervention. Russia has made parody of the noble principle of protecting human rights. All of these signs should be alarming to small states and raise many concerns: how secure can these nations still be? And what should be done to restore security for small states?

End with Geopolitics?

Since Estonia restored its independence in 1991, the national elite have been determined to become active members of Western institutions (NATO, EU, Council of Europe, etc.). This orientation has been motivated by two factors: to become members of functional security structures that take into account the concerns of small states, and to secure the nation from potential imperialist revival in Russia.[2] Although in the 1990s Russia behaved differently in global affairs, due to its economic and political weakness, the imperialist discourse has never been domestically condemned or disappeared. Internationally, Russia established the impression that the era of geopolitics was over and that the Kremlin accepted the new normative framework of international relations. Russia was particularly vocal that Europe should not establish new dividing lines via enlargement of NATO or the EU.[3] At the same time, there were alarming examples for small states bordering Russia, like Estonia. Frozen conflicts occurred with Russian assistance in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Although Russia seemed to play according to the normative framework of the new world order, its policies in neighbouring territories remained imperialist.[4] Russia connected the withdrawal of its troops to the situation of the Russophone population in Estonia in order to delay it, and in 1993[5] there was even an attempt by some Russian activists in North-East Estonia to create an autonomous territory.[6] In the end, the referenda in Narva and Sillamäe were declared illegitimate, and Russia agreed to withdraw its troops in 1994,[7] but it showed that, despite its rhetoric, Russia has not given up its ambition to control the former Soviet republics.

Russia resisted NATO enlargement with the argument that it creates new dividing lines in Europe and, at the same time, also appealed to a promise made by the West not to move NATO further to the East after the reunification of Germany.[8] The first statement was borrowed from the spirit of the post-Cold War era that condemned the bloc-based world system and aimed to create an all-inclusive world. This statement had to be understandable for the West

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that was the normative centre of global politics. The second argument, rather, aimed to appeal to the gentlemen's agreement and the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* – an important value for the West and the new world order.

The second argument also included a clear geopolitical consideration, at least for Russia. Russia perceived the NATO enlargement as a geopolitical victory for the West, particularly for the US, and that this should be handled according to a 19th or 20th century power struggle. Being too economically weak and dependent on Western investments and assistance, Russia was not in a position to resist this process. Despite the firm position of the Baltic states that NATO enlargement should be made based on merits and not geopolitics, the decision about their membership had some geopolitical connotation. In 2001, Russia removed its objection to the Baltic states' NATO membership, and in 2002, membership negotiations started, culminating with membership status in 2004.[9] However, in 2008, when Ukraine and Georgia prepared to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP), Russia decided to intervene and impose its geopolitical thinking on NATO. Unfortunately, it was also accepted (consciously or unconsciously) by some NATO members and halted the enlargement process towards the East without considering the wills of Ukraine and Georgia.[10] In order to ensure its geopolitical victory, Russia launched its aggression against Georgia some months later and established its puppet governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The setbacks by the Coloured Revolutions in the former Soviet Union republics were overcome by supporting pro-Russian, authoritarian, and corrupt governments (e.g. Yanukovich in Ukraine).

At the same time, Russia developed an alternative to the European integration – the Eurasian Custom Union – that could become the first step for further integration of the former Soviet space, which is perceived by Russia as its natural geopolitical space. This smoothly developing plan took a sudden blow from the Ukrainian people who, by the end of 2013, started to protest against their president's decision to halt integration towards Europe. Instead, Yanukovich started to make the first steps toward integrating Ukraine with the Russian-dominated Eurasian Custom Union.[11] This decision mobilised pro-European forces in Ukraine that managed to remove Yanukovich from power and form a new government that defined its aim as pursuing European integration in February 2014.[12] This interruption to the Russian geopolitical grand plan was not welcomed, and it required punishment and exemplary hanging. In the Russian public, there is little respect towards Ukrainians as an independent nation[13] and, therefore, these events in Ukraine were perceived as an American and European geopolitical power game. Thus, for Russia, it was crucial to show power by saying it is “our territory,” and solving the Ukrainian issue for good.

The Security Concerns of Small States

From the Russian point of view, there is an explicit geopolitical power struggle going on. Ukraine is perceived as their natural backyard. This means that Europe and the US should keep their hands off of these territories. In 2008, the vague decision on Ukrainian and Georgian NATO membership ambitions at the Bucharest NATO summit was interpreted by Putin and his administration as the West accepting the Russian geopolitical game.[14] There is no need to ask what small nations think or want, but it is enough if leaders of the great powers make their deal. It is likely that France and Germany, who were the most vocal opponents to giving the MAP to Ukraine and Georgia, did not explicitly aim to make a geopolitical deal with Russia, but at least it was perceived in this way by the Kremlin. A similar ambiguous position was given by the EU Independent Fact Finding Mission Report after the Russo-Georgian War, which named both parties responsible for this conflict,[15] confirming this perception for the Kremlin. Therefore, the annexation of Crimea and escalating conflict in Ukraine should not be a surprise, because Russia understands that the geopolitical worldview has been restored and acts accordingly.

This is an alarming situation not only for the Ukrainian people, who live today under fear of war, or for Estonia, who shares an almost 300-km border with Russia and 30% of whose population the Russian government defines as their compatriots, but it is an alarming situation for all small nations globally. Allowing the great powers to make geopolitical decisions about a nation's rights to join one or another international organisation restores the old world system that does not respect the rights of small nations. It ignores sovereignty rights of smaller nations and undermines the existing system of international law. The latter is the most powerful instrument for small nations against great powers who decide to pursue their interests because they have the power to do it. This leads to anarchy that structural realists claim to be the main characteristic of international relations.[16] However, this standpoint fails to understand that, in acting according to this perception, they only reproduce it and legitimise the

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aggressor's claims. It is not the structure that defines state actions, but state actions that define the structure.

In order to restore the security of small states, it should be made clear to an aggressor country that geopolitical thinking and behind-the-back deal-making are no longer acceptable norms in international relations. Appeasement policy that aims to save the face of the aggressor and maintain good relations (economically) should be stopped.^[17] This short-term economic thinking only encourages the aggressor to move forward in realising its ambitions. Even if appeasement temporarily gives the illusion that a situation has been solved, as it did in the case of Russo-Georgian War, then it slowly, but steadily, erodes the cornerstone of international relations that are able to provide security for small nations. Therefore, it is time to move forward with more serious economic sanctions, even if, in the short term, it creates economic difficulties for European nations, but in the long run it helps to tame the aggressor. Otherwise the long-term losers are small nations, who will again become only change in the hands of great powers.

[1] Estonian Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas' speech in Riigikogu, March 21, 2014

[2] Merje Kuus, Toward Cooperative Security? International Integration and the Construction of Security in Estonia, *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, 2002, vol. 31 (2), pp. 297-317

[3] Oksana Antonenko, Russia, NATO and European security after Kosovo, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 1999, vol. 41 (4), pp. 124-144

[4] The territories of the former Soviet Union were officially called the "near abroad," where Russia has special interests. This mediates the understanding that these countries are some kind of quasi-states and only temporarily away from Russia.

[5] Sven Gunnar Simonsen, Compatriot Games: Explaining the 'Diaspora Linkage' in Russia's Military Withdrawal from the Baltic States, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2001, vol. 53 (5), pp. 771-791

[6] Sergey Khrychikov, Hugh Miall, Conflict Prevention in Estonia: The Role of the Electoral System, *Security Dialogue*, 2002, vol. 33 (2), pp. 193-208

[7] With the small exception of the Paldiski submarine training base that was dismantled by September 1995. Leon Aron, Russia's New Foreign Policy, *Russian Outlook*, Spring 1998, p. 2

[8] Mark Kramer, The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia, *The Washington Quarterly*, 2009, vol. 32 (1), pp. 39-61

[9] Viatcheslav Morozov, Russia in the Baltic Sea Region: Desecuritization or Deregionalization? Cooperation and Conflict: *Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association*, vol. 39 (3), pp. 317-331

[10] Sandra Dias Fernandes, Time to reassess the European security architecture? The NATO-EU-Russia Security Triangle, *EPIN Working Papers*, No. 22 / March 2009

[11] Ukraine seeking observer status in Eurasian Economic Union – Yanukovych, <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/182869.html>

[12] <http://www.euronews.com/2014/02/27/ukraine-forms-new-pro-eu-coalition-government/>

[13] <http://evroua.com/rossijskij-zhurnalist-shevchenko-sdelal-sensacionnye-zayavleniya-po-krymu/>

[14] Andrey Makarychev, EU & Russia: Competing Realities and Misperceptions, 10.03.2014 <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/eu-russia-competing-realities-and-misperceptions>

[15] <http://www.ceiig.ch/>

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[16] Structural realists have seen the Ukrainian crisis as major fault on the US side that has moved to the Russian backyard and, thereby, threatens Russia. For example: John J. Mearsheimer, Getting Ukraine Wrong, The New York Times, 13.03.2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/opinion/getting-ukraine-wrong.html>

[17] Currently several EU members (including also small nations, e.g. Finland and Cyprus) do not want to implement any further sanctions to Russia because they see that it would harm their economy.

About the author:

Heiko Pääbo is the Head of the Center for Baltic Studies, Institute of Government and Politics, University of Tartu. His research focuses on international relations and history of East and Central Europe, mainly on the Baltic States and Russia. His current research focus is related to development of national master narrative in Estonia. He has published several articles on textbook analysis of Estonia. In 2011 he defended his doctoral dissertation at the University of Tartu: Potential of Collective Memory Based International Identity Conflicts in Post-Imperial Space. Comparison of Russian Master Narrative with Estonian, Ukrainian and Georgian Master Narratives.