

DISCUSSIONS



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**RUSSIA AS AN IRRITANT FACTOR
FOR THE POLITICAL ELITESS
OF THE BALTICS
IN THE CONTEXT OF ELECTION
CAMPAIGNS OF 2010—2011:
AN EXPERT OPINION**

This article presents an overview of the principal intellectual alternatives of today regarding the role and place of Russia in the social and political spaces of the former Baltic republics, which were articulated in the course of international expert discussions and round tables at the IKBFU.

Key words: elite, Baltic States, factor, expert channel, election campaign.



In the late 2010 — early 2011 a number of important electoral events took place in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. On October 2, 2010 Latvia held the elections to the Sejm, on February 27, 2011 the elections to local self-government of Lithuania were completed, on March 7, 2011 Estonia finished the elections of deputies of the Parliament. Each electoral campaign deserved separate discussion panel in I. Kant Baltic Federal University with the participation of leading political scientists, historians, public and governmental figures from these countries. «Round table» discussions and further review provide valuable empirical data to analyze the current agenda among the experts of the Baltic States. A special interest is drawn to political assessment of the Russian presence as a factor of electoral activities of political elites in the Baltic countries¹.

The general framework for the international expert discussions was set by A. Klemeshev, Rector of BFU, who denoted the timely relevance of country studies for Russia and the urgent necessity for Kaliningrad to open a research center to the study of the Baltic States. Strengthening of the international academic cooperation should become an important step for better understanding the specifics of development of the former Baltic republics.

Elections for the Seim of Latvia actualized in political science the question of the grounds of the existing political system. A view that the political system in Latvia was based to a considerable, if not a major extent

¹ The review is made on the records of three «round tables». The records were taken by V. Sutyryn, a PhD student of the Department of political science and sociology of the I. Kant Baltic Federal University.

on an anti-Russian attitude of the ruling elite became widespread. At the same time arguments in this field make the expert community conclude that attempts to change the existing status quo could lead to conflicts and major disintegration in society.

Currently prevailing view is voiced in the debate by I. Ijabs, who spoke about the need to refrain from serious steps to reform the existing political system in Latvia. In these circumstances, political mechanisms and prospects for political integration grow in relevance. In particular, Latvian university conducts a research under the guidance of Y. Rozenvalds claiming that Russian-speaking parties in the government will help to strike the sensible compromise in resolving acute ethnic and language issues in Latvia.

In this regard a Russian expert Vladimir Simindey outlined argumentation, according to which the "occupation rhetoric", most often used during election campaigns, is a source of legitimacy for the current Latvian political elite.

It should be noted that for the Latvian political science community the most urgent problem is the «big brother» complex, which in the opinion of leading Latvian political scientists, becomes an obstacle to achieving interaction both at the elite level, and the expert one. The strategy of the argumentation in this case includes the general context of modern international relations, characterized by a high degree of interconnectivity, emphasizes the need for equal consideration of interests and, hence, the desirability of Russia's refusal of the "discourse of teaching" (the term of C. Crook) towards Latvia. According to the participants of the "round table" the possibility of open discussion of this subject explained the increased interest in Latvian political scientists and journalists to the discussions held at the Kaliningrad University.

Electoral campaign in Lithuania was marked by less acute problems of social and political integration. On the one hand, this is due to the relatively low number of national minorities than in Latvia and Estonia, which mitigates the problem of political and institutional integration of different ethnic groups. On the other hand, the experience of institutional building after gaining the independence and reaching the consensus among the Lithuanian political elite are generally considered to be more successful than in the other Baltic States.

In the Lithuanian society, as it was demonstrated by the «Round Table» discussion, topics of historical policy, in particular the issue Soviet «occupation», are very relevant. It is only natural that the consideration of the political aspect of the «occupation» has become a central issue in the BFU discussion. At the present moment there is no unambiguous position on this topic both within expert and political communities. For example, Y. Vyasyalka pointed at the need to take into account the context in the analysis of historical events and, accordingly, inadmissible estimates of past events, based on contemporary realities. A. Medalinskas expressed the opposite opinion, which is shared by many representatives of Lithuanian political elite, linking non-recognition of Soviet Russia "occupation" with the inability to accept Lithuania as an independent, "other" state.

In general, the results of the discussion identified the consensus in the Lithuanian community of experts about the negative perception of the Soviet past in Lithuania. However, it's worth mentioning that such a negative attitude among both political scientists and the political elites does not always apply to the contemporary Russian-Lithuanian relations. In this case political statements can significantly diverge. However, according to the general opinion, the central problem is the one of lack of confidence in bilateral relations, the origins of which is seen not only in the past, but often in the current political situation.

"Round table" on the election results in the Estonian Parliament set the task to discuss a number of basic attitudes of the Estonian elite against Russia. Compared with Lithuania the historic policy of Estonia in the electoral process has been less obvious. Relevant to the Estonian political science issues focused on the modern problems: the weakening of economic ties with Russia and nationalism in domestic policy in Estonia.

It should be noted that the leading parties including key members of the national political elite in the recent parliamentary election campaign almost did not refer to the factor of Russia in general and the so-called "Russian question" (Russian minority), in particular. Nevertheless, the Russian factor is here to stay, and it was confirmed by a scandal instigated by a donation from a Russian fund for the construction of an Orthodox church in Tallinn.

A. Semenov stated in this connection a very controversial in the Estonian expert community opinion, according to which the Russian-Estonian relations were determined by the relations of Russia and the United States and, accordingly, the warming of the past leads to a reduction in the intensity of the critical or just anti-Russian rhetoric in Estonia's political elite. T. Alatalu mentioned the fact that the support from the United States is very important for Estonia, confirming that with specific examples from the recent parliamentary campaign.

One of the most topical issues in the discussion of the Estonian political scientists is the one about the controversy, revealed when comparing the economic and political policies of the ruling elite of Estonia. Thus, A. Astrov diagnosed, according to his words, "internal schizophrenia", denoting a sequence of signs of neoliberal policies pursued by the Estonian elite in the economy, and justifying the existence of elements of strict regulation up to the dictates in the domestic politics (particularly in education). Strategies of argument on the negative impact of these contradictions on the economic development of Estonia were described in the reports made by Tinna E. and S. Record, where the starting point was found in the thesis that Estonian business interests were harmed by hostile political line against Russia of the ruling elite in Estonia.

In this context, possible ways out of the situation discussed, one of them was the creation of cross-border industrial innovation clusters. As noted by S. Record, in 2009, an Estonian-Russian project was implemented. The research process conducted by representatives of businesses, local authorities and expert communities identified four key sectors where clustering was recognized as the most promising: chemical, metal, wood processing and hospitality.



The main challenges of international clusters on the Russian-Estonian border were identified by experts as lack of information, staff shortage, and lack of financing. These problems are surmountable, but they are seriously aggravated by existing political risks. In this context a theoretical concept, according to which the successful development of clusters is provided by the so-called triple helix, which represents cooperation between business, government and the sector of science and education becomes especially relevant. The experts agreed that the horizontal connection between enterprises will never replace the political decisions at the highest level.

For the political elite in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia Russia remains a factor-irritant, which is quite obviously manifested, in particular, during the election campaigns in the three Baltic republics. The constant appeal to the Soviet past, very characteristic of the political process, will not disappear anywhere in the foreseeable future. Reaction to Russia's "external irritant" (whether Russian roots of the mayor of Riga Nil Ushakov, "hand of Moscow" in the political career of former Lithuanian President Rolandas Paksas, or the mayor of Tallinn, Estonia Centre Party leader Edgar Savisaar) was and will always be emotional.

A key issue is the quality of this reaction: to what extent the political elite of the Baltic countries will be dominated by anti-Russian ideology or pragmatic schemes of cooperation? Among some of the expert community of the Baltic States there is a consensus which regards it necessary in any case to maintain a positive trend in relations among Russia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, particularly in the economic sphere.

Given the complex historical and political context, calm relations between the countries, which are based on understanding of the need for mutual cooperation, cannot arise *ex nihilo*. Therefore, it is the logic of successful economic interaction that may eventually prove to have more anti-Russian sentiment (often introduced from outside) within the political elite in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, that will play a crucial role in the stabilization between countries.

The topical issue, raised in the Kaliningrad expert discussions was the problem of development of innovation sphere and the need to intensify cooperation between Russia and the Baltic countries in this area. One of the starting points of view of political scientists of Baltic countries is a broad understanding of the content of innovation, which includes not only the economic component, but also a political one.

In this context, the traditional political science question of the relationship between politics and economics is updated with contemporary problems of finding ways of sustainable high-quality growth in overall economic instability. The possible policy steps in this direction were discussed, in particular the idea of creating platforms for the resumption of the interaction of parliamentarians of the Baltic States and the Kaliningrad region deputies. Such political arrangements could be a prospective tool for the implementation of innovative initiatives on promoting cross-border work, consolidating scientific and humanities issues which are discussed in the expert community.

On the issue of academic ties between Russia and the Baltic countries one should pay attention to the Russian language, which in this area remains

an important resource. Despite the general tendency to reduce the number of Russian-language schools and teachers, the young people, belonging to the titular nations of the Baltic countries, show the interest in learning the Russian language, considering that it will expand their career opportunities. A similar situation is when, on the one hand, many of the political elite and the academic communities of the Baltic countries speak the Russian language and, on the other hand knowing the Russian language is important in terms of many young people and it represents a great opportunity for intensive development of cooperation in science and education, which creates a stable basis for the improvement of political relations.

Presented in the recent three major debates, the main view-points and strategies identified three levels of analysis used in the expert community. The idea of a particular level as a framework for analyzing the political situation largely determines the results:

1. *The scale of a country.* Examines the socio-political structures and processes specific to individual countries. Focuses on the essential differences from other countries around the Baltic Sea as a whole.

2. *The scale of the Baltic countries.* Accentuates the intense political, economic and cultural ties between the countries, the overall use of history, geographical landscapes and geopolitical position. The analysis aims to identify common trends and patterns in the development of the Baltic countries.

3. *The global scale.* The basic categories of analysis come from large countries, international political associations and macroregions. Explanation of action of the political elites of the Baltic States is often given on the basis of geopolitical analysis of relations between Russia, the EU and the United States.

In-depth analysis of the political situation involves taking into account all the above levels of scale, which, however, does not always happen. In the expert views on the magnitude of the identified positions they overlap some combination of economic and political factors. More often than economic factors proceed from the allegations of national economies coherence and emphasizing the potential benefits to the State as an intermediary in economic EU-Russia relations. Political factors are presented by experts on the basis of political and historical patterns of argumentation and modern discourses of nationalism, identity and social integration.

As one of the general ideas that are often put for defining the frame of cooperation, many experts of the Baltic States still use the concept of "mediator" or "bridge", between Russia and the EU. In the policy the stance of "mediator" gives way to the stance of an "expert" on Russia. However, today such phrases are generally understood as not implemented yet or as lost opportunities and serve as an ideal reference point in the argument, rather than the current pragmatic goal.

Common to the expert community is recognizing the fact that in Russia at the moment there is a lack of objective data about the current political situation in the Baltic countries. Existing knowledge is not always sufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the political and electoral processes, attitudes and actions of political elites in the Baltic countries. This situation is determined by both rapid deterioration in relations between Russia and the



Baltic countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and by the structural and social factors. At the moment in Russia there are practically no highly qualified researchers focusing on the study of the Baltic States.

Summing up, it should be noted that experts and political scientists in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, who participated in the recent "round tables", agreed on the key role of the Kaliningrad region as a most favorable and promising for the dialogue. The unique geopolitical position of the Kaliningrad region facilitates its active cross-border cooperation with the Baltic Sea States which result in growing ties between academic communities. The format of the meetings similar to the «round tables» is becoming traditional for I. Kant BFU. Significant experience in organizing international discussions with politicians and public figures from different countries has been accumulated.. The participation of the recent round tables suggests that the Kaliningrad region today is acquiring the status of a leading current platform for academic dialogue between Russia and the Baltic countries.

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