

Chapter 14

The Baltic Road to Freedom and the Fall of the Soviet Union

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Time Is On Their Side

June 5, 1990. A major CSCE conference on human rights was held in Copenhagen, at the invitation of the Foreign Minister of Denmark, Uffe Ellemann Jensen. In attendance were the foreign ministers of all European states, plus the United States and Canada. This conference was part of a series of meetings laying the groundwork for new relations between European states in the post-Cold War era. The Berlin Wall had been torn down, Eastern Europe had been set free, and democratically constituted governments had been formed in the Baltic states, although they remained within the Soviet Union.

The newly appointed foreign ministers of the then still Soviet Baltic republics, Lennart Meri, Janis Jurkans and Algirdas Saudargas, were in Copenhagen to plead their case for restored independence. The Soviets presented the host with an ultimatum: if they stay, we leave. The Danish hosts caved in and the Baltic foreign ministers were shown the door. When I heard the news, I threw away my prepared text and spoke exclusively on the Baltic issue, because their voices had been silenced. I was the only minister to do so. Here are the relevant excerpts from my spontaneous speech, quoted from the Danish Foreign Ministry's transcript:¹

The Berlin walls have started tumbling down. The nations of central- and eastern Europe, who suffered too long from under an alien system, that was imposed upon them by military force, have been set free. The transition from totalitarianism to freedom is a tortuous one. Before things start to get better they may even get worse. But at least there is hope at the end of the tunnel. The main thing is that we see people grappling with pragmatic solutions instead of confrontation behind fortification. There is a longing for

openness and a striving for co-operation. That is the most hopeful change that has occurred.

So far, so good. Since we started on this long journey we haven't suffered any major setbacks. But Tienanmen Square, outbursts of ethnic violence in eastern Europe, within the Soviet Union, in Kashmir, South Africa and elsewhere, are there to remind us how precarious is the peace. And how easily the flames of hatred can flare up again.

We are talking about political leadership. It so happens that the president of the Soviet Union, Mr Gorbachev, is acting out the greatest historical role of any statesman of the post-war era. He has been the initiator of change, a pioneer of peaceful reforms. His refraining from the use of force to halt the democratic revolution in eastern Europe actually made it all possible.

But every step that he takes from here onwards is wrought with dangers. The long delayed economic reforms within the USSR may bring social upheaval in its wake. The use of force in repressing legitimate claims to independence of the Baltic nations could destroy our confidence in our unfailing commitment to the universal human values of the rights of nations to independence and sovereignty.

We can not pretend that the problem of the Baltic states can be glossed over or be forgotten, lest we endanger the peace process. The simple fact is: Human rights and the rights of nations are indivisible. Those universal human values can not be handed out as privileges to be enjoyed by some of us, but denied to others.

The undisputed historical fact is that the Baltic nations were independent states, recognised as such by the international community. During the war they suffered the fate of military invasions, occupation and illegal annexation. The illegality of this act of war has by now been recognised by the Soviet congress of deputies.

There can therefore be no solution to this problem that is compatible with the Helsinki-Vienna process other than full recognition of the Baltic nations' right to independence. At the same time the legitimate security interests of the Soviet Union in the Baltic sea

area should be recognised and negotiated. Any use of force, be it economic or military, to keep those nations illegally and against their will within the Soviet Union, is in contradiction to the new CSCE spirit and will unavoidably put at risk further progress towards a new and stable security order for Europe.

That would be a misfortune, not only for the Baltic nations, but for the Soviet Union themselves and for the rest of Europe as well. Peaceful negotiations, between the Soviet government and the democratically elected governments of the Baltic states, is a *crucial test* of the Soviet Union's commitment to the principles of peaceful reform and fundamental democratic values.

When I stepped down from the podium, a man jumped up and embraced me and exclaimed, "What a privilege it is to be the representative of a small nation and be allowed to speak the truth." This was Max Kampelmann, a renowned Sovietologist and U.S. negotiator. As I headed for my seat, a burly heavyweight shook his fist at me: "Shame on you, Mr. Hannibalsson," he declared. "There was not a word of truth in what you said about the Soviet Union in your speech." This was Yuri Rhesetov, a Soviet expert on human rights in the Geneva negotiations and later Russia's ambassador in Reykjavík. With the U.S. representative ashamed and the Soviet one angry, I felt I was on the right path.

From then on, in every forum where Iceland had a platform and an audience, we insisted on reminding those who wished to forget. We kept the argument running everywhere: at the UN, within NATO, in the European Council, at CSCE conferences, at Social Democratic party leaders' meetings. I wish in this context to pay tribute to my Danish colleague, Uffe-Ellemann Jensen, who soon after Copenhagen joined me in this effort and proved to be an effective champion for our cause, not least within the European Community, where I had no access.

The Baltic Road to Freedom

For almost half a century, the Baltic nations were the forgotten nations of Europe. Their lands had been erased from the map; their national identities and distinct cultures had partly gone underground.

They had simply disappeared from the political radar screen of the outside world. When discussing the Baltic issue with a distinguished foreign minister of a NATO country, he dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand and added, “Haven’t these peoples always belonged to Russia anyway?”

Two events that caught the imagination of the outside world did more than anything else to change this attitude. One was the “Singing Revolution” in June 1988. Just about one third of the Estonian nation assembled in the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds, singing patriotic songs and celebrating freedom. Similar events were also staged in Latvia and Lithuania. The world had known cases of Gandhian civil disobedience against injustice before—but singing oneself to freedom was a novelty.

The other event, which made it onto front pages and TV screens around the globe, was the “human chain” of August 1989—also called the Baltic Way. Almost two million people holding hands, from Tallinn in the north to Vilnius in the south, to protest against the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocols from half a century before. This infamous pact between the two dictators, Hitler and Stalin, had signaled the beginning of the Second World War and gave Stalin a free hand to invade Poland, the Baltic countries and Finland, one of the Nordic countries.

Those inspiring events did not only signal national reawakening. It was a symbol of powerful grassroots democracy. The leaders of the independence movements—the Popular Fronts of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—had therefore every reason to believe that they would be welcomed with open arms back into the family of European democracies. After all, most of the West European states had never *de jure* recognized the annexation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union.

The freedom fighters were in for a rude awakening. When they sent their representatives abroad to solicit recognition of their restored democracies, they were received by polite annoyance. The restoration of independence of the Baltic states—which implied breaking away from the Soviet Union—did not fit in with the scheme of things, within which Western leaders were negotiating in partnership with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to end the Cold War. Gradually it dawned upon men like Vytautas Landsbergis of Lithuania and Lennart Meri of Estonia that they were being treated as unwelcome intruders into the

amiable fraternity of the major powers, which simply had a different agenda.

The Baltic independence movements had unknowingly put the leaders of the big Western democracies upon the horns of a dilemma of their own creation, one from which they couldn't disentangle themselves without outside help. This is a chapter in the story of the endgame of the Cold War, which the major powers in the West understandably want to forget, but which in turn the current masters in the Kremlin are by the same token unwilling to forget.

First, we must acknowledge that the Singing Revolution could not have gathered momentum were it not for Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika*—his signatory trademarks for opening up and structural reform. Even if the opening up was both timid and limited and effective structural reform never truly materialized, Gorbachev, by ultimately *refusing to use force* to keep the Soviet Union together, made all the change possible.

Second, if through their actions the Baltic states could successfully break away from the Soviet Union, they could signal the beginning of the end of the empire. Not only would such a political tsunami engulf Gorbachev personally, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union would be caught up in its waves as well.

Of course we were all questioning ourselves at the time: Could such a tremendous transformation as the potential breakup of the Union occur peacefully? Or would disintegration unleash a bitter war, with unforeseeable consequences? For a while during the first weeks of 1991, we were teetering on the brink.

Third, the leaders of the major Western powers—George H. W. Bush, Helmut Kohl, François Mitterand and the Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher—had all staked the success of their policy of ending Cold War antagonism on the political fate of a single individual—Gorbachev. If he were to be deposed, they thought, the hardliners would be back. That would mean a return to the Cold War and—in the worst case scenario—an escalation into full blown war.

Fourth, there was a lot at stake, including disarmament—both nuclear and conventional, reduction in military forces and arms control, the peaceful reunification of Germany and united Germany's contin-

ued membership in NATO, the liberation of the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, and mutual hopes for a “peace dividend.”

Gorbachev’s last line of defense was preventing the breakup of the Soviet Union. If that line wouldn’t hold, everything else would be lost.

The leaders of the West found themselves facing a tough choice: should all the aforementioned benefits of ending the Cold War be sacrificed by supporting the small Baltic nations’ legal rights and aspirations for restored independence? Or should those small nations—in the name of maintaining peace and stability—sacrifice their dreams, at least for the time being?

There was an almost unbridgeable gap between the official, idealistic rhetoric about the expansion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law—and the coldblooded realpolitik being pursued *de facto* behind closed doors.

This is why President Bush gave his infamous “Chicken Kiev” speech on August 1, 1991, three weeks before the declaration of independence of Ukraine. In it he appealed to the Ukrainians “not to succumb to suicidal nationalism” but to keep the Soviet Union together—in the name of peace and stability.²

This is why Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterrand wrote a joint letter to president Landsbergis, urging him to postpone the implementation of Lithuania’s declaration of independence of March 11, 1990 and instead to seek negotiations with Lithuania’s colonial masters, without prior conditions.³

This is why the leaders of the restored Baltic democracies were turned away from conferences where the “New World Order” was being negotiated between the old Cold War adversaries, as potential “spoilers of the peace.”⁴

Western Policy: Keep the Soviet Union Together at All Costs?

When recounting this story more than a quarter of a century later, many questions remain unanswered. One of them is whether the leaders of Western democracy were really so callous as to be ready to

sacrifice the legitimate claims of the Baltic nations to restored independence—in return for political gain in dealing with the Soviets. Although it appears to have been so, the real answer is perhaps a little more subtle.

Keep in mind that the Baltic nations had disappeared from the political radar screen for almost half a century. In that sense they had become “forgotten nations.” The comment by the distinguished foreign minister of a NATO country that I cited earlier—“Haven’t these peoples always belonged to Russia anyway?”—was symptomatic of a way of thinking.

If this was really the accepted view in the chancelleries of Europe, Western leaders were, presumably, not thinking in terms of sacrificing anything. Bear in mind that most of those major powers in the West—the United Kingdom, France, Spain and also the United States—were all ex-colonial powers. The United States suffered a devastating civil war to prevent the breakup of the union. I am not for a moment suggesting that the American Civil War, with the aim of emancipating the slaves, should be compared with imperial aggression with the aim of enslaving free nations. *But preventing the breakup of the union* was the common principle.

The United Kingdom today is in the grip of an existential crisis—as is Spain—in mortal fear of the breakup of the union. Colonial powers—think of the British, the French and the Spanish empires—have fought ferocious wars trying to prevent the breakup of their empires.

The leaders of major powers with a colonial past are not to be expected to be at the forefront in defending the rights of small nations to national self-determination. Rarely have small nations been let free by a benevolent act of major powers. They simply have to liberate themselves. Under such circumstances, the concept of “solidarity of small nations” may have some practical relevance, against all odds.

When it had actually become official Western policy from 1990 onwards to keep the Soviet Union together at all cost—in the name of peace and stability—it should have been obvious that something had gone wrong. What was wrong? Among other things a wrong conception of the political and economic longevity of the Soviet Union under the *status quo*. Despite the rhetoric of reform, the reality was quite dif-

ferent. The economy was totally paralyzed. They couldn't deliver the goods.

The gap between the self-glorification of the Soviet power elite and the reality that ordinary people faced had become too wide. It was absurd for the leaders of the West to put all their stakes on the political fate of a single individual. It was not a given that the hardliners would return, although Gorbachev would be removed from power. Reality turned out to be different, as proven by subsequent events. The analysis was superficial and the policy misconceived.

The Soviet Union was in an existential crisis that the Soviet power elite didn't know how to tackle. The Empire was on the verge of breakdown, as had been the fate of the British and French colonial systems after the war. To me it was outrageous to listen to the leaders of the West, preaching to the captive nations that they should stay in, to hold the Soviet Union together at all cost—in the name of peace and stability. To my ears this sounded like an Orwellian oxymoron. I never saw nor heard convincing evidence justifying this policy.

Recently I have repeatedly been asked by my Baltic friends in leading positions, if there is any truth in what U.S. emissaries are now telling them, i.e. that Iceland's action on the Baltic issue was actually U.S.-inspired and directed; that since the US was in a difficult position to speak up (due to among other things the Gorbachev-partnership and the Gulf War in January 1991) they prompted Iceland on their behalf and with their tacit approval. To tell the truth, it must then have been such a secret U.S. operation that it passed me by.

Why Iceland?

I am often asked why Iceland didn't simply accept the conventional wisdom of the leaders of the West on the Baltic issue? Certainly there was no vital national interest involved. On the contrary, Iceland was dependent upon the Soviet Union for oil and gas—the life blood of any developed economy—since the British placed an embargo upon Iceland during the Cod Wars in the 1950s.⁵ And didn't we know that small nations are supposed to seek shelter with and follow the leadership of the major powers?

The truth is that we were reluctant followers. The leaders of the West were obviously pursuing their own agenda. Apart from the envisaged benefits of ending the Cold War, the United States needed Soviet acquiescence for the invasion of Iraq (which was a Soviet ally) in January 1991. For the German government the peaceful unification of their country was naturally paramount. If that agenda did not include the restored independence of the Baltic nations, then that was bad luck for them. There was simply too much at risk, it was believed, by allowing the restoration of independence of the Baltic countries to disrupt the Gorbachev partnership. On that score, Western leadership was more or less united.

We simply disagreed. When it had become the declared policy of the Western democracies on ending the Cold War that the Soviet Union had to be kept together at all cost—in the name of peace and stability—it should have dawned upon thinking persons that something was seriously wrong.

What was wrong? First and foremost, this naive infatuation with Gorbachev was both ill-conceived and downright dangerous. It could not be taken for granted that the hardliners would be returned to power, even if Gorbachev were to be deposed. Subsequent events were soon to prove us right on that score.

We were convinced that the Soviet system itself was in the throes of existential crisis, for which their leaders had no solutions. The empire was in the process of falling apart, just as had been the fate of the British, French and other European empires after World War II. The political life expectancy of the Soviet system was greatly exaggerated.

How come that we dared assume that we had a more reliable take on political reality within the Soviet system than the CIA? Well, it so happens that my elder brother was a graduate of Moscow University and had done graduate work in both Warsaw and Krakow with, among others Leszek Kolakowski, who was a prolific writer on the shortcomings and dangers of the communist regime. Another brother of mine had studied for some time at Charles University in Prague. Both had maintained contacts with dissidents in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, including the Baltic countries.

I myself as a Fulbright Scholar at Harvard had studied and did research on comparative economic systems. My conclusion regarding the Soviet economy was simple: it didn't work. It had lost its driving force. It was inflexible, wasteful, and inefficient, although it had sectors, mainly connected to the military, which were provided with enormous resources, with some success. In addition, the political elite—the *nomenklatura*—had lost its belief in the system. They had lost their appetite for using force to stay in power, even though the Soviet Union could only be kept together by force.

Contrary to current Russian President Vladimir Putin—who is on record saying that “the fall of the Soviet Union was the greatest geo-strategic catastrophe of the 20th century”—I was convinced in 1989/91—and I still am—that the dissolution of the Soviet Union should be welcomed as perhaps the most beneficial event of the 20th century. If it needed a little push from the Baltic nations, so much the better.

What had the Cold War been all about if not to liberate the captive nations? I was appalled listening to Western leaders preach to subjugated peoples that they should accept their fate as captive nations so that we in the West could enjoy peace and stability. To my ears this was not only a shameful betrayal, it was a blatant mistake.

I personally was reluctant to follow such a recipe. If we could make sure that we could have access to oil from other sources, we would be all right. Remember, the Soviet Union at the time was in steep economic decline. They offered low prices for low quality products. We could secure more profitable markets elsewhere. So we took a calculated risk. And this turned out to be right.

My analysis of the internal situation within the Soviet Union led to a totally different conclusion from the mainstream one. There was no need to sacrifice the rightful claims of the Baltic nations to independence for some greater good in dealing with the Soviet Union. If you are convinced that you are right—and there is a lot at stake—why not follow your conviction?

I have never been beholden by an inferiority complex for being the representative of a small nation. During my political career I have been at close quarters with several great power leaders, who were no more

impressive for representing more populous states. I can also cite several examples of how small nations, if they stick together, can change the world.

January 1991: A Turning Point

January 1991 was a crucial time—a turning point. The hardliners in the Kremlin—on whose support Gorbachev increasingly depended—decided to take Western leaders at their word and “keep the Soviet Union together at all costs.” That meant to prevent the imminent secession of the Baltic nations from the Soviet Union—by force, if necessary.

The justification given at the time sounds familiar today, in light of current events in Ukraine. The plan was to create incidents to justify military intervention and emergency rule from Moscow, in the name of protecting national (i.e. Russian) minorities; and to restore law and order.

The tanks started rolling. Special troupes occupied strategic positions. The killing machine started doing its job. Everything was set for a crackdown on the democratic forces and “regime change”—imposed by Moscow.

I remember vividly being awakened in the middle of the night by a telephone call from President Landsbergis saying in essence: “If you mean what you have been saying in our support, come immediately to Vilnius to demonstrate your personal commitment to our cause. The presence of a NATO foreign minister matters.” I was the only foreign minister from anywhere to respond to an appeal to arrive on the scene to demonstrate solidarity in their hour of peril. I visited all three capitals during those crucial days.

I shall never forget those days in the squares and on the streets of Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn. There I personally witnessed nations, unarmed and virtually alone, ready to defy military might, in the name of human dignity, freedom and self-respect. It was a privilege to be allowed to be with them during those fateful days. I came away convinced that if the Soviets would have applied full force to follow

up on their original plan of regime change, it would have resulted in a terrible bloodbath.

Would Western leaders have intervened? The leaders of the Baltic independence movements were under no such delusion. In the documentary film *Those Who Dare*,⁶ on Iceland's role during the Baltic independence struggle, James Baker, U.S. Secretary of State at the time, makes it absolutely clear that despite a lot of talk, Western military intervention on behalf of the Balts was never a serious consideration. They didn't do it in Budapest in 1956. They didn't do it in Prague in 1968. And it was never a serious option in Vilnius in 1991.

On January 16, 1991, the United States launched "Operation Desert Storm" to drive Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. It is neither the first nor the last time when oil has turned out to be potent motivation for action. The Soviet Union was an ally of Iraq. To the United States it was imperative that the Soviets would support, or at least not actively oppose, the U.S.-led operation. Soviet cooperation on that score depended on maintaining the Gorbachev partnership. And indeed, Gorbachev's Soviet Union voted in the UN Security Council in favor of the resolution to drive Iraq out of Kuwait—with force.

Why did the Soviets back off in the Baltics at the last moment? The tanks had started rolling. Special troops had occupied strategically important places, such as ministries and TV stations. There is no doubt in my mind why they gave up. The reason is the popular reaction: hundreds of thousands of unarmed people flocked onto the streets and confronted the tanks. If the Soviets had used armed force, it could have led to one of the greatest bloodbaths in postwar Europe—something for which Nobel Peace Prize holder Mikhail Gorbachev could not take responsibility. It would have meant the negation of everything for which he had stood so far. By stopping at the brink, Gorbachev saved his soul and his reputation. But at the same time the days of the Soviet Union were numbered. The reason why is that when the will to apply violence is weakened, it means the end of a police state. And that's what happened.

It was in the streets of the Baltic capitals that the hard truth was proven: the Soviet Union could only be kept together by force. From then on Western policy on the Baltic issue was in tatters. History has

taught us that when the power elite of a dictatorship or a totalitarian police state loses its appetite for violence, it is the beginning of the end.

Violence or the Rule of Law

After my “official” visit to the Baltic countries in January 1991 during the political upheaval, following the Icelandic Government’s agreement January 23 to “initiate talks concerning the possibility of strengthening diplomatic relations” with Lithuania, and after the Alþingi (Iceland’s national parliament) adopted a resolution on February 11, 1991 calling upon the Government to “bring this issue to a conclusion by establishing diplomatic relations with Lithuania as soon as possible,” the Soviet Government at long last showed its displeasure.

First they recalled their ambassador from Reykjavík for talks in Moscow. Then they delivered a strongly worded note of protest against the Icelandic Government’s alleged “interference into the domestic affairs of the Soviet Union.” Threats to terminate long-established bilateral trade treaties between the countries were repeated more than once to warn the strong shipowners’ lobby in Icelandic politics of the consequences of the government’s Baltic policy.

We decided to confront the issue, not only politically, but also on the basis of international law. I put together a team of legal experts (with an important input from Estonia) who produced a document, detailing the case of the illegality of Soviet occupation and subsequent annexation of the Baltic states. This was presented to the Soviet authorities on April 12, 1991.⁷

The argument was presented with reference to Soviet obligations under international law (specifically the Helsinki Final Act of 1975) and other major multinational treaties and precedents. We also reminded the Soviet government of the fact, that the Soviet Congress of People’s Deputies had itself already accepted the case by declaring the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 null and void December 24th. 1989.

Here are some key excerpts from the Icelandic legal case:

It is a well-recognized maxim of international law that no benefit shall be achieved through an illegal act. Refusal by the international

community to recognize illegal occupation and annexation is based on the utter condemnation of the use of force in contravention of international law. Even recent history shows that the international community will not recognize claims that such questions following illegal annexation fall solely within the domestic jurisdiction of the annexing state.

Turning to the situation in Lithuania, it can first be noted that the view that the occupation of Lithuania in 1940 was illegal has been confirmed in a decision of the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union on 24 December 1989.

Furthermore:

The incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union, which took place according to Soviet law at the beginning of August 1940, did not represent a voluntary association on a federal basis, but the seizure by force of foreign territory, i.e. an unlawful annexation under modern international law.

On the current situation it stated that

The government of Iceland attaches particular importance to the enactments of 11 March, 1990, restoring the independence of Lithuania and laying down a Provisional Basic Law (Constitution). Those pronouncements allow third states to regard the legal situation in Lithuania as one of continuity. Under this approach the enactments of 11 March, 1990 and their subsequent implementation provide evidence of fulfilment of the classical criteria of territory and population and, on the face of it, an indication of effective government.

Finally we put all this into the context of the changing political landscape, at the initiative of the Soviet Government itself:

The position of the Icelandic government towards Lithuania is to be viewed in the context of the profound changes in European relations which have taken place in recent years. In particular it should be viewed in the context of the democratic revolution that the European political landscape has undergone; a revolution rendered possible primarily by the policies of the Soviet Union.

Finally, the Icelandic government offered its services to act as a mediator between the democratically constituted governments of the Baltic countries and the Soviet government in settling the disputes.⁸

Needless to say, we never received any response from the Soviets to this sophisticated piece of scholarship.

On Gorbachev's Place in History

It should never be forgotten that Gorbachev's decision not to apply military force to maintain Soviet hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe made the peaceful ending of the Cold War possible. Gorbachev was a man of peace. For this he deserved the Nobel Peace Prize.

But in January 1991 he was on the verge of drowning the independence movements of the Baltic nations in a terrible bloodbath. At the last moment he stopped at the abyss and withdrew—again in the name of peace. By doing so he saved his soul and his place in history.

This is the reason why the man of peace, Mikhail Gorbachev—lauded as he is in the West—is less than loved in his beloved homeland, Russia. In the eyes of many Russians, who secretly share Putin's great power dreams, Gorbachev is denigrated as a loser—if not a traitor. He is said to be the man who lost everything that Soviet Russia, in the Great Patriotic War, had won through bloody sacrifices. He is blamed for not having prevented—by force if necessary—the dissolution and collapse of the Soviet Union. In the eyes of his critics at home, Stalin may have been a tyrant, but he made the Soviet Union a world power. Gorbachev may be a good man, but with this record they deny him any claim to greatness.

To those of us who do not share any dreams of (restoring) the Russian Empire, however, Gorbachev remains the man who made a more peaceful post-Cold War world possible.

Those examples of the role individuals play in history give occasion to compare the fate of two individuals who about the same time faced similar challenges: Chairman Mao's inheritor, Deng Xiaoping, and Stalin's last inheritor, Mikhail Gorbachev. Each came to power in totalitarian states as inheritors of bloody tyrants who had failed to alleviate the poverty of the people.

Deng Xiaoping began by improving the lot of the peasants, allowing them to sell their produce in the cities. Then he opened China up for foreign direct investment and technological transfers in experimental “free trade zones.” This limited approach worked. He started the most transformative economic revolution of all times, lifting hundreds of millions of Chinese from poverty to prosperity in the time span of a few decades. Like all Chinese leaders, he was in mortal fear of the dissolution of the Middle Kingdom. Economic reform, therefore, took precedence. Political reform had to wait—if it was ever to come. Hence the crackdown against student protests in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

Gorbachev preached both: structural reform (*perestroika*) and opening (*glasnost*). At home and abroad he was considered a missionary of democratic reform and freedom of expression. But despite a lot of talk of *uskorenie*—acceleration of the economy—it remained mostly empty words. He never managed to present nor implement a comprehensive plan for reforming the Union (or even the bloc). Is it possible to reform a totalitarian police state and a centralized command economy? It turned out that Gorbachev didn’t know how to do it. Instead of reform, Russians were exposed to political dissolution, economic chaos, shortages, insecurity and humiliation.

Yeltsin in post-Soviet Russia failed too. Democracy was stillborn, the economy ended up in freefall, the rule of law never took hold, corruption blossomed. Russia remained domestically weak and struggled internationally to refind the place it felt it was due among the other great powers and especially as an equal of the United States. This is why the revanchist policies of strongman Putin find such resonance with many Russians. But for the rest of us, Russia has again become a country that is by nature dangerous to its neighbors.

This is why Gorbachev’s legacy, great as it is, is less than fully appreciated in his home country.

Endgame: Dissolution of the Soviet Union

On August 19, 1991, a sequence of events started that culminated in the recognition by the international community of the restored independence of the Baltic states and the dissolution of the Soviet

Union. The scene began on the barricades in the streets of Moscow; it moved on to a modest ceremony in Höfði-House in Reykjavík less than a week later, on August 25. Five years earlier this modest villa—a former British Embassy in Reykjavík—had been the venue for the Reagan-Gorbachev summit that later turned out to have marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War. Now it was to be the venue for the recognition of the Baltic states' restored independence—a process that turned out to be unstoppable and irreversible. Let me briefly retrace the sequence of events:

- The attempted coup d'état in Moscow began on August 19.
- Two days later the North Atlantic Council met in Brussels. The meeting was held in the shadow of the attempted coup. When the proceedings started there was still some measure of uncertainty as to the question of success or failure of the coup. During an interval NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner was requested to try to reach direct contact with Boris Yeltsin in Moscow and report back to the meeting. Within less than an hour Wörner returned with the following message from Yeltsin: The coup had failed. He, Yeltsin, and the democratic forces were now firmly in control. Yeltsin urged the NATO foreign ministers assembled in Brussels to do everything in their power to *support the democratic forces* in the Soviet Union.
- After the interval it was my turn for an intervention. Again—just as in Copenhagen a year earlier—I set aside my prepared text. I appealed directly to my colleagues to give serious consideration to the totally changed situation. I reminded them that their former refrain, namely that nothing should be said or done that might undermine Gorbachev and bring back the hardliners, was no longer valid. The hardliners had already tried their hand and failed. President Gorbachev, who had clung to the sole remaining aim to keep the Soviet Union together at any cost under a new constitution—had also failed. The new leader was Boris Yeltsin. As president of the Russian Parliament he had already appealed to Russian soldiers not to use force against the unarmed population in the Baltic countries.
- The Congress of Peoples' Deputies of the Soviet Union had already declared the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact null and void. Thus, the

new Russian leader had acknowledged that the occupation and annexation of the Baltic nations into the Soviet Empire was illegal. The Baltic nations had borne the full brunt of Soviet imperial suppression, through repeated deportations and enforcement of a Russification policy. All this was in flagrant breach of the basic principles of international law and the code of conduct in interstate relations that was now in the process of being negotiated. We therefore had a moral obligation to insist on the restoration of justice for those nations, as well as other central and east European nations. The restoration of Baltic independence could be a powerful impetus for the restored independence of other nations that had been incorporated by force into the Soviet Empire.

If I remember correctly, the response to my speech was polite silence.

On my return home I “occupied” the Icelandic embassy in Copenhagen. For many hours and late into the night, I was in telephone contact with Reykjavík and the Baltic capitals. My message was simple: *In politics timing is everything.*

The time to act was right then, while there was power vacuum in Moscow and confusion reigned in the West. I issued formal invitations to the foreign ministers of the Baltic states to come to Reykjavík as soon as possible. There and then we would formally sign the relevant documents restoring full diplomatic relations between Iceland and the Baltic states and appointing ambassadors and general consuls on a mutual basis. This would soon, I argued, be followed up by others. Now was the moment to act resolutely for the sequence of events to gather momentum—*irreversibly.*

The Baltic foreign ministers—Lennart Meri of Estonia, Janis Jurkans of Latvia and Algirdas Saudargas of Lithuania—arrived in Reykjavík on August 25. On August 26 in Höfði-House the four of us signed the relevant documents and made brief statements on the significance of the event. The news had hardly been spread by international media before the invitations started to pour in: could the three foreign ministers—who formerly had been shown the door at all major gatherings of Western leaders—be persuaded to visit European capitals, as soon as possible, to repeat what had been done in Reykjavík? The process had become irreversible. For me that was “mission accomplished.” A few months later the Soviet Union had broken up.

The rest is history.

What Can be Learned From All of This?

Looking back over the timespan of more than a quarter of a century, what are the most important lessons to be drawn from the Baltic experience in the aftermath of regaining independence?

The lessons of history are deeply rooted in the psyche of the Baltic nations and their leaders. When the Second World War broke out, they were left alone and unprepared to deal with their fate. That is why after 1991 reinsurance against external threats was uppermost in the Balts' minds. Their aim was to consolidate their fragile independence by "returning" to the European family of nations.

This meant joining the European Union and NATO at the earliest possible opportunity.

During the crucial period of transition from a centralized command economy to a diversified market economy and from a totalitarian state to a pluralistic democracy,—it is invaluable if you can rely on positive external support. When formulating policy and making important decisions, Baltic leaders therefore had an overall guiding principle: Would this policy or that decision fulfill the entrance requirements for the EU and NATO, or not? On behalf of the democratic West this meant firmly rejecting the legacy of Russian imperialism in the form of "spheres of influence" or the so-called "near abroad."

The European Union is not merely a customs union or a free trade area. Its primary purpose, right from the beginning, was political: to prevent war and maintain peace in Europe. The nations of Europe voluntarily apply for membership but undertake the obligation to fulfill the entrance qualifications. They are ready to give up part of their formal sovereignty in order to share in the enhanced sovereignty of the Union itself.

As for the EU internal market, every member state is under the obligation to play by the same rules. The four freedoms of trade in goods, services, financial transactions and the labor market are meant to ensure a level playing field. A win-win situation, as Americans would put it.

Although the EU is not a military organization, nonetheless it provides the member states with the “soft power” projected by the most important player globally in international trade.

NATO, on the other hand, is a military alliance, open to democratic societies and providing them with collective defense and security vis-a-vis external threats. During half a century of Cold War, this U.S.-led military alliance for common security proved sufficiently strong to deter any aggression. *I bet it still can.*

This, to my mind, is the most important lesson to be learned from the Baltic post-independence experience. Right from the start, the political leadership stood united, across all political dividing lines, behind the long-term goal of joining both the EU and NATO.

Those ultimate goals enjoyed solid support among the majority of the populations. This unity of purpose gave their domestic politics—despite the political turmoil and social upheaval of the most difficult transition period—the internal discipline needed to push through and stand by difficult and unpopular decisions.

Whenever demagogues or populists wanted to take the easy way out, such moves could be averted if they conflicted with the declared purpose or undermined the capacity to fulfill the entrance qualifications. Steadfastness of purpose and long-term strategy, despite the social upheaval of the transition, helped all three Baltic nations to pull through. This has helped make the Baltic post-independence experience a success story.

Despite ethnic divisions, economic hardship and political strain, each of the Baltic states has managed to build functioning democratic institutions. They have shown the self-discipline required to fulfill the entrance qualifications of both multinational organizations, the EU and NATO. Their economies have successfully been integrated into the inner market of the European Union, including the euro. This has set them on their way of catching up with their more prosperous neighbors.

As fully-fledged members of the North Atlantic Alliance they have the full force of NATO behind them in standing up to hostile military threats to their security. This is a success story from which others can learn a lot.

Unfortunately, the Ukrainian political elite has failed utterly in securing and consolidating their newborn independence by implementing the structural reforms that would make them fit for membership in the Western alliance.

Now it is time that the Baltic leaders exert their influence within the EU and NATO in support of the Ukrainian people, who are engulfed in an existential crisis. They have the knowledge and the experience. They speak the language and share the experience of having had to cohabit with their overbearing neighbor. They are the experts. Now they have to share their post-independence experience with the Ukrainians on how to make the transition from totalitarianism to democracy—successfully.

Notes

1. The unabridged text of my CSCE conference speech in Copenhagen, June 5, 1990, can be found in Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, *The Baltic Road to Freedom—Iceland's Role* (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017).

2. The “Chicken Kiev” Speech is the nickname for a speech given by U.S. President George H.W. Bush in Kyiv on August 1, 1991, 3 weeks before the declaration of independence of Ukraine. It was 4 months before the December independence referendum in which 92.26% of Ukrainians voted to withdraw from the Soviet Union. In this speech Bush cautioned against what he called “suicidal nationalism.” Exactly 145 days after the speech the Soviet Union collapsed. The speech is said to have been written by Condoleezza Rice, later U.S. Secretary of State under president George W. Bush. It outraged Ukrainian nationalists. *New York Times* columnist William Safire called it the “Chicken Kiev” speech in protest at what he saw as its “colossal misjudgement,” very weak tone and miscalculation.

3. The text of this letter of April 26, from President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl to president Vitautas Landsbergis, is published in the 2011 printed edition of *Baltic Worlds*, pp 8–14, and in a special issue of the 9th Baltic Conference, June 2011.

4. First, the Baltic foreign ministers were shown the door at the CSCE conference in Copenhagen in June 1990. This offensive scene was repeated later that fall when national leaders were gathered for the adoption of the Paris Charter, in the French capital, on November 20, 1990. French foreign minister Roland Dumas, had invited his Baltic colleagues to present their case at the conference. But when the Soviets protested, Dumas capitulated. Again they were shown the door. Danish Foreign Minister Uffe Ellemann Jensen and I tried to make amends by inviting the Baltic ministers to meet the international press as our guests at the conference venue. That helped bring their message to a wider audience.

5. In the latter half of the 20th century Iceland, in an informal alliance with other small coastal states, extended its territorial waters (extended economic zone) in stages up to 200 nautical miles (1954–1976). Great Britain first responded with a trade embargo on Iceland in 1954. Then the Soviet Union intervened and negotiated a bilateral trade deal with Iceland, which gradually grew in importance. In 1958, 1972 and 1975–6 the British sent in the Royal Navy, trying to enforce their fishing rights in Icelandic waters. Iceland responded by guerilla warfare, cutting the gear from behind the British trawlers under the noses of her Majesty's commanders. Iceland won all three Cod Wars. The subsequent Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS) was a major step forward in protecting fish stocks and the ecosystem of the oceans.

6. The documentary film *Those Who Dare*, a cooperative Icelandic-Baltic project, tells the story of Iceland's involvement in soliciting support for recognition by the international community of the restoration of independence of all three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania: <http://axfilms.is/those-who-dare/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4UeJJxNKTe>.

7. In response to the Soviet government's protest notes on February 5 and 13, 1991 against Iceland's alleged "interference into the domestic affairs of the Soviet Union," I set up a legal team under the direction of Dr. Guðmundur Eiríksson, the head of the legal department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but with a valuable input from Mr. Clyde Kull, an expert from the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After intensive work and consultations the outcome was a position paper that I presented to the Ambassador of the Soviet Union, on April 12, 1991. Landsbergis later told me that this was, as far as he knew, the most thorough and convincing presentation of the legal arguments for the Baltic countries' rights for restored independence under international law. He also meant that it had been useful when Lithuanians were negotiating with the Soviets about the withdrawal of military forces from their territory.

8. The proposal that Iceland should offer its services as a mediator between the Soviet government and the governments of the Baltic countries striving for restoration of independence first came from Edgar Savisaar, Estonia's first prime minister post independence. In light of Iceland's active support for the Baltic countries' restored independence it is perhaps not surprising that the proposal did not appeal to the Soviet government.

