

Lucinda J. Thompson
Book Review
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Taming Nationalism? Political Community Building in the Post-Soviet Baltic States

by Dovile Budryte. Post-Soviet Politics Series; Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005; 233 pages. £55.00 ISBN 0-7546-4281-X

The author begins by stating, “this book is about finding ways to co-exist in ethnically diverse nation-states with painful pasts.” It is an analysis of political community building in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, emergent post-Soviet nations with aspirations to be recognised as democratic and liberal states with a common national identity. *Taming Nationalism? Political Community Building in the Post-Soviet Baltic States* looks at the attempts to apply such aspirations, showing how ideals such as minority rights, multi-culturalism, and tolerance of diversity come to be expressed practically in terms of policy. Looking in particular at policies concerning national language and citizenship, the author explores both external influences on and domestic responses to government decision-making in order to interrogate the belief that liberalisation of Baltic nationalising policies have come about thanks to the involvement of Western institutions (for example the European Union and NATO). From a survey of the three states’ nationalising policies through the years 1991 to 2002, Budryte concludes that international institutions and actors had a positive influence on the nationalising policies of the Baltic states, but also finds that there were unintended consequences which did not promote ethnic inclusion or state cohesion among such diverse communities.

This is a complicated topic covered systematically. The author begins with a survey of the literature on post-soviet Baltic nationalisms, and three chapters concerning Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are well-structured analyses of policies, outlining the challenges encountered by the states in their attempts to improve fluency in the national language and to liberally regulate citizenship. Language and citizenship policies seem somewhat banal choices of subject, but they present a useful focal point for the activities and interactions of government and external organisations, as well as easily showing the effectiveness of policies among citizens through statistical data. Each chapter is complemented by extensive and informative footnoting, and a concise conclusion which highlights comparisons and contrasts between states. This exercise could easily have been a bland analysis of policy development, but the author gives the reader a flavour of the complexities faced by decision makers, highlighting intricacies of the external involvement in domestic policy making.

This analysis is sandwiched between two chapters which frame the nationalisms of the three states in the context of a history of Soviet oppression, demonstrating how the Baltic states emerged with a pervasive perception of endangered nationhood. The consequence of this is conflicting pressures on the process of community building; external actors such as the EU and Russia have been keen for reassurance that the states are upholding the rights of minorities, whereas ethnic citizens, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, feel that concessions to minorities endanger their nationhood. This is particularly the case for Estonia and Latvia, whose largest minorities are Russians, natives of the former oppressive regime, and the focus of anti-Soviet nationalism. Budryte prudently begins his analysis by probing the extent to which the perception of Soviet oppression can be said to be accurate, and implicating its influence on Baltic nationalisms in the second chapter, “Nation Building or Nation Killing? Experiencing and Remembering Soviet Population Policies.” The main contention of this chapter is that outside observers have long concluded that Soviet policies did not suppress Baltic nationalisms, but rather inadvertently built them up, yet the Baltic states themselves perceive their history to have been one of national oppression, even genocide, under the Soviet Union. Budryte notes that, regardless of what observers think, the fact that Baltic nations hold this perception has reinforced a sense of insecurity which shaped their political community-building.

This is a sensitive chapter which neither denies nor confirms previous studies but emphasises the importance of historical narratives to everyday policy making.

At the end of the analysis of the three states, Budryte considers the commemoration of painful histories in Chapter 6, "Remembering the 'Soviet Genocide' in the Independent Baltic States." Budryte touches on a debate between those who would describe the mass deportations and repression as 'genocide' and those who were opposed to the use of such a term. One argument outlined challenges the centrality of nationalism to Soviet acts and instead frames it in terms of a class war. While Budryte's outline of the Baltic experience of the Soviet Union did not imply such a possibility, it would be interesting to consider how such an argument might interact with Budryte's wider discussion. Indeed, this is a chapter which raises several questions for further research, such as the extent to which outsider (particularly EU) involvement in the political community building of the Baltic states was a process which allowed for compromise and dialogue between the states and the EU. When states were reluctant to comply with EU requests to liberalise their policies, were they seen as disobedient children or was there room for compromise and understanding between two disparate points of view.

Budryte's comments on the Baltic commemoration of Soviet history suggest not. When outsiders criticised commemoration ceremonies for former SS Legionnaires,¹ Baltic states responded by weighing up the cost of their international status in return for concessions of national memory. The thought of negotiating with outsiders on the significance of this commemoration would perhaps have been too controversial. Budryte shows that openness to international influences has probably helped to liberalise Baltic history, but on the other hand, the Baltic states could as easily have been described as 'held to ransom' rather than open to suggestion.

This is a thread discussed throughout the book; that the motive behind liberalisation of political community building can be explained in terms of a desire to enter the EU and NATO. Budryte highlights, for example, that Latvia and Estonia only made concessions in their policies when they were fully assured of membership to those bodies. The implication of this depends on whether or not you believe in the utility of policy for encouraging cohesion within diverse nation-states. If policy promotes ethnic tolerance and cohesion, then the conditionality of Baltic membership into such organisations is beneficial. Alternatively, if other factors have a significant influence, such as collective memory of past injustices, then the conditionality of membership to the EU and NATO is counter-productive; disparate ethnic groups cannot be forced to harmonize through policy when discourses of collective memory reinforce perceptions of previous hardships and enmity between them. Budryte's work goes a long way towards opening up this debate for discussion; *Taming Nationalism?* is an original and interesting discussion of the complexities of the debate.

¹ The SS Legionnaires were recruited by Nazi Germany in WWII to fight against the Soviet Union, believing they were fighting for their own country, not for the Germans. As a result they are implicated in the crimes of the Holocaust, but their history in Latvia and Estonia is one of betrayal, humiliation and victimhood at the hands of the Soviets, part of the wider Baltic history.