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*Political culture in the Baltic States: with similar past is there a similar present?*

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1. ***Introduction.***

The three countries: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, also called “the three siblings” located on the shores of the Baltic sea share not only the geographical similarities, but also a common feature of being post-communist countries. As the Tõnis Saarts in his PhD thesis “The Sociological Approach in Party System Analysis: The Baltic States in the Central and Eastern European Context” stated, that the Baltic States share “the post-Soviet legacy with some peculiar post-colonial features (the mass immigration of the Russian-speakers, the dramatic experiences of the Soviet occupation, etc.)”[[1]](#footnote-0) With Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia having a big historical baggage, geographical closeness, similar effects on cleavage creation and governance, diverse traditions these three countries are a great area to analyse the political culture phenomena.

1. ***Transitional period in the Baltic States***

Being in the Soviet Union and having to put their national interests behind, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia decided to fight for their sovereignty. In 1980s civil resistance towards Soviet Union began, which was called the Singing revolution, a period between 1988 and 1991, when most of the demonstrations and rallies were organised against the Soviet Union. One of the major events happened on August 23rd of 1989, when people held hands and created a two million human chain through the three countries. The chain stretched for 600 km and made a clear point, that the Baltic States are against the repressions of the Soviets. After the fall of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the independence of the three countries: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were recognised on the 6th of September 1991 by the USSR. From that day, the transition period began, which was a total shock not only for the governments, courts, but also for the people. Dieter Fuchs, Edeltraud Roller and Bernhard Weßels (2013) argue, that since the countries declared independence “private ownership and multi-party systems have been restored and are functioning”. The authors claim, that since 1990 citizens from the Baltic countries have been attending fair parliamentary, municipal and presidential elections. Therefore, it shows the success of re-establishment of multi-party systems. Moreover, Dieter Fuchs, Edeltraud Roller and Bernhard Weßels (2013) state, that “over 80 percent of the businesses in the Baltics are managed by private owners”, all of the three re-introduced their national currencies and “restored their memberships in major international organizations.” Also, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia joined the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004.[[2]](#footnote-1) This means, that the countries took a liberal and democratic way and tried to cope with the past. According to Júlia Mező and Ágnes Bagi in their article “Crisis Management in the Baltic States” Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia followed a “SLIP recipe”, which stands for stabilization, liberalization, institution building and privatization.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Starting to build a new life, switch to democratic and liberal way of acting and thinking with having this important historical package and obvious will and expectations of the people in mind, was a challenge for all. The heritage, that the Soviets left was unbreakable. The Soviet political culture had its own features, which were not at all in correlation with the democratic ones. As Marju Lauristin, Peeter Vihalemm and Ivar Tallo claim in the article “The development of the political culture in Estonia” that Soviet political culture consisted of mythical or ritual behavior (which can not be explained by logical reasoning), messianism “a vision of saving all oppressed people of the world, a vision of the historically progressive nature of the Soviet system”, lack of tolerance to the ideas and values, the separation of the official and non-official opinions (as the authors calls it “Orwellian double-think and double-behaviour”), supreme providence, paternalism and “being directed from above”. Whereas the political culture in the democratic societies contains features such as: freedom and diversity of the ideas and political subjects, tolerance towards other opinions, people, opposition, high participation of the people in the political life, people's belief in the legitimacy of political institutions, stable rules and relations between the political actors and “political and interpersonal trust”. [[4]](#footnote-3) The difference between these two political culture concepts seems immense, therefore the Baltic countries had to figure out the appropriate transition, which would not only fit the possibilities of the countries, but at the same time break people's way of living and fulfill their initial will to be free.

1. ***Political cleavages in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia***

Looking at the historical background and the transitional path three of the Baltic countries took it is interesting to question how it determined the political culture of today and most importantly - the cleavages in society. The most distinctive summary about cleavages in the Baltic States was given by Tõnis Saarts in his PhD thesis “The Sociological Approach in Party System Analysis: The Baltic States in the Central and Eastern European Context”. The author argues, that there are five most distinctive cleavages in the Baltic countries, they are: ethnic, communist and anti-communist, socioeconomic, clerical and anti-clerical (as the author puts it “the state-church” divide), urban and rural. In this chapter I will be analysing as the author puts it “the major cleavages” (ethnic, communist-anti-communist divides) and some of their relations with the cleavages of the “secondary importance” (socioeconomic, clerical-anti-clerical and urban-rural).[[5]](#footnote-4)

Ethnic and communist-anti-communist divides ar the two major cleavages in the Baltic States. Regarding ethnic cleavage it is clear, that with soviet, german, polish occupations and many other historical factors the societies in the Baltic countries are diverse. As Peteris Zvidrins and Atis Berzins stated in their article “Dynamic of the ethnic structures in the Baltic countries in the 21st century”, that after the collapse of the Soviet Union “the directions and intensity of migration and natural movement of population” began. According to the authors the largest ethnic minority in the Baltics is Russians: “more than a half of the Russians residing in the region live in Latvia (about 550 thousand), 320 thousand in Estonia and about 170 thousand in Lithuania”. Because of this ethnic minority some of the cities, rural areas in the Baltics have a dominance of Russian language and environment. Even non-russian people use this language to communicate. It often creates a dissatisfaction among the native speaking citizens and a problematic view on integration. The authors state, that the second largest ethnic minority is the Poles:“ The great majority (more than 80%) of them reside in Lithuania, about 45 thousand in Latvia and only about 1,600 in Estonia”. Moreover, there are many belarusian, ukrainian, jewish, finnish and romanian people residing in the Baltic countries. Although the most used languages among the ethnic minorities are russian and polish, most of the people know the titular language.[[6]](#footnote-5) According to the Tõnis Saarts the ethnic cleavage is dominant in both Latvian and Estonian party systems. Although, in Estonia ethnic cleavage is considered to be related with the communist and anti-communist divide.[[7]](#footnote-6)

Communist and anti-communist divide is also one of the most distinctive cleavages in post-communist countries. The Baltic States are no exception. According to the Tõnis Saarts in his article “The ethnic - colonial communist legacy and the formation of the Estonian and Latvian party systems” with Latvia and Estonia having stronger relations between ethnic and communist-anti-communist cleavages, Lithuania`s situation is different. Communist and anti-communist cleavage continues to be the dominant one in Lithuania, but also it “cannot be associated with the ethnic cleavage or with strong anti-Russian sentiments”. The author claims, that the reason behind this phenomena is a smaller percentage of russian-speaking individuals living in Lithuania compared with other Baltic states. Nevertheless, the communist and anti-communist divide is one of the explanatory factors in Lithuania`s party politics. It reflects the “intra-elite conflict between the communist-successor party (Social Democrats) and nationalistic-conservative forces (Home-Land Union and other conservative right-wing parties).” Moreover, the cleavage apart from that it is not related to ethnic cleavage, but it is rather “reinforced by the clerical-anti-clerical devide”. This means, that the right-wing parties usually are identified as the anti-communist, religious parties, on the contrary to the left-wing parties.[[8]](#footnote-7) According to Tõnis Saarts PhD thesis “The Sociological Approach in Party System Analysis: The Baltic States in the Central and Eastern European Context” the communist-anti-communist cleavage in Lithuania is not only related to the clerical-anti-clerical divide, but also with the socioeconomic cleavage. Although, he stated, that this divide was of “the second importance in the Latvian and Estonian party politics”.[[9]](#footnote-8)

1. ***Trust, values of the society and party systems in the Baltic countries***

Regardless of the similar major cleavages, trust in institutions, values of the society and party systems are major components of political culture in the Baltic countries. This argument could be backed up by Liutauras Gudžinskas. The author stated in his article "Trends in confidence in public institutions: A comparative analysis of the Baltic countries" that the Baltic countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union managed to transform themselves into the liberal democracies and integrate “within the Western transatlantic community”. The author emphasizes, that all three states share similar structural features including: the size of a state, geographical location, economic model and many more, although they have some notable differences.[[10]](#footnote-9)

It is important to mention the trust of the governments and values in the society to truly understand political culture in the Baltic States and how the cleavages in the society influenced the mentioned features. Trust was largely analysed by Ostrom and Ahn. The authors claim, that in order to achieve collective action, there should be trustworthiness, institutions and networks. According to Liutauras Gudžinskas (2017) the civil society`s strength is portrayed in the high levels of social trust and egalitarian values. The author compares the trust in multiple areas such as legal system, police, army and overall security system. His compiled research show, that Estonia (from all the Baltic States) already had higher confidence in the state and order institutions in 1993. Lithuanians and Latvians score lower. Lithuania have lowest score in trusting courts and the army. The confidence in police does not have major differences in all the countries. This difference between Estonia and other Baltic countries could be linked to the Estonian government actions right after the regaining the independence. In Estonian first post-independent elections the government introduced sweeping anti-communist changes appointing new Supreme Court judges, trying the “economic shock therapy”, downsizing and simplifying the governmental machinery and “the deinstitutionalization of the whole system of public administration”.[[11]](#footnote-10) This helped not only to “shake off” the communist past, but also increase the trust in the institutions and jump start the transition for the democratic political culture. Liutauras Gudžinskas continues to analyse the trust and values in the Baltic States by taking the data from World Value Survey in 1990. The author emphasizes the summary of the German researcher Katrin Mattusch, which gives an understanding about the values in the Baltic States. She states, that in Lithuania people have more “traditional values in family life, are personalistically orientated, fairly authoritarian, have high demands of equality for the community, believe that one can achieve little in life and society by her-his efforts and are less disposed towards capitalist ideas of property and distribution.” Katrin Mattusch continues to recognise, that there is a slightly different position in Estonia. She claims, that “estonians are more secularised; they conceive family roles in less traditional way and display the individualistic, autonomous, and achievement - orientated understanding of their role in society”. The german researcher identifies Latvia as an “in between”, she states that the “culture is characterised by the mixture of different traditions”[[12]](#footnote-11)

Party systems are another important feature explaining the political culture of the Baltic States. Most importantly, because it explains the link between politics and the cleavages in society. Also, it could also correlate with trust and values of the society. According to Tõnis Saarts “the different regime legacies could lead to distinct cleavage configurations (and party systems).” The author claims, that Kitschelt proposed a theoretical approach on cleavages and party system formation in the post-communist countries. Saarts agrees with Kitchelt`s ideas, but sees the tendencies, which were missed. He states that Lithuania fits the framework of Kitschelt “as a mix of national-accommodative and patrimonial communism”. Although the author argues, that Estonia and Latvia have something different, because of the communist-anti-communist cleavage is related with the ethnic divide, weak left-wing parties and (as the author calls it) “the absence or marginality of the communist-successor parties”. Saarts considers that these factors makes the party competition “ideologically unbalanced and strongly inclined to the right”[[13]](#footnote-12)In another article “Nationalisation of Party Systems in the Baltic States and in Central Europe: A Comparative Perspective.” Tõnis Saarts continues to analyse the party systems in the Baltic States. He states, that in Estonia and Latvia the legitimacy of the communist regime was low. Therefore, the communist successor parties were unsuccessful. However, the situation is different in Lithuania. Even today one of the biggest parties, who have been in the parliament since 1992 is rooted from the former Communist Party.[[14]](#footnote-13)

1. ***Conclusion***

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are the three countries, who were strongly influenced by the communist regime. It not only made a huge impact on the countries` development, but also on their political culture. The transitional period, when the countries claimed their independence and finally stated their stance about sovereignty and national identities was a challenging time. Not only because the countries had to choose their way of politics, but also to transition from one political culture to another. As it is mentioned in the essay the communist political culture and democratic political culture truly were the opposites, therefore the transition was ever harder.

The political culture in the Baltic States could be analysed through their cleavages and their linkage with other prospects of the political culture. The major cleavages in the Baltic States are very similar due to the historical consequences. Ethnic cleavage and communist-anti-communist divide is distinctive in all the Baltic countries. It is interesting to note that the cleavages could give a beneficial context on the other political culture components especially trust, values of the society and party systems. The trust in the Baltic States varies. Especially, one can see a distinctive result in Estonia, where the trust in legal system, police and overall security is much higher than in Lithuania and Latvia. Moreover, the values in the Baltic States are also diverse. While Lithuanians are considered to be more traditional towards the family values, personalistically orientated, Estonians have more liberal views on the family formation and portray individualistic view on their role in society, lastly - Latvians are considered to have a mixture of the values, which would make them appear in the middle of Lithuania and Estonia. Moreover, not only trust and values, but also the party systems show particularities of the political cultures in the Baltic States. While Lithuania still has a quite strong left-wing party, Estonia and Latvia do not. This not only shows the consequences of the actions picked by the governments during the transitional period, but also reflects the major differences of political culture in the Baltic States.

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