

DECOLONISATION: BALTIC STATES AND AFRICA

An Essay Comparing the Post-Colonial Policies of the Baltic and African Governments

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Abstract The Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—were under the control of the USSR for almost fifty years between 1940 and 1991. This paper aims to compare the problems the Baltic states' governments faced after regaining their independence in 1991 to the problems faced by the governments of the newly-independent states in Africa after their independence in the 20th century. The paper draws parallels between four types of government policy—economics, foreign affairs, intergovernmental cooperation and settlers' rights. The paper argues that such similarities provide a basis for referring to the policies of the governments of the Baltic States in the 1990s as post-colonial. While this alone does not imply that the Soviet control of the Baltics was a colonisation process, it sheds light on the impact and perception of Soviet rule by the Baltic states and their citizens.

Keywords: colonisation, Baltic States, Africa, policies, post-colonialism, USSR

I. Introduction

While the Cold War era is often a topic of heated discussion, there is near-universal recognition of the fact that the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were illegally occupied by the USSR and never legitimately formed part of the USSR (Ziemele, 2005). Yet, there is another, lesser-researched perspective on the fifty years when the Baltic states were under the control of Moscow. Annus (2012) discusses how the Baltic diaspora in Western Europe and America has used the term “colonisation” to refer to the situation in the Baltic states since the 1960s, arguing that what started out as an occupation later became a colonial rule.

While the terms “colonisation” and “occupation” are often used interchangeably, it is important to differentiate between the two. According to Young (2016), “colonisation” refers not only to having control over a certain territory and its indigenous population but also to the relocation of communities loyal to the coloniser into the controlled land. While the occupying force is trying to gain control over land, people or riches, the colonising force aims to settle in another land for economic, religious or political gain.

Based on the premise that the Baltic states were colonised, it would appear that the Singing Revolution—the series of events in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including protests and human chains, which eventually led to the restoration of independence of the three Baltic states (Waren, 2012)—formed part of the decolonisation process. If we look at examples of decolonisation in other parts of the world, the process in Africa appears to be most similar the Singing Revolution. Both African decolonisation movements (Babou, 2010) and the Singing Revolution can be described as radical changes, with organised resistance against the colonisers, leading to independence. They both reflect wide-ranging societal transformations in which cultural identity played a key role, and both were reflected in those countries’ policy after independence (Mazrui, 1971; Waren, 2012).

This paper seeks to explore the extent to which the policies of the Baltic governments, after regaining independence, were similar to the post-colonial policies of African states. This paper will discuss the economic, foreign, interregional, and rights of settlers’ policies pursued by the governments in the two regions. The paper will then compare Baltic and African policies to show similarities between them in all four aspects mentioned above and argue that policy in the Baltic states in the 1990s can be described as post-colonial, just like in Africa.

The relevance of this paper is not limited to one field. Firstly, it is a history paper, exploring and comparing past historical events, their details and causes. Secondly, it is relevant in the field of postcolonialism or post-colonial theory. It examines how governments in Africa and the Baltics fought the problems that

emerged due to colonisers exploiting their lands, and tries to find similar patterns between the post-colonial policy of two countries located in different continents during different periods. Finally, this paper can contribute to the field of international relations, since if the Baltic states were colonised as opposed to occupied, this would change the way the relationship between the Baltics and Russia is perceived. At a time when Russia is trying to restore its imperial borders by waging a war against Ukraine, understanding the power balance Russia has with the countries that were previously under its control is crucial to ensure a lasting peace in Europe.

2. Economic Policy

Faced with underdevelopment of their newly-independent countries, and the fact that they remained economically reliant on their former European colonisers, the first leaders of the free African states promoted policies designed to make their countries' economies as self-reliant as possible. In that regard, the early post-independence period fundamentally differs from the rest of the African continent's history, as the main goal pursued by the leaders of the new states was economic sovereignty (Hormeku-Ajei et al., 2022).

In practice, that meant that most African countries diversified their trade partners and tried to rely on both NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries equally while officially maintaining the policy of non-alignment (Boutaleb, 2022). For example, despite Nigeria gaining independence in 1960 and joining the Non-Aligned Movement in 1964, the UK remained the largest importer of Nigerian products ten years later, accounting for 28.3% of Nigerian exports, down from 47.6% post-independence. Whereas USA and Eastern European countries increased their share of exports to Nigeria from 9.4% to 11.5%, and from 0.4% to 3.6% respectively. Exports to other West African countries also increased but only from 0.7% to 2.1%, showing that there was not enough regional trade to sustain the African economies and they were far from self-reliance (Akindele, 1986).

The process of achieving economic independence was often gradual, taking place in stages, with continued involvement of the former coloniser country in monetary processes. The speed of achieving this economic independence varied greatly. For example, Tunisia's local currency, the dinar, was established in 1958, two years after its independence from France (Rouine, 2022). Meanwhile, fourteen Central African countries still use the CFA franc, a currency pegged to the Euro, which was established when they were still colonies of France. Some economists describe these practices as "French monetary colonialism" (Gabor, 2019).

By comparison, the economic policies of the Baltic states after the restoration of independence were centred around market liberalisation—the transition from a centrally planned Soviet economy to the free-market capitalism of the West. The Baltic states liberalised their economies faster than all the other former USSR republics, which had a positive effect on inflation and foreign investment in these countries (Grennes, 1997). Despite the rapid reforms made to “westernise” the Baltic states, with all three governments setting the key goal of eventual membership to the European Union and NATO, Baltic states were not able to sever their ties with Russia (Paulauskas, 2006). In fact, even after Lithuania joined the EU in 2005, Russia remained both the largest exporter of goods to the country and the largest importer of Lithuanian goods (The World Bank, n.d.a). In both Latvia and Estonia, Russia was in the top five exporters and importers (The World Bank, n.d.b; The World Bank, n.d.c).

One of the most important Russian imports to the Baltic states in the 1990s was energy. For Russia, this represented an opportunity to deepen economic ties and the Baltic states’ reliance on it as their sole supplier of oil and natural gas (Paulauskas, 2006). At its peak in the early 2000s, Russia supplied 100% of natural gas and 90% of oil to the Baltic states (The Energy Information Administration of the US Department of Energy, 2005, as cited in Paulauskas, 2006). Such a monopoly would only start being questioned after the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Comparing the Baltic and African approaches to economic policy, it is clear that in both cases the newly-independent countries tried to sever or at least minimise their ties with the country that previously ruled over them. Yet, while African states’ main goal following their independence was economic self-reliance, the Baltic states instead pursued a change in allegiance from the USSR and Russia to the EU and NATO. Despite their difference in rhetoric, both African and Baltic countries ended up in the similar position of having to continue to rely on their former metropole for trade incomes. The low level of development in African countries made it impossible for them to limit the influence of superpowers, and they ended up relying on not one but multiple superpowers to sustain their economies. Although the Baltic states joined the EU and NATO, they decided not to try to find new trade partners, remaining at least partially dependent on Russia for both imports and exports. Economic policy in both post-independence Baltic and African states demonstrates the complex relationship they were forced to maintain with their former metropole. This complex dynamic is not only reflected in economics but also in their foreign policy.

3. Foreign Policy

African foreign policy cannot be imagined without the Non-Aligned Movement, a forum of countries that were not prepared to join either of the opposing camps in the Cold War. When the Cold War ended with the dissolution of the USSR, all African countries except for the apartheid regime in South Africa were members of this movement (Vats, 1991). Yet, despite its success, the Non-Aligned Movement was not enough for the newly established African states to establish strong international relations on their own. Few were able to achieve enough economic or political leverage to improve the position in the Western European sphere of influence, which they had inherited from the time of colonial rule. Indeed, the only real diplomatic relations that a recently-independent country had were those with its former coloniser (Darby & Paolini, 1994).

The extent to which each former metropole was willing to maintain relations with and assist their former colony was often critical in terms of whether the new country was able to enter the world stage and develop foreign relations with other countries (Hoskyns, 1968). For example, the leader of Tanganyika, Julius Nyerere, had to rely on British troops to suppress a mutiny of the nation's army just three years after its independence. On the other hand, the Ugandan government, facing similar problems, tried to appease the soldiers instead, which led to years of instability in the country (Parsons, 2003).

All three Baltic states proclaimed the renewal of their independence from the USSR in 1990. This was followed by referendums in February or March 1991 and, finally, the formal recognition of their independence in early September 1991 by the USSR following an attempted *coup d'état* in Moscow. Nonetheless, Soviet troops, who in late 1991 became Russian troops, remained on the territory of all three Baltic states. This became the first serious test of Baltic diplomacy, as the three governments tried to negotiate the withdrawal of foreign troops, which eventually happened in 1993 in Lithuania and 1994 in Estonia and Latvia (Bajarunas et al., 1995).

This was not the only foreign relations issue they faced. The border dispute between Russia and Latvia only ended in 2007 after significant resistance from Latvian nationalist movements (Lannin, 2007), while the border dispute between Russia and Estonia persists to this day. In addition to placing a permanent strain on Russian-Baltic relations, these circumstances also made it harder for the Baltics to integrate into the European political scene (Levinsson, 2006). The United States and Western Europe were wary of fully embracing the Baltic states in case this angered Moscow. In fact, despite one of the main goals of virtually every single government of every Baltic state since 1991 being their candidature to NATO,

this was not seen as plausible until 2001, when Russia softened its stance towards the then-theoretical expansion of the alliance (Kramer, 2002).

A common feature of Baltic and African states' foreign policies was the complicated relationship with their former ruler with whom they wished to sever ties, yet remained economically dependent. Following their independence, African states' only foreign relations were with their former metropole, on which they relied to become full members of the international community. Whereas, the Baltic states were forced to remain in dialogue with Russia to find diplomatic solutions to their complex disputes and its opinion on their bids to join the EU and NATO mattered greatly to Western European leaders. Both Baltic and African states struggled to separate themselves from the countries that had ruled over them just years before—particularly in the eyes of the international community. As a result, they had to maintain good relations with their former rulers to be able to establish a more independent foreign policy in the long term, irrespectively of whether their goal was to avoid taking sides in the Cold War—as was the case of African states—or becoming a member of one camp—as with the Baltics.

4. Interregional Cooperation

While joining large international organisations and playing an important role in global politics remained a long-term goal for the newly-independent nations, they began to integrate with one another very quickly. Pan-Africanism—the movement seeking to unite all peoples of Africa—has its origins in the late 19th century and is closely linked to the independence movements which led the way to the end of colonial rule in Africa. Following the independence of most African countries, cooperation between the different regions of Africa and across the whole continent became a priority for many African governments. In 1963, the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) was established by 32 African governments (Akinyemi, 1982). In 2002, OAU was succeeded by the African Union, which now comprises every single country in Africa (including four members which are currently suspended due to military coups) (The African Union, n.d.).

The OAU and the African Union became important forums for mediating conflicts and discussing the common problems faced by African countries. However, it was the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) spanning the entire continent, which became the lynchpin of their post-independence policy. The main goal of these organisations was to overcome the development hurdles faced by the newly-independent nations that could not be dealt with at the national level (Vanheukelom & Bertelsmann-Scott, 2016, as cited in Mlambo, 2020). Not only

that, but some RECs also played a crucial role in pressuring the governments of the subregion in cases of violation of civil rights. For example, the South African Development Community helped the process of ending the apartheid in South Africa (Mlambo, 2020).

Cooperation between the three Baltic states started even before the formal declaration of independence, as the three organisations that would lead the transitional governments—the Latvian Popular Front, Sajudis of Lithuania and the Popular Front of Estonia—coordinated protests and acts of civil disobedience among themselves. Perhaps the most well-known event of the Singing revolution was the Baltic Way: a public demonstration in which around two million people from all three Baltic states formed a human chain that spanned more than 600 kilometres and connected the three Baltic capitals, Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn (Egļitis & Ardava, 2012).

Right after the renewal of independence, in late 1990, the three Baltic states formed the Baltic Assembly, which has since become an effective instrument in tackling common problems, including the withdrawal of Russian troops, the harmonisation of legislation after the Baltics entered the EU and the improvement of the situation at the borders between the three states. Among the Baltic states, Latvia, which is geographically positioned between the other two Baltic states, became the most active supporter of further interregional cooperation and considers further Baltic cooperation as a national priority on par with joining the EU and NATO (Kapustans, 1998).

The policies of interregional cooperation adopted in Africa and the Baltics bear many similarities. In both regions, the origins of cooperation were created even before achieving independence, with African movements promoting the idea of Pan-Arabism into mainstream politics and Baltic movements cooperating and fighting the Soviet regime together. Such cooperation may have contributed to the success of independence movements, and continued to be a priority for the newly-established states. After achieving independence, regional organisations were created in both Africa and the Baltics not only to promote the unity of the regions but also to decide on common important issues. One such issue being the rights of the people who resettled in these countries during their colonial periods.

5. Rights of Settlers

The question of citizenship rights of the white settler minority in the newly-independent African countries has divided the continent. Unlike in European colonies in the Americas and Australia, settlers in Africa never managed to become the

majority of the population. In British colonies of Western Africa, automatic citizenship was only given to people who were citizens of the United Kingdom and colonies, whose parents were born on the territory of the former colony (Manby, 2016). By contrast, the British colonies in East, Central, and Southern Africa developed nationality laws that made it easy for the white settlers to become citizens of the independent countries, including *jus soli* laws inherited from colonial times. This was in part a consequence of the white minority successfully gaining the right to self-government prior to independence (Babou, 2010).

According to Annus (2012), ethnic Russians who migrated to the Baltic states during Moscow's fifty-year control are one of the reasons why the Soviet rule in Baltic states can be classified as colonial. The USSR adopted a policy to change the ethnic composition of the Baltic states by force. In the first years of occupation, 10% of the entire adult population of the Baltic states were deported to other republics of the USSR—mostly Siberia—or sent to Gulags (Sander, 2022). Ethnic Russians, on the other hand, including thousands of families of Soviet troops stationed in the countries, were encouraged to migrate to the Baltics. As a result, by the time that the Baltics renewed their independence, the proportion of ethnic Estonians in Estonia had fallen from 88% in 1939 to 62%, and that of ethnic Latvians in Latvia from 76% to 52%. The proportion of ethnic Lithuanians in Lithuania remained almost unchanged, thanks to higher birth rates of ethnic Lithuanians and its bigger population (Driessen, 1994; Paulauskas, 2006).

The Baltic states insisted on the principle of continuity of sovereignty after the renewal of independence and therefore found no reason to recognise the people who migrated to the countries during Soviet rule. Latvia and Estonia created a special status of “non-citizens” for people who were not and whose ancestors were not their citizens before the Soviet invasion (Driessen, 1994). Non-citizens are not able to vote or stand for office and lack other rights available to the citizens of Latvia and Estonia. The governments of both countries continue to receive criticism from international organizations and human rights groups relating to the non-citizen status, yet outside of the countries' Russian-speaking minorities, there is little will to abolish it (Alijeva, 2017).

In the aftermath of regaining their independence, whether or not settlers should have the right to become citizens of the newly-independent nations was a highly controversial question in the Baltic states because of how radical the solution of “non-citizenship” was. Although none of the newly-independent African states adopted a similar policy, West African states colonised by the United Kingdom did require settlers to have a parent born on the territory of the former colony in order to automatically grant citizenship. This restriction meant that all the first-generation settlers had to either return to the United Kingdom or go through

a process of naturalisation, as in the Baltics. Furthermore, many African states were quick to tighten their nationality laws in the years following their independence to remove the *jus soli* rights remaining from colonial times.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to reveal the extent to which the policies of the Baltic governments after regaining independence were similar to the post-colonial policies of the African states. First, it studied the economic policies of the Baltic and African states. While the goals of the countries in each region differed, they were aligned in struggling to cut the economic ties they had to their former rulers. Next, it explored foreign policy, where a similar dilemma arose: the newly-independent states in both regions remained dependent on the countries that had subjugated them, and the international community was not ready to accept and integrate the new states without the permission of the former metropole. Both the Baltics and the African states saw regional cooperation as a priority, and both used this cooperation as a means to help one other and tackle their common problems. Finally, both regions faced the question of how to deal with the settlers who had entered their countries prior to their independence. While restricting the right to automatic citizenship for settlers was more of a priority in the Baltic states, African states also made some attempts to do.

This paper does not seek to decide whether the Soviet control of the Baltics was a colonisation or an occupation. Rather, it shows the impact that the Soviet rule had on the Baltic countries and the people living in them. While newly-independent African countries and the Baltics often had different goals, especially in the long term, the dilemmas they faced and the ways they struggled with their former colonisers were remarkably similar. Despite the difference in the time period, the size of the countries, the length of the colonial rule and the history preceding it, newly-independent states in the Baltic and African regions experienced similar issues.

This topic is as important as ever to the fields of political science and international relations. Viewing Moscow's rule in the Baltic states through the lens of colonisation could significantly change perceptions of Russia and its conflict with other Eastern European countries. As Ukraine fights for its independence and future, exploring the colonialist and imperialist elements of Russia's stance on Eastern Europe could be essential to achieving long-standing peace based on the rule of law to the region. This paper demonstrates that such elements were present in the 20th century, when Russia—as the USSR—controlled the Baltic states, and are

likely to emerge once again in the 21st century if Russia is allowed to encroach on Ukraine's territorial sovereignty.

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