

BEYOND “CAUTION, PRAGMATISM AND CYNICISM”? FRANCE’S RELATIONS WITH THE EASTERN BALTIC IN TIMES OF CRISIS (1918–1922; 1988–1992)

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ABSTRACT

France’s relations with the small states in the Eastern Baltic have been the object of studies focusing mostly on geostrategic elements. Seen through that lens, France appears to concentrate mostly on supporting Russia as a stabilizing force in the Baltic, with little interest in the claims of small states. But there are other elements shaping France’s policy towards these small states, elements that this article will present and that allow for a more varied view of French policy towards Finland and the Baltic states.

Keywords: France, Finland, Baltic states, international relations, 1918–1920, 1988–1992

France’s relations with Eastern Europe have been the object of a long list of historical studies, most of which have concentrated on geostrategic elements linked to the German issue.¹ As France was engaged in an existential struggle with Germany right up to the 1951 Treaty of Paris, it regularly looked to Russia or the Soviet Union as a balancing force to guarantee imperial stability.² In this context, small states and national groups were

¹ A few exceptions have worked to also consider other levels of explanation, for example Isabelle Davion, *Mon voisin, cet ennemi. La France face aux relations polono-tchécoslovaques entre les deux guerres* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2009); Frédéric Dessberg, *Le triangle impossible. Les relations franco-soviétiques et le facteur polonais dans les questions de sécurité en Europe, 1924–1935* (Bruxelles: PIE-Peter Lang, 2009).

² See Anne Hogenhuis-Seliverstoff, *Les relations franco-soviétiques, 1917–1924* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, IHRIC, 1981). Three important moments bear witness to this tendency: the Franco-Russian alliance between 1893 and 1917, the 1935 Franco-Soviet treaty, and the post-1944 contacts between Charles de Gaulle’s government and the Soviet Union. At these three moments, the French obviously tried to find a counterbalance to Germany in Eastern Europe.

seen as potentially destabilizing, and the post-1871 French leadership was reluctant to recognize national claims in Eastern Europe.³ In the early twentieth century, this reluctance spread from conservative to moderate Republican circles – the journalist and thinker Jacques Bainville illustrated it well in 1917, denouncing the birth of unreliable little nationalities ready to dismantle Eastern Europe’s old imperial structures.⁴ While some of these nationalities were seen as having strong claims to historical legitimacy (mostly because they were old partners of France, like Poland), others were described as destabilizing accidents of history. Nowhere else is this tradition as strongly expressed as in Albert Sorel’s influential *L’Europe et la révolution française*, published between 1885 and 1904, where Sorel portrayed France’s ideal foreign policy as one of European stability, and criticized the Third Empire’s adventurous support for European national movements.

This uneasiness with Eastern European national claims seems at first sight to dominate French policy up to the end of the Cold War. This is

³ Georges-Henri Soutou, “La France et le problème des nationalités pendant la guerre de 1914–1918: le cas de la Serbie”, *Balkanica*, XLV (2014), 369–398.

⁴ Nationalities and the right to self-determination constituted for Bainville the facets of a “democratic” phenomenon he saw as the principal cause of instability and war in Europe (cf. Yaël Dagan, “Jacques Bainville en première guerre mondiale”, Olivier Dard, Michel Grunewald, *Jacques Bainville, Profils et réceptions* (Genève: Peter Lang, 2010), 71–86). For Bainville’s 1913 articles on Polish and Ukrainian “separatism”: Dominique Decherf, *Bainville, l’intelligence de l’histoire* (Paris: Bartillat, 2000), 126; Jacques Bainville, *Les conséquences politiques de la paix* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1920), 130; *Les petits États face aux changements culturels, politiques et économiques de 1750 à 1914, 16e Congrès international des sciences historiques, Stuttgart, 25 août-1er septembre 1985*, ed. by Domokos Kosáry (Lausanne: Faculté de lettres, 1985), 13. Bainville epitomized a rich intellectual tradition of contempt towards “small states”, borne out in various contexts of concerns for European stability or a rejection of nationalism. Examples of that trend can be found in France and Britain, from H. G. Wells (cf. the author’s *Anticipations of the reaction of mechanical and scientific progress upon human life and thought* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1902), 260) to E. H. Carr (*The 20 years’ crisis, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), vii), François Delaisi (Franck Théry, *Construire l’Europe dans les années vingt, l’action de l’Union paneuropéenne sur la scène franco-allemande, 1924–1932* (Genève: Institut européen, 1998), 54) to Peter Hitchens’ ravings about “annoying mini-states on the borders of Russia” (“As Ukrainians force Russians to turn their back on their language and change their names, I ask, is this the world’s most absurd city?”: *Mail Online: Peter Hitchen’s blog*: <<http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2010/09/as-ukrainians-force-russians-to-turn-their-back-on-their-language-and-change-their-names-i-ask-is-th.html>> (accessed 20 May 2015). Julien Gueslin gathers a few arguments on both sides of the debate concerning small states in his article: “Les petits états dans l’Entre-deux-guerres. Un concept en evolution”, *Bulletin de l’Institut Pierre Renouvin*, 11 (2001).

particularly true if one considers small states in the Eastern Baltic,⁵ as pointed out by Latvia's former Foreign Minister Sandra Kalniete, who in 2010 described French President François Mitterrand's attitude towards Baltic independence as predominantly "cautious, pragmatic, and cynical".⁶ In 1918 as in 1990, Baltic nationalism appeared to herald the prospect of inherently weak and troublesome small nations to the east of Germany.⁷

However, in times of momentous change, France could also officially recognize and support the states based on those troublesome nationalities. Paris recognized Finland in January of 1918, less than a month after the country's declaration of independence, and recognized Latvia and Estonia in January of 1921, and Lithuania in December of 1921.⁸ Aristide Briand's contribution to the recognition of Estonia and Latvia earned him a street named in his honour and a memorial plaque, both in Riga. After France's intervention projects in Russia ran their course, the 1920's saw a stabilization of relations with the new Eastern Baltic states, both at the diplomatic level and in their image in French society – while Finland was associated with Scandinavia, the Baltic nations were reincarnated as promising "little Denmarks". At another point in time, Mitterrand quickly withdrew his bet on Gorbachev and became the first Western president to visit the newly independent Baltic states in 1992.⁹ At both points in time, large sections of French society, the press, political and diplomatic circles agitated on behalf of small, oppressed nationalities. Historical memories,

⁵ For the purpose of this article, the Baltic States will be defined as the grouping of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The text will also consider Finland as well in the context of the early 1920's – as a neighbour to Soviet Russia, Finland was often bunched by the French in the same thematic aspects as the three Baltic states (intervention in Russia, stabilization of the Eastern Baltic, German influence).

⁶ "Piesardzība, pragmatisms un cinisms – tā es raksturotu Miterāna attieksmi pret Baltijas valstu neatkarību," quote in Sandra Kalniete, "Rietumvalstu nostājas maiņa Baltijas valstu neatkarības atzīšanas jautājumā", presentation during the seminar 1990. gada 4. maija *Latvijas Neatkarības deklarācija: starptautiskie un iekšpolitiskie aspekti*. Riga: Latvian University, 3 May 2010.

⁷ This can also be observed in the Ukrainian case: Olga Alexandrova, "Ukraine and Western Europe", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 20 (1996), 145–170.

⁸ Cf. Louis Clerc, *La Finlande et l'Europe du Nord dans la diplomatie française – relations bilatérales et intérêt national dans les considérations finlandaises et nordiques des diplomates et militaires français, 1917–1940* (Brussels: PIE-Peter Lang, 2011); Julien Gueslin, *La France et les petits États baltes: réalités baltes, perceptions françaises et ordre européen, 1920–1932*, Thèse de doctorat en histoire sous la direction du professeur Robert Frank (Université Paris I, 2004).

⁹ Speech by the President of Latvia Vaira Vīķe Freiberga during the Seminar on Baltic Integration in the EU, Paris, October 2, 2002: Latvijas Valsts prezidents, <http://www.president.lv/pk/content/?art_id=1439> (accessed 20 August 2016).

representations, cultural values or the vagaries of domestic politics were allowed to interfere with the iron logic of geopolitics.

This article aims to make sense of these contradictory policy dilemmas by exploring various levels in French decision-making linked to Finland and the Baltic states at two critical junctures in time. Besides the cases under study, the methodological point this article would like to make concerns the necessity of observing decision-making as a mix of geostrategic considerations and the workings of complex societies.¹⁰ Both of the moments we will study (Finland's and the Baltic states' independence in 1918; the Baltic states' reacquisition of independence in 1988–92) are situations where structural constraints relax, the range of choices suddenly expands, new actors emerge, and structures are allowed to evolve.¹¹ Both allow us to look at long-term developments (in this case mostly long-term geopolitical constraints on France's Baltic considerations) and consider possible new elements shaping French reactions. Set in a longer chronological frame, these two points of comparison might provide ways of nuancing the idea of an instinct for stability in French diplomacy: if the logic of Franco-Russian relations and French conservative instincts served as strong incentives for France to take action,¹² our study would also like to emphasise the international context framing France's policy options, and, in the meanders of France's domestic policy, the role of networks, contacts, personalities, values, representations and historical memory.¹³

¹⁰ Studying the United States' relations with Finland, Michael Berry has already noted that there would be no reason at all to study the foreign policies of small states if geography and the politics of Great Powers alone actually determined the fate of international relations: Michael R. Berry, *American foreign policy and the Finnish exception, ideological preferences and wartime realities* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1987), 375.

¹¹ Giovanni Capoccia, R. Daniel Kelemen, "The study of critical junctures: theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism", *World Politics*, 59:3 (2007), 341–369.

¹² Cf. Georges-Henri Soutou, "La France face aux crises des périphéries européennes aux XIXe et XXe siècles: une grande puissance en retrait", *La France face aux crises et aux conflits des périphéries européennes et atlantiques du XVIIe au XXe siècle*, ed. by Eric Schnakenbourg and Frédéric Dessberg (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), 47–56.

¹³ This article draws on a general conception of foreign policy as the product of calculations and decisions rooted in international and domestic contexts, not unlike Graham T. Allison's Foreign Policy Analysis as summarized in *Politique étrangère, nouveaux regards*, ed. by Frédéric Charillon (Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 2002), 33–64. But the main theoretical and methodological environment of this work is the body of reflections organized around Pierre Renouvin's and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle's school of International History. This methodology, in a general framework consisting of states and decision-making organizations, allows foreign policy decision-making to be considered as the result of both deeply rooted structures and the interpretations of

International relations as a frame for France's actions

Two important elements of France's relations with nations in the Eastern Baltic in 1917–20 were on the one hand the competition with Germany, and on the other hand the debates over nationalities and self-determination. 60 years later though, the Cold War's bipolarity and European integration were the main structures affecting policy. France itself, as an international actor, was a different nation in the early 1920s and in the late 1980s.

Following the truce of November 1918, most French really did see their country as both the main victor and the main victim of the war. As compensation for its war efforts, and as a guarantee of its security, France considered it an urgent necessity to expand its influence in Europe – especially in regions where Germany had been dominant or where France had mostly played the role of a distant mediator,¹⁴ such as Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea.¹⁵ Before the war, those regions had mostly been peripheral to France's vision of its immediate strategic interests,¹⁶ but they suddenly came into focus as victory on the Western Front brought governmental leaders, intellectuals, and businessmen to believe in new possibilities for

these structures by various actors, official and non-official. As this method is above all a method of historical studies, it allows the researcher to factor in the fickleness of historical events and the role of random interactions. For the latest reflections in this field, cf. *Pour l'histoire des relations internationales*, ed. by Robert Frank (Paris: PUF, 2012). Going in the same direction, and conveniently written in a language corresponding to the unwritten norms of current academic debates: T. G. Otte, "Diplomacy and decision-making", *Palgrave advances in international history*, ed. by Patrick Finney (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 36–51.

¹⁴ Cf. Xavier Fraudet, *Politique étrangère française en mer Baltique, 1871–1914*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis 77 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2005), 240–255.

¹⁵ France was concerned not only by Germany's influence but also by that of Britain. Abdil Bicer, for example, draws an interesting portrait of the subdued rivalry between France and Britain in the Ottoman Empire immediately after the Armistice: Abdil Bicer, "Le service de renseignement, outil de la politique orientale de la France au lendemain de la Grande Guerre", *Revue Historique des Armées*, 3 (2003), 77–89.

¹⁶ Economically but also politically, the Baltic region remained a periphery of France's diplomacy between 1900 and 1918. France's competitors dominated the region, and it was little known in Paris. Here France acted mostly as a distant – if at times active – mediator. Cf. *La position internationale de la France: aspects économiques et financiers, XIXe–XXe siècles*, ed. by Maurice Levy-Leboyer (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 1995), 43–45; Louis Clerc, "Un médiateur lointain. La diplomatie française et les États nordiques (1900–1940)", *Les horizons de la politique extérieure française, Stratégie diplomatique et militaire dans les régions périphériques et les espaces seconds (XVIIe–XXe siècles)*, ed. by Frédéric Dessberg and Eric Schakenbourg (Bruxelles: PIE Peter Lang, 2011), 313–326.

expanding France's influence.¹⁷ Methods were conceived in the context of the options available to France and what was acceptable in the early twentieth century: cultural influence was important, but direct intervention in the economic, military, and diplomatic sense was clearly envisaged.¹⁸ Goods and alliances were supposed to follow the flag, a general approach strengthened by four years of war and the development of France's armed forces as integral parts of foreign policy decision-making.¹⁹ Security was seen as resting on a mixture of military might, economic preponderance, and strong alliances. But France in 1918, for all its glory, was also a weakened and indebted nation: lack of resources and a general state of exhaustion found their expression only a few months after November of 1918 in the National Assembly's budgetary discussions.²⁰ France had to tighten its belt, and the 1919 Paris Peace Conference was a long exercise in compromise for French leaders constrained by the influence of allies and creditors.²¹

France's action was also marked by discussions on the "national question" and more specifically small nationalities in Eastern Europe. In January of 1918, US president Woodrow Wilson clearly spelled out his goals for the post-war world, including in them the restoration of Poland as a state and some consideration for the claims of Eastern European nationalities. This US attempt to shape the debate on peace terms found only lukewarm support in France.²² On the specific issue of nationalities, French diplomats were not entirely convinced that European equilibria and the susceptibilities of imperial powers could be so easily gambled with, even in the

¹⁷ For instance, *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, tome IV, vol. 2 (Paris: PUF, 1980), 730.

¹⁸ Kalervo Hovi, "The Baltic states and the French economy in the 1920s", *Emancipation and interdependence: the Baltic states as new entities in the international economy, 1918–1940*, ed. by Anders Johansson, Kārlis Kangeris, Alexander Loit and Sven Nordlund, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia, 13 (Uppsala, 1994), 35–39.

¹⁹ Cf. *Bâtir une nouvelle sécurité – La coopération militaire entre la France et les États d'Europe centrale et orientale de 1919 à 1929* (Paris: CEHD/SHAT, 2001).

²⁰ Hogenhuis-Seliverstoff, *Les relations franco-soviétiques*, 111, 132–140.

²¹ Cf. David Stevenson, *French war aims against Germany, 1914–1919* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Peter Jackson, "Politics, culture, and the security of France: a reinterpretation of French foreign and security policy after the First World War", *French Historical Studies*, 34:4 (2011), 577–610.

²² Georges-Henri Soutou especially underlines the reluctance of the diplomat Philippe Berthelot, the main architect of France's answer to Wilson's 14 points: Georges-Henri Soutou, Ghislain de Castelbajac, Sébastien de Gasquet, *Recherches sur la France et le problème des nationalités pendant la première guerre mondiale (Pologne, Lithuanie, Ukraine)* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne, 1995).

case of Poland.²³ But France did not distance itself from the emergence of a “juridical internationalist” conception of international relations, which was about to reach maturity in the context of the 1920s and the League of Nations.²⁴ For some French publicists and politicians, the liberation of “oppressed nationalities” was a question of principle already in 1917: personalities from the republican moderate Left with an interest in international affairs and foreign cultures (Henry Franklin-Bouillon, Albert Thomas, Léon Bourgeois, *etc.*) defended small European nationalities in the name of justice but also out of a conception of France’s historical mission: victorious France, daughter of the 1789 Revolution, naturally had to act as the defender of the oppressed.²⁵

But even the most convinced defenders of small nations tended to regard as worthy of consideration only those “historical nationalities” they saw as being sufficiently developed, well established, and presumably Francophile. This essentially included Poland, Bohemia, Romania, and what would after 1918 become the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.²⁶ The favoured status of these “historical nationalities” eventually crystallized into a policy of support for a narrowly defined group of countries in Eastern Europe. Generally, most French, whether agitators for “oppressed nationalities” or conservative diplomats, saw becoming a nation with rights to sovereignty that were worth defending as a progressive construct, the result of historical maturation towards viable statehood – not the right to immediate realization of an affirmed national “nature”. From this point of view, Finland and the Baltic states, peripheral, comparatively “young”, and suspected of pro-German leanings, only barely made the cut.

In this respect, however, Finland had managed to anchor itself on the French map of Europe as a real nationality, oppressed by Russia but nonetheless developed and active. The Baltic states, on the other hand, were up to 1918 considered (in the words of Julien Gueslin) a “grey area”.²⁷ History and culture seemed to weigh on the side of Finland as an autonomous part of the Russian empire, whereas the Baltic states were seen in a more

²³ Cf. John Thompson, “Wilsonianism: dynamics of a conflicted concept”, *International Affairs*, 86:1 (2010), 27–47.

²⁴ For the term and the phenomenon, cf. Jackson, “Politics, culture, and the security of France”, 578.

²⁵ In the last volume of his monumental *Histoire de France*, written in 1922, Ernest Lavisse presented a messianic image of France as the protector of nationalities.

²⁶ Cf. István Bibó, *La misère des petits États d’Europe de l’Est* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), 140.

²⁷ For a comparison between the two, see Clerc, *La Finlande et l’Europe du Nord*, 25–57 and Gueslin, *La France et les petits États baltes*, 37–48.

ambiguous way: Lithuania certainly had historical credentials, but Latvia and Estonia were seen as natural parts of the Russian whole.

In the context of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, France's decision-making thus tended to oscillate between caution and support under quickly changing circumstances. Taken in the feverish atmosphere following Lenin's coup, the decision to recognize Finland's independence in January of 1918 seemed to rekindle the idea among the French leadership of some nationalities as potential poles of stability, this time against chaos in Russia. Discussions were a mix of suspicion towards wayward national groups, reflections concerning Finland's national worthiness, and hopes that these seemingly solid nationalities could be used to stabilize some parts of the Russian empire.²⁸ After 1918–22 and up until the second half of the 1920s, a policy of containing the Bolshevik danger in Russia drew the French yet closer to the Baltic states: this is the moment when these states were allowed to come into view as important parts in the bulwark against bolshevism, small worthy members of the European community. Only in this geopolitical context will the idea of the Baltic states as “old nations” be allowed to overcome a representation of them as “ephemeral phenomena” soon to be reintegrated into the Russian sphere.²⁹

In 1988–92, the international environment in which France took foreign policy decisions had deeply changed.³⁰ Interwar multipolarity had been replaced by the Cold War's superpower competition. Even though Charles de Gaulle had tried to challenge this bipolarity, France lacked both hard

²⁸ Cf. Louis Clerc, “Louis Raynaud et la reconnaissance de l'indépendance finlandaise par la France, 1917–1918”, *“Muille maille vierahille...” Kalervo Hovi ja yleinen historia*, ed. by Esa Sundbäck (Turku: Turun Historiallinen Yhdistys, 2002), 221–241.

²⁹ This is well demonstrated by Gueslin, *La France et les petits États baltes*, 554–616.

³⁰ For general elements of Franco-Baltic relations during the early 20th century, cf. Clerc, *La Finlande et l'Europe du Nord*; Gueslin, *La France et les petits États baltes*; Xavier Fraudet, *Politique étrangère française en mer Baltique (1871–1914), De l'exclusion à l'affirmation*, Acta Universalis Stockholmiensis 77 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2005); Suzanne Champonnois, “The Baltic states as an aspect of Franco-Soviet relations 1919–1934: a policy or several policies?” *Contact or isolation? Soviet-Western relations in the interwar period*, ed. by Alexander Loit, Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia 8, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1991), 405–413. For general elements of France's reactions to the crumbling of the Soviet Union and the Baltic States' 1991 return to independence, cf. Frédéric Bozo, *Mitterrand, la fin de la Guerre Froide et l'unification allemande: de Yalta à Maastricht* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005). Suzanne Champonnois has written one of the few articles on French policy toward the Baltic question during the Cold War: Suzanne Champonnois, “French policy towards the Baltic states, 1939–1991, from abandonment to reunion”, *The Baltic question during the Cold War*, ed. by John Hiden, Vahur Made, David J. Smith (London: Routledge, 2008), 84–99.

and soft power to succeed in truly shaking off the effect of the East-West divide, and had to contend with its new status as a “middle power”.³¹ That new status meant that France did not have the capacity to act in this new period of changes as it had acted after the First World War. The structures created by European integration also had a significant effect: France's relations with Germany gradually made the two countries key allies and partners, even though France took a cautious stand towards German reunification and agreed to it only in the context of a restructured and strengthened European Union.³² A more structured apparatus of conflict resolution, the development of multilateral diplomatic instruments and international organizations also framed France's reactions to new developments.

Finally, new norms and values had emerged, shaped by the rise of international laws and standards, decolonization in the 1950's and 1960's, and the emergence of a vigorous discourse on human rights in the 1970's and 1980's.³³ All these developments played in favour of the Baltic states, the status of which had evolved since the post-1918 period: the three Baltic states now existed *de jure*, their annexation had remained unrecognized by France, and their dissidents were denouncing human rights violations. More specifically, whereas the 1918–22 Baltic states had been a blip on the radar of French preoccupations, in 1988–92 these nations played a key role in bringing down the Soviet Union.³⁴ They had become one of the most important flashpoints of Europe, drawing intense media attention and the scrutiny of organizations and states. In that context, the Baltic states constituted a test of the French government's and the West's intentions regarding the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

³¹ Academic debates on “middle-sized” powers developed in France in the 1980s, and had clear aspects of introspection into the current role and status of a diminished France. Cf. for example the contributions concerning France in *La moyenne puissance au XXe siècle*, ed. by Jean-Claude Allain (Paris: FEDN - IHCC, 1989).

³² More information on French policy towards German reunification see: Frédéric Bozo, “Mitterrand's France, the end of the Cold War, and German unification: a reappraisal”, *Cold War History*, 7:4 (2007), 455–478.

³³ On the rise of the human rights discourse, see: Samuel Moyn, *The last utopia: human rights in history* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012).

³⁴ John Hiden, book review of Charlotte Alston, “Antonius Piip, Zigfrīds Meierovics and Augustinas Voldemaras: the Baltic States”, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 42:3 (2011).

Fitting the Baltic states and Finland into France's foreign policy visions

In these two different chronological contexts, France's relations with small countries in the Eastern Baltic were also a function of the general evolution of its foreign policy.

France's foreign policy in the years 1918–20 was first and foremost characterized by the war's aftermath and by efforts to adapt to an increasingly unfamiliar Europe. The German danger dominated, while 1918–19 saw several half-hearted attempts at intervention against the Bolsheviks. In both these phases, France's policy was mostly reactive, relying on actors on the ground and strong personalities capable of leading French policy. The Baltic region was also overshadowed by Poland, which had become stabilized as an ally of France.³⁵

These policy orientations were ambiguous regarding Finland and the Baltic states, as contradictory tensions pulled France's diplomacy in different directions. Once again, the evolution of Bainville's rhetoric provides us with a good barometer of these uncertainties: while in 1917, the writer condemned the perspective of independence for the Baltic states and Finland, seeing them as threats to the Russian empire and thralls of Germany, the rise of Bolshevism in Russia after November of 1918 impelled him to look at these little nations with different eyes.³⁶ Unpalatable and unstable as they were, these small national forces were at least present on the ground and potentially ready to fight the Reds.³⁷

Finland provides a good example of this evolution. Regarded by Paris with hostility for most of the war because of their links with Germany, the Finns declared their independence in December of 1917. French diplomacy ended up recognizing the new country on 4 January 1918 essentially for two reasons: the intense lobbying of the French consul in Helsinki, Louis Raynaud, and the French leadership's hopes that this comparatively well-known, stable national group would hold the line against Lenin.³⁸ The following year and a half saw France alternate between support and criticism of Finland, according to the general context of Russian affairs and to Finnish attitudes. In the spring of 1919, relations with Finland were considered

³⁵ Cf. David Stevenson, "France at the Paris Peace Conference: addressing the dilemmas of security", *French foreign and defence policy, 1918–1940: the decline and fall of a great power*, ed. by Robert Boyce (London: Routledge, 1998), 10–27.

³⁶ Jacques Bainville, *La Russie et la barrière de l'Est* (Paris: Plon, 1937), 39, 72–75.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 249–251.

³⁸ Clerc, "Louis Raynaud et la reconnaissance de l'indépendance".

important enough for it to be counted among the countries to which France would send one of its half-dozen military missions dispatched to countries on the borders of Russia. France entertained high hopes that Finland would stabilize and remain in France's orbit. But tensions rose again in the autumn as the White Russians advanced against the Bolsheviks and France tried to persuade the Finns to assist the White General Nikolai Yudenitch. Writing to his ambassadors on 24 October 1919, Foreign Minister Stephen Pichon summarized France's position regarding Finland: "The position of the French government is that by subordinating her intervention in Petrograd to the satisfaction of demands that cannot be currently examined, Finland will let the psychological moment pass."³⁹ A few days before Pichon's letter, Yudenitch's White Army had been reported by the press agency Havas as having entered the suburbs of Petrograd: as the return of tsarist Russia finally seemed to be at hand, the French were quick to bury Finland. The hope for a return to geopolitical stability trumped conceptions about the right of self-determination for small nations.

But in January of 1920, with Yudenitch's army disbanding and its leader in an Estonian jail, the French diplomat Jules Laroche took stock of the situation and proposed the wholesale recognition of all *de facto* states created on the Western borders of the former Russian empire.⁴⁰ Generally, different groups viewed the Baltic states either as small states that could be supported until they were asked to join a strong Russia, or the northernmost tip of a barrier erected between Europe's two hell-raisers, Germany and Bolshevik Russia, with Poland as the crux.⁴¹ The dilemma between French hopes for a Russian renaissance and support for the Baltic states and Finland was solved only by the stabilization of the Bolsheviks in Russia.

Once geopolitics had given way, the French were quick to make a virtue of necessity and to stabilize their vision of the Baltic states. Julien Gueslin has shown how the pesky small states of 1917–18 came to be considered with sympathy as model pupils of the League of Nations: poles of instability were now seen as hopes for stability in a European context deprived of its imperial anchors. The same was true for Finland. However, tensions returned with the 1930s: in a revealing report from January of 1938, the

³⁹ Stephen Pichon to diplomatic posts, Paris, 25.10.1919, series Europe 1918–1940/URSS, vol. 283, Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁴⁰ *Documents Diplomatiques Français*, 1920, vol. 1, doc. 32, 50: *Les États limitrophes de la Russie et les bolcheviks*, Jules Laroche, 20.1.1920.

⁴¹ Suzanne Champonnois, "La mission militaire française en Estonie 1919–1920", *France-Estonie: regards mutuels*, ed. by Antoine Chalvin (Paris: Association France-Estonie, 1997), 40–49.

French ambassador in Moscow Robert Coulondre outlined a pessimistic account of the Baltic states and Finland, essentially describing their gradual descent into the German orbit.⁴² French policy had already then switched from intervention to mediation, and in 1939, France put a premium on relations with the Soviet Union rather than with the Baltic states and Finland: according to the French ambassador in London, Charles Corbin, Moscow's 1939 strong-arm tactics and treaties with the Baltic states were "seen with resignation" both in London and Paris.⁴³ Having successfully defended itself in the winter of 1939–40, and already considered as being more stabilized, Finland was cast in a different light.

The same fluctuations were discernible in French policy in 1988–92, well summarized in 1990 by Mitterrand: "We are in a terrible contradiction. Our interests are both in keeping Gorbachev where he is, and in supporting Lithuanian independence."⁴⁴ In 1989, in the context of a rapidly changing situation in Eastern Europe, one of the core principles of Mitterrand's Eastern Policy was support for a gradual transformation in a Soviet context.⁴⁵ While the French leadership celebrated the negotiated power transition in Poland in August of 1989, it was very cautious about what was perceived as the German rush toward reunification. As noted by Frédéric Bozo, during the German refugee crisis in September of 1989, German reunification was perceived as a legitimate but untimely objective – the time was not ripe for it.⁴⁶ Similarly, Baltic aspirations were seen as legitimate but France was unwilling to accelerate events in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. As in the Polish case, Mitterrand and French diplomats in Moscow were unsure how far changes could be encouraged without causing a backlash. On 29 August a report prepared by the European Affairs Department for a meeting of the French government advised: "our attitude must remain one of great caution, avoiding any declaration or inadvertent gesture that might be misinterpreted by Moscow or the nationalist movements."⁴⁷

⁴² Coulondre to Yvon Delbos, Moscow, 12.1.1938, Archives of the Moscow embassy, Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁴³ Charles Corbin to Paris, 771, 28.10.1939, Archives of the London embassy, Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁴⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, subject: meeting with President Mitterrand of France, 19.4.1990, Key Largo, Florida, George Bush Presidential Library, The White House.

⁴⁵ Bozo, *Mitterrand, la fin de la Guerre Froide et l'unification allemande*, 83.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁷ "Notre attitude doit rester empreinte d'une grande prudence en évitant toute déclaration ou tout geste intempestif susceptible d'être interprété à Moscou où par les mouvements nationalistes comme un signal erroné": *Conseil des Ministres du 30 août*, éléments

Mitterrand was a strong supporter of Mikhail Gorbachev and his reformist tendencies in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, France was hardly in any position to take any action on its own without Germany: for the most part, Mitterrand's caution was more a result of the West's caution and of West Germany's uneasiness regarding Baltic claims. The point was to ensure that Gorbachev would stay at the head of the USSR to handle the "grand bargain" concerning German Reunification.⁴⁸ France did not cold-shoulder the Baltic states any more or less than Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who did everything possible to avoid German implication in Baltic questions and to restrain both Baltic aspirations and the endeavours of other European countries to visibly support these aspirations.⁴⁹ In the context of sensitive negotiations (European integration, the reunification of Germany), France needed to retain good relations with Germany and thus to adapt its positions concerning the Baltic states to those of its neighbour. This propelled Paris towards a position of cautious support for Gorbachev compatible with German policy.⁵⁰ This was not only France's problem, and the Spanish authorities had clearly stated everybody's dilemma in December of 1989: "The Western world is faced with an obvious contradiction: either lose this opportunity to support the Baltic states, with the consequent breakdown of the principles held to this today (non-recognition of the annexation), or rather openly support Baltic claims for independence, reducing Gorbachev's manoeuvrability and creating new difficulties for perestroika."⁵¹ The geopolitical shackles were on, and whatever the amount of sympathy there was in France for Baltic pleas, this could not influence policy beyond a certain point. Supporting Mikhail Gorbachev seemed more important than principled support for the Baltic states.

In this context, independence for the Baltic states appeared foreboding to François Mitterrand, who feared a possible outburst of civil war born of

d'intervention, a/s: situation dans les républiques baltes, le 29 août 1989, series URSS (1986- 1990), file 6591, Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

⁴⁸ Bozo, *Mitterrand, la fin de la Guerre Froide et l'unification allemande*, 211.

⁴⁹ Kristina Spohr Readman, "Between political rhetoric and realpolitik calculations: Western diplomacy and the Baltic independence struggle in the Cold War endgame", *Cold War History*, 6:1 (2006), 1-42; Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: the struggle to create post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 158.

⁵⁰ George Bush, Brent Scowcroft, *A world transformed* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1999), 215; "Deutsch-französische Konsultationen, Paris, 26 April 1990", *Deutsche Einheit Sonderedition aus den Akten des Bundeskanzleramtes 1998/90* (R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1998), 1056.

⁵¹ COREAU (*Correspondance européenne*) from Madrid, 16.1.1990, Series URSS (1986-1990), file 6592, Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

uncontrolled separatism, and was in principle unconvinced by the resurgence of old-fashioned nationalism in Europe.⁵² Mitterrand's central priority in 1990 had been European integration and stability, and he expressed his concerns to the acting President of Latvia Anatoliy Gorbunovs in May of 1991: "Are we going to witness a general breaking-up of Europe? However good the cause, we wonder what will emerge from this disorder. A destabilization of the whole continent."⁵³ In contacts with Gorbachev, Mitterrand also emphasized the importance of the integrity of Soviet territory: in November of 1991 during a private conversation with Gorbachev, Mitterrand explained that: "If there is a collapse, we will go back to what you had before Peter the Great. It would be a historical catastrophe and would contradict France's interests." By evoking Peter the Great, the French president was referring to what he saw as a period of dangerous instability in Eastern Europe, caused by the lack of an organizing power that could counter-balance Germany. "Centuries of history teach us that France needs an ally to maintain a balance in Europe," he explained, and went on: "[...] any collapse of integrity in the East would bring instability. [...] Furthermore, we are great friends of today's Germany. But it would be very dangerous if there would be a soft underbelly in the North or East of Germany. Because the Germans will always have a tendency and a temptation to penetrate these areas."⁵⁴ But yet again, France's policy changed in 1992 once the survival of the Soviet Union itself became definitely compromised: the most important priority then became to stabilize what was left, including the Baltic states.

⁵² Hubert Védrine, *Les mondes de François Mitterrand: à l'Élysée, 1981–1995* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 483. Mitterrand's last official speech, given in front of the European Parliament in January of 1995, abundantly expressed his vision of "nationalism" as an unhealthy, disrupting phenomenon. The speech provided one of Mitterrand's best-known sound bites: "Nationalism means war" ("Le nationalisme, c'est la guerre"). Besides the theatrics of a speech obviously staged for posterity by a president at the end of both his mandate and his life (he left the presidency in March of 1995 and died in January of 1996), nationalism meant different things to the leaders of Europeanized and war-worn France and to the Baltic leaderships of 1988–92. Text of the speech: <http://centenaire.parti-socialiste.fr/article.php3?Fid_article=376.html> (accessed 14 September 2016).

⁵³ "Est-ce que l'on va assister à un éclatement général de l'Europe? Même si c'est pour une juste cause, on s'interroge sur ce qui naîtra de ce désordre. Une déstabilisation sur l'ensemble du continent." (Entretien du Président de la République avec M. Gorbunovs, Président de la République de Lettonie, le 16 mai 1991 à 18h, Archives de la Présidence de la République, 5 AG 4/ CD 314, file 13, French National Archives).

⁵⁴ Anatoly Chernyaev, *Diary 1991*, 150, available online: <<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB345/The%20Diary%20of%20Anatoly%20Chernyaev,%201991.pdf>> (accessed 14 September 2016).

In both these cases, French caution towards independence for the countries of the Eastern Baltic seems to be built not so much on imperial nostalgia as on the fear of destabilization for a state depending on stability in Europe (at the end of the Cold War), or on plans to redraw Europe's boundaries after a war that significantly weakened it (1918). In these circumstances, the Baltic states and Finland could at times become important elements of France's broader foreign policy orientations. While in the long term, France seeks stability through twentieth century versions of the concert of nations, in times of crisis, a more positive policy towards nationalities can be accepted. That was the case in 1918 when Finland and the Baltic states emerged and were left for a time to stabilize as "historical nations". This was also the case in 1991 when the Soviet Union had passed the tipping point.

Domestic policy and bilateral networks as providers of alternative visions

By emphasizing France's foreign policy as an activity isolated from the rest of French policy, one might certainly reach the same conclusion for the Eastern Baltic seen from Paris as François Bédarida, who wrote that before 1939, the Eastern Baltic was "beyond the sphere of French strategic interest".⁵⁵ The Baltic states and Finland were also generally less well-known in France than other Eastern European countries: upon arrival in Paris in 1919, the head of the Estonian delegation to the Paris conference, Kaarel Robert Pusta, summarized this feeling by writing that they were "unknown men, from an unknown country".⁵⁶ His colleague Jaan Poska wrote in his diary about the "indifference towards us [...] manifested by our allies".⁵⁷ The same words can be found in eyewitness accounts from the late 1980s when another generation of Baltic diplomats was sent to Western capitals to re-claim the independence of the three republics. On 2 September 1991, when this new diplomatic battle for Baltic independence was almost over,

⁵⁵ François Bédarida, "France, Britain and the Nordic countries", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 2 (1977), 7–27.

⁵⁶ Julien Gueslin, "Paris sur Baltique 1918–1949", *Regards sur l'Est*, 34 (2003).

⁵⁷ Quote in: Vahur Made, "The Baltic states and Europe 1918–1940", *The Baltic question during the Cold War*, ed. by John Hiden, Vahur Made, David J. Smith (London: Routledge, 2008), 7.

the President of the Supreme Council of Lithuania, Vytautas Landsbergis, told the press: “Westerners have not lifted a finger for us.”⁵⁸

But aspects related to France’s domestic context and the role of personalities and networks have to be brought into the discussion to explain the jittery nature of French policy towards the Baltic states and Finland. Indeed, at critical junctures in time, various groups and personalities acquired the capacity to act in France (quoting Julien Gueslin’s formula) as “itinerant salesmen” of the positions of the Baltic states and Finland in Europe, influencing decisions, spreading information and facilitating contacts.⁵⁹ These elements developed differently in the post-World War I context and in the late 1980s.

Networks between France, Finland and the Baltic States existed before the Baltic countries achieved independence in 1917–19. These Finnish and Baltic networks were active in France before 1918, when a number of these personalities branched into the diplomatic service of their respective countries. These networks, less efficient in the case of the Baltic states, had in the case of Finland managed to establish the image of a developed nation, a functioning province, a polity in the making oppressed by Russia: “cultural transfers”⁶⁰ of knowledge and conceptions of these national movements turned into pure lobbying before and after the war, as described by Chiara Tessaris in her work on Latvia’s presence in the League of Nations.⁶¹

These lobbying networks followed the patterns of “interest groups” studied, for example, by Jan Beyers, Rainer Eising and William Maloney: informal organisations revolving around certain political interests.⁶² The hard core was composed of professional militants of bilateral cultural and political relations, Balts and Finns installed in France, but also Frenchmen,

⁵⁸ “Les Occidentaux n’ont pas levé le plus petit doigt pour nous. Entretien avec V. Landsbergis”, *Le Monde*, 2 September 1991.

⁵⁹ Other examples of the same phenomenon concerning Hungary in Catherine Horel, *De l’exotisme à la modernité: un siècle de voyage français en Hongrie, 1818–1910* (Budapest: ELTE, 2003); Nicolas Bauquet, “Les réseaux franco-hongrois et la France, de 1896 à 1914: auxiliaires d’une découverte ou marchands d’illusion?” *Studia Politica* (sept. 2005), 1–36; Stéphane Reznikov, *Francophilie et identité tchèque, 1848–1914* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002).

⁶⁰ A concept developed by Michel Espagne, *Le prisme du Nord. Pays du Nord-France-Allemagne (1750–1920)* (Tusson: Du Lérot, 2005).

⁶¹ Cf. Chiara Tessaris, *Peace and security beyond military power: the League of Nations and the Polish-Lithuanian dispute (1920–1923)*, PhD dissertation (University of Columbia, 2015).

⁶² Jan Beyers, Rainer Eising, William Maloney, “Researching interest group politics in Europe and elsewhere: much we study, little we know?”, *West European Politics*, 31:6 (2008), 1103–1128.

all of whom drew symbolic and sometimes material resources from their capacity to incarnate in Paris a certain culture and the political “cause” attached to it. French “specialists”, heavily influenced by the rhetoric of Finns and Balts, were seen as more neutral, and were sometimes consulted for advice by the press or by decision-makers on matters linked to these countries. Good examples are the jurist Albert de Lapradelle for Finland, or the journalist Henry de Montfort for the Baltic states – both were used as “experts” by the French government, in the case of Lapradelle up until the late 1920s. Motivations amongst them ranged from the wish to defend just causes to the social resources that came with the qualification of being an expert on a precise question. A certain attraction for novelty was mixed with the exaltation of seeing themselves as the midwives of new nations. Some of these people had a direct influence on foreign policy, not so much shaping it from scratch but nudging it in certain directions in times of uncertainty: this is obvious in the case of Professor Paul Boyer, who advocated Finland as an expert with the French government, using his contacts to influence the circles of power in the winter 1917–18.⁶³

It should be stressed, like Nicolas Bauquet does, that these networks were highly dependent on the atmosphere and politics of the country in which they deployed. Their activities were constrained by the local situation, even more so because the police often monitored them as foreign activists.⁶⁴ Information coming from these networks also had to be adapted to a French context – before 1918, for example, no expression of active hostility towards the Russian leadership was likely to work beyond very small circles of French society. Likewise, French audiences were eager for all expressions of attachment to French culture and appreciation for French arts and the French language, interpreting these as positive signs of “national maturity”, and as potential for the political support of France.

Although they were complex and heavily constrained in their actions, these networks were maintained in the long term, and could influence French politics at key moments. When decisions had to be made concerning regions the French leadership had little knowledge of, and where France had no ready representatives, this motley crew of friendship societies, cultural associations, and “specialists” could suddenly become an important relay in official decision-making. These networks clearly played a role in a

⁶³ Clerc, *La Finlande et l'Europe du Nord*.

⁶⁴ The French police, for instance, had a file on Kaarel Pusta: file Karel Pusta, 19940469/425, dos 37127; card Kaarel Pusta, 19940508/1756, Moscow fund, French National Archives.

phenomenon that Charlotte Alston has summarized as the efforts of small states to “help themselves”.⁶⁵

In the period of 1989–91, agitation in connection with the Baltic cause in France could not really benefit anymore from networks anchored in bilateral relations. Links with the Baltic nations had never been particularly tight, and the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian communities in France were relatively small. As observed by Yves Plasseraud, after 1945 “the public lost the memory of the Baltic states and one only spoke about the peoples living in the periphery of the USSR as about national minorities that seemed to have always belonged to the Soviet Union”.⁶⁶ Here again, geopolitical assessments influenced cultural perceptions: there was a strong tendency to interpret what was geopolitically impossible as being culturally unsavoury.

In general, though, this realistic approach was not endorsed with any enthusiasm: in private, France’s diplomatic leadership welcomed Baltic aspirations to independence out of a new consciousness of the principles emphasized since the end of World War I and reaffirmed during the Cold War, such as human rights, self-determination and non-recognition of illegal annexation. The activities of the Baltic independence movements also attracted the interest of French journalists in 1987, initiating a slow process of reintroducing the Baltic question to French debates, of once again opening the window to alternative perceptions of the Baltic states. In the period of 1987–89, news from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was mainly framed as the rumblings of nationalist movements on the Soviet periphery. The historical origins of the Baltic problem were evoked but were not discussed more than other aspects of the Baltic drive for independence such as the situation of Lithuanian Catholics, protests of the Russian speaking sector of the population in Estonia, russification in Riga, or Baltic economic performance.

The turning point came in August of 1989, when the Baltic Way provided a visible news item and a basis for efficiently communicating the main Baltic arguments for independence. In the following days, French newspapers became relays of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian message to French society: an alternative history could emerge once geopolitics

⁶⁵ Charlotte Alston, *Antonius Piip, Zigfrīds Meierovics and Augustinas Voldemaras: the Baltic states* (London: Haus, 2010).

⁶⁶ Yves Plasseraud, “La connaissance de l’Estonie en France”, *France-Estonie: regards mutuels*, ed. by Antoine Chalvin (Paris: Association France-Estonie, 1997), 115.

seemed once again to give way. *Le Monde*⁶⁷ and *Libération*,⁶⁸ both important national daily papers, reminded readers of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, Baltic claims disputing the legality of their annexation by the USSR, and the non-recognition of this annexation. In *Le Figaro*, Pierre Bocev highlighted the dilemma the Kremlin was facing,⁶⁹ while Olivier Weber (*Le Point*) concluded like most French media that “the Baltic desire for independence had a legal basis”⁷⁰, while *La Croix* stated that “Soviet occupation in the Baltic states was coming to an end”. The mouthpiece of the French Communist party, *l'Humanité*, was isolated in explaining that there was no link between the annexation of the Baltic countries and the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.⁷¹ *L'Humanité*'s harsh stand towards Baltic claims brought the paper into sharp contrast with most of the French press, in which rhetorical elements concerning the Baltic states developed during the Cold War (national culture, non-recognition of the 1940 annexation, etc.) resurfaced.

By the end of 1989, as the situation in the Baltic states became increasingly tense, journalists and the conservative parliamentary opposition to Mitterrand's ruling Socialist Party were the first to reach out to Baltic personalities and to question French policy regarding what was by now called “the Baltic question”. This pressure pushed Mitterrand and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to at least rhetorically emphasize France's non-recognition of Baltic annexation and, for example, the fact that Lithuanian and Latvian gold was still in the vaults of the *Banque de France*.⁷² Meant to mask French caution, this rhetoric, however, constrained French foreign policy

⁶⁷ “Les Pays Baltes contestent la légalité de leur rattachement à l'URSS”, *Le Monde*, 24 August 1989.

⁶⁸ “600 0000 Baltes marchent contre l'annexion”, *Libération*, 24 August 1989.

⁶⁹ Pierre Bocev, “Le Kremlin face à l'histoire”, *Le Figaro*, 28 August 1989.

⁷⁰ Olivier Weber, “Le défi des Pays Baltes”, *Le Point*, 3 October 1989.

⁷¹ Bernard Frederic, “Les tensions nationalistes”, 25 August 1989, *l'Humanité*. *L'Humanité* and the French Communist Party in general would later also be at odds with the rest of the French press concerning Ukraine, criticizing European and Ukrainian policy towards Russia. On that, cf. Valentyna Dymytrova, “La “révolution orange” dans le prisme des éditoriaux de la presse française”, *Sens et représentation en conflit: controverses et différends textuels*, ed. by Karsten Forbrig and Cloé Tessier (Peter Lang, 2011), 117–127.

⁷² Cf. various documents in French Presidential Archives 5AG 4/CD 242, dossier 4, French National Archives: *Communiqué de Roland Dumas le 12 mars 1990, François Mitterrand “7sur7”*, 23 March 1990; *Conférence de presse conjointe de François Mitterrand et de Vaclav Havel*, 20.3.1990; *Conférence de presse conjointe de monsieur François Mitterrand président de la République française et de monsieur Georges Bush, président des États Unis*, Key Largo, 19.4.1990; *Conférence de presse conjointe de Monsieur François Mitterrand Président de la République et de Monsieur Helmut Khôl chancelier de la République Fédérale d'Allemagne à l'issue des 55^{ème} consultations franco-allemandes, Palais de l'Élysée*, 26.4.1990; *Présidence de la République, Service de Presse, Conférence de*

in a domestic political frame and prepared the about-face of 1991: it disseminated the idea of illegal Soviet rule and brought new visions of the Baltic case to a wider audience. The Baltic problem and its main contours, which for 50 years had been minor issues, of concern only to interested diplomats and civil servants, suddenly became part of public debates framed not only in geopolitical terms but also in sentimental and idealistic terms.⁷³

Mitterrand's caution in the Baltic case came under attack in Parliament (the French National Assembly and Senate) as part of criticism directed at his support for Gorbachev. The Right-wing parties *Union pour la Démocratie Française* (UDF) and *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR) asked for stronger support of Baltic independence and often reminded the assemblies of the Soviet Union's illegal annexation in 1940 and the French non-recognition policy.⁷⁴ The Baltic cause also gained some measure of bipartisan support, as a parliamentary group of deputies from the opposition and the majority was established in both the French Senate and National Assembly to support Baltic independence.⁷⁵

In 1990–91, members of these groups helped organize visits of Baltic officials to Paris and advocated Baltic interests in France.⁷⁶ For example, the legislator Michel Pelchat, president of the Baltic support group in the National Assembly, was mandated by the three Baltic governments to solve the matter of the Baltic embassies in Paris, which had been given to Soviet authorities by the French after 1945.⁷⁷ The legislator's motivations are dif-

Presse conjointe de Monsieur François Mitterrand Président de la République et de Michail Gorbatchev Président de l'Union des républiques socialistes soviétiques, Moscou, 25.5.1990.

⁷³ "In the Baltic context, most Western governments appeared locked into a Cold War rhetoric and thus into Cold War policy, when their new Realpolitik priorities clearly lay elsewhere": Readman, *Between political rhetoric*, 29. This idea is certainly true in the American case but the Baltic question was never a major part of the French Cold War discourse.

⁷⁴ Cf. *Assemblée Nationale, Constitution du 4 octobre 1958, 9^e Législature, Seconde session ordinaire de 1989–1990, (4^e séance), 1^e séance du mercredi 4 avril 1990, Politique de la France à l'égard des Pays de l'Est*, 72.

⁷⁵ *Communiqué Association Parlementaire France-Pays baltes, Paris, 28.06.1990, Taustamaterjal Prantsusmaa, 1990–1991, Box 4.1.3., Estonian Diplomatic Archives; Groupe d'études sur l'Estonie, La Lettonie et Lituanie, Taustamaterjal Prantsusmaa, 1990–1991, Box 4.1.3., Estonian Diplomatic Archives; Michel Pelchat, Député de l'Essone à V. Landsbergis, Président du Conseil Suprême de Lituanie, Paris, 25.7.1990, Box 1990_39_216, Latvian Diplomatic Archives.*

⁷⁶ Michel Pelchat, Député de l'Essone à François Mitterrand, Président de la République, n.d., Box 1990_39_216, Latvian Diplomatic Archives.

⁷⁷ Michel Pelchat to Lennart Meri, 10 April 1991; Mandate to Michel Pelchat signed by Lennart Meri, 22 April 1991, 4.1.3-7: Taustamaterjal Prantsusmaa 1990–1991f, Estonian Diplomatic Archives.

difficult to entangle, but they echo a logic observed in 1900–20: a discreet backbencher, Pelchat gathered information from Baltic representatives, he was interested in international questions, he gained domestic political capital from becoming an expert on the question, secured prominence for working on behalf of a just cause, and finally used the issue as a stick with which to beat the government. All these elements and the governmental response of caution and reason were on display in a heated exchange that took place between Pelchat and the Foreign Minister Roland Dumas in the National Assembly in December of 1990.⁷⁸

At the same time, different branches of the French Foreign Service seemed more inclined to consider Baltic arguments than the President and his diplomatic advisers. French diplomats in Moscow were circumspect regarding the Baltic drive towards independence, but clearly considered the Soviet historical claim to these territories as void.⁷⁹ By the end of 1989, the chief of the Soviet Affairs Subdivision of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the conditions of their annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940 gave strong moral legitimacy to the claims of the Baltic nations.⁸⁰ Analyses conducted by the Ministry's think-tank (*Centre d'analyse et de prévision*) explained that the Yalta system could not be considered nullified as long as the Baltic states had not recovered their independence,⁸¹ while the Ministry's Legal Department stated clearly that "[...] in our opinion the Baltic states still exist. [...] Our recognition of these states after World War I is still valid. In our view, the legal existence of these states has survived their annexation, even though they have not been able to exercise their sovereignty".⁸² All in all, as Aina Nagobads-Åbols has written, despite

⁷⁸ Journal officiel de la République française, Débats parlementaires, Assemblée Nationale, constitution du 4 octobre 1958, 9e législature, Première session ordinaire de 1990–1991, 126 • séance, 2 • séance du mercredi 19 décembre 1990, 7138.

⁷⁹ Ambassadeur de France en URSS à Ministre des Affaires Étrangères, *Mission en Lituanie*, 10.–12.3.1991, series Europe (1991–1995), file URSS 7667, Archives of the French Foreign Ministry; Ambassade de France en URSS, note *Lituanie et question balte*, Moscou 10.5.1990, Series Europe (1991–1995), file URSS 6686, Archives of the French Foreign Ministry.

⁸⁰ Direction d'Europe, sous-directeur d'URSS, Paris, le 22.9.1989, French Presidential Archives, series 5AG4 / CD 242 file 4, French National Archives.

⁸¹ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Centre d'analyse et de prévision, note *L'Etat de droit au droit de l'Etat ou la Lituanie martyre*, 16.1.1991, series Europe (1991–1995), file URSS 7667, Archives of the French Foreign Ministry.

⁸² Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Direction des affaires juridiques, rédacteur Mr. D'Haussy, note pour la Direction des affaires politiques, *La position française à l'égard des Républiques Baltes*, 9.3.1990, series 5 AG 4/CD 242, file 4, French National Archives.

the President's caution,⁸³ the Baltic cause found a number of efficient relays in the Ministry:⁸⁴ diplomats who had worked on a daily basis with Soviet affairs considered the independence of the Baltic nations to be an inevitable development, and even supported it or personally felt strongly for it.⁸⁵

These positions in the Ministry reached the President, especially via an April 1990 report written by the Director of the European Affairs Department Jacques Blot, where he criticized France's official policy of caution in clear terms. In this conflict of irreconcilable claims, France had to have a plan of action in case the Soviet side opted to use force: "If the current escalation continues", Blot explained, "slowly but inevitably, we will be forced to imperceptibly accept the unacceptable: to witness the suppression of a desire for freedom in nations, the annexation of which by the Soviet Union we have never recognized."⁸⁶ Blot's arguments, however, did not have any direct consequences: the President commented that the report expressed "an interesting point of view"⁸⁷ but did not follow-up on Blot's guidelines. He tried instead to reconcile the Soviet and Baltic points of view. During a press conference in Moscow, for instance, the President stated both that "France did not recognize the annexation" and that, nevertheless, "as of this day Lithuania is enclosed in the constitutional reality of the Soviet Union. These two views are hard to reconcile. I do not want to be the judge".⁸⁸ In a private meeting, he told Lithuania's Prime Minister Kazimiere Prunskiene that "[...] Lithuania has a right to its own sovereignty. But the reality is that Lithuania has been welded to the USSR".⁸⁹

⁸³ The communist daily *L'Humanité* was particularly vocal in its criticism of the Baltic States, criticizing their raw nationalism, the role of Baltic Nazi collaborators during World War II, their treatment of Russian-speaking minorities, etc. Examples of articles on these themes can be found in *L'Humanité's* web-based archives, for example <<http://www.humanite.fr/node/33020>> (accessed 2 September 2015).

⁸⁴ Aina Nagobads-Ābols, *Parīze, Madride, Lisabona un atpakaļ Rīgā* (Riga: Zinātne, 2000), 36.

⁸⁵ Lettre de René Roudaut, sous-directeur de la sous-direction URSS à Lennart Meri, Ministre des Affaires étrangères de l'Estonie, n.d., series Taustamaterjal Prantsusmaa, 1990–1991, file 4.1.3, Estonian Diplomatic Archives.

⁸⁶ Direction d'Europe, le Directeur, note *Pays baltes: le conflit des deux légitimités*, 3.4.990, series AN, AG 4/CD 242, file 4, Archives of the French Foreign Ministry.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Présidence de la République, Conférence de Presse conjointe de François Mitterrand et de Mikhaïl Gorbatchev, Moscou, 25 May 1990.

⁸⁹ Présidence de la République, compte-rendu, entretien du Président de la République avec Madame Prunskiene, Premier Ministre de Lituanie, 10.5.1990 18 h 45, series AN, 5AG4/DM 48, file 11, Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Thus, while caution and international pressures dominated French policy regarding Baltic claims to independence, it was also the result of interactions between different actors – the President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and members of the National Assembly and Senate all had an influence as well, paving the way for changes in perceptions. In the French Fifth Republic system, however, the President held sway over foreign policy and things could not move forward without him. The policy resulting from these interactions can be described as one of small gestures towards the Balts followed immediately by disavowals stemming from the fear of destabilizing Gorbachev or of going against German attempts to downplay the Baltic question.

In April of 1990, France and Germany sent a letter to Lithuania's President V. Landsbergis, asking him to suspend Lithuania's declaration of independence in order to facilitate their negotiations with the USSR. However, Mitterrand refused to act as a mediator in these negotiations when it became clear that the Germans were unwilling to become more involved in the Lithuanian crisis, and the Soviets criticized even this comparatively cautious Franco-German move.⁹⁰ In November of 1990, when France invited the Baltic states to participate in a CSCE meeting in Paris, the move prompted Gorbachev to lose his temper and demand that the French hosts of the conference ask Baltic ministers to leave the room.⁹¹ While in January of 1991, Roland Dumas and Hans-Dietrich Genscher sent a letter to Eduard Shevardnadze condemning the use of force against civilians in Vilnius and Riga,⁹² both Mitterrand and Kohl privately assured Gorbachev that they understood the complexity of the situation in the Baltic states and supported him.⁹³ This policy of small steps and caution ended in August of 1991, when the French position changed radically due to the attempted putsch in the Soviet Union. As in 1918–20, the potential of contacts with

⁹⁰ Cf. published documents in Vytautas Landsbergis, *Un peuple sort de prison* (Baltijos kopija, 2007).

⁹¹ Interview with Roland Dumas, Minister of Foreign Affairs 1988–93, Paris, March 2010; interview with Ambassador Philippe de Suremain, Deputy Director of European Affairs Division 1989–91, Paris, March 2010; interview with Ambassador René Roudaut, Director of the USSR Subdivision 1990–92, Budapest, April 2010.

⁹² Déclaration commune des ministres des affaires étrangères de France et d'Allemagne, le 13.1.1991, series AN 5AG 4/CD 242, file 4, Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁹³ Youri Doubinine, *Moscou-Paris dans un tourbillon diplomatique: témoignage d'un ambassadeur* (Paris: Imaginaria, 2002), 368; Christian Neef, "The Gorbachev files: did Gorbachev know about violent crackdowns?", *Spiegel Online*, 8 (2011): <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/the-gorbachev-files-secret-papers-reveal-truth-behind-soviet-collapse-a-779277-2.html>> (accessed 24 August 2015).

the Baltic states was then allowed to flourish freely and develop into a more active and positive French policy towards these countries.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to consider the different levels at which France's reactions towards the Baltic States and Finland have been shaped. While perceptions of the geopolitical situation and long-term strategic considerations framed these reactions and prompted France to consider wider implications linked to Russia/the Soviet Union beyond the specifics of Baltic and Finnish developments, other levels also contributed to shaping French policy. In times of crisis, these different levels could be allowed a certain influence on the re-shaping of French attitudes towards these small states.⁹⁴

In the context of this special issue, representations and historical memories obviously come to mind as elements that were left to influence French reactions – once the geopolitical situation started to fluctuate, discontinuities were allowed to appear. Finland is a good example of this in 1917–18, when memories of past relations resurfaced: at that time, the Baltic states were less strongly anchored on the French map of Europe than “historical nationalities”, whereas Finland was known as an oppressed nationality since 1900. In 1990 though, the Baltic states evoked memories of historical developments, their maturation during the interwar period and their well-known ordeal at the hands of the Soviet Union. In 1990, the ways “nationalities” were defined had also changed and one could say that the Baltic States were then seen as historically grounded, political nationalities. Yet in both cases, key French actors seemed to consider geopolitical stability first, and alternative perceptions were allowed to appear only in the cracks of this geopolitical approach in the context of sudden changes and uncertainties.

France's relations with small states in the Eastern Baltic thus appear more complex than the cliché of French hostility and cynicism. French

⁹⁴ Something that was true not only of France, as Esa Sundbäck highlighted the same elements in his description of Britain's reactions to Baltic and Finnish developments after 1917. If Sundbäck deals mostly with geopolitics in his 1991 article (Esa Sundbäck, “Finland, Scandinavia and the Baltic states viewed within the framework of the border state policy of Great Britain from the autumn of 1918 to the spring of 1919”, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 16:4 (1991), 313–334), he considers a much broader range of influences shaping British reactions in his PhD: Esa Sundbäck, *Finland in British Baltic policy: British political and economic interests regarding Finland in the aftermath of the First World War, 1918–1923*, Suomalainen tiedeakatemia toimituksia (Gummerus, 2001).

foreign policy developed first in a general international context, a structure of international relations that was interpreted in different ways by French decision-makers. Small states were also seen as parts of wider foreign policy orientations. Finally, a host of less clearly defined but nonetheless important elements linked to bilateral relations, lobbying and networking influenced developments. Far from the ethereal perfection of theories, elements combined on the spot into a messy, context-dependent, day-to-day process of shaping policy towards the Baltic states and Finland in the post-1918 world, and the Baltic States in the late 1980s.

Some elements, both general and more specific, can be distinguished in the long term. First of all, France appears as a weakened country in both cases, with an internationally restricted margin for manoeuvring, and is interested mostly in stability and the *status quo*. Two world wars, four years of occupation and a difficult process of decolonisation reduced the country to the measure of a middle-sized power, wary of sudden changes in Europe and often looking to Russia for stability in Eastern Europe. In the long term, doubts and incomprehension have characterized France's official responses to the claims of national groups, from the early twentieth century insistence on imperial stability to Mitterrand's defiance of "nationalism". More specifically, France's interests in the Eastern Baltic have always been at best a function of other considerations – German influence, Russian stability, etc. In this context, nationalities in the Eastern Baltic have seldom been considered as international actors *per se*, but have instead often been seen as a mix of considerations concerning human rights, relations with Russia, and relations with Germany.

At the same time, in the short term and in certain circumstances, France's policy has dedicated some attention to nationalities in the Eastern Baltic, and changed its stance according to circumstances. Networks of people interested in Baltic questions have sometimes been left free to influence civil society debates but also official French policy. In 1918–20, these networks consisted mostly of Baltic representatives and their friends in Paris. In the early 1920s, fear of Bolshevism inspired the French to consider the Baltic states more positively as outposts of the West against Lenin: the geopolitical stage was set for a cultural reassessment of these small nations as essential parts of the European cultural landscape. The return of the Soviet Union to the international arena in the late 1920s and the rise of tensions with Germany in the 1930s would once again place these relations with the Baltic states in question as the French leadership proceeded to lean increasingly on Moscow for support against Berlin.

In the late 1980s, pro-Baltic networks rallied French personalities interested in raising consciousness about the Baltic cause or in boosting their own profile through defending a widely publicized human rights cause. At the end of the Cold War, perceptions of small states in the Eastern Baltic had also changed: Finland was considered a Scandinavian country, while the Soviet Union's Baltic republics were also seen through France's non-recognition of their annexation and incorporation into the Soviet territory as stabilized but oppressed political and cultural groups. Time had passed since 1918, and memories of relations had accumulated.

A parallel with the Ukrainian case obviously comes to mind – would it be possible to look at the same patterns and levels in order to obtain a multi-faceted image of France's reactions to the Ukrainian crisis? Ukraine has had an ambiguous position in France's policy, from a short period of support for Ukrainian independence in 1917–18⁹⁵ to the indifference of the Cold War, but one can observe the same elements in play in a rather ambiguous, rapidly changing pattern. Franco-Ukrainian relations in the 1980s–90s were dominated by France's relations with Russia and its reluctant stance towards the possibility of Ukrainian independence.⁹⁶ France has also had little economic contact with Ukraine.⁹⁷ However, the June 1992 bilateral treaty signed with France was Ukraine's first treaty with a Western European country. In the early 2000's, the Orange Revolution made Ukraine a darling of the French press, a cause worth defending against Vladimir Putin's Russia.⁹⁸ In a wider context where post-2004 France forged closer ties to Washington, geopolitics allowed a window for more positive perceptions of Ukraine to surface, and sympathy abounded (*Le Monde's* editorial on 25 November 2004, was entitled *Sauver l'Ukraine*)⁹⁹ even if moderation remained the official approach in 2014: in a February 2015 radio interview, just before the second Minsk meeting, France's Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius emphasised that while

⁹⁵ Cf. Volodymyr Kosyk, *La politique de la France à l'égard de l'Ukraine, mars 1917-février 1918* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1981), 181–214; Castelbajac, Gasquet, Soutou, *Recherches sur la France*, 127–139.

⁹⁶ John Edwin Mroz and Oleksander Pavliuk, "Ukraine, Europe's linchpin", *Foreign Affairs*, 75:3 (May-June 1996), 58.

⁹⁷ Olga Alexandrova, "Ukraine and Western Europe", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 20 (1996), 145–170.

⁹⁸ Valentyna Dymytrova, "La "révolution orange" dans le prisme des éditoriaux de la presse française", *Sens et représentation en conflit: controverses et différends textuels*, ed. by Karsten Forbrig, Cloé Tessier (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2011), 117–127.

⁹⁹ In *Le Figaro*, Joseph Macé-Scaron reminded readers that "Ukrainian identity is not a fantasy" ("Le goût du tatami", *Le Figaro*, 4.12.2004), something only very few French commentators would have taken for granted only 20 years before.

there was general agreement on not recognizing Crimea's annexation *de jure*, contesting it by force was out of the question.¹⁰⁰ With all due consideration to context, echoes of the Baltic case might be too loud to ignore, and future scholars should be able to look beneath the surface at networks and lobbying efforts: going further back in time, examples of pro-Ukrainian activism in France start with the 1917–18 network of Jean Pélissier, a journalist and writer who contributed to achieving the semi-recognition of Ukraine by France in the winter 1917–18.¹⁰¹

Under a surface of geopolitical logic, various elements are involved: the general framework of international relations, France's domestic policy, the pressures of public opinion and values, the influence of groups and personalities, the cumulative memory of past relations, etc. If most of the time the iron logic of geopolitics and the demands of European stability shape France's policy towards these small states, other elements can come into play in times of crisis. While it has generally been interested in maintaining the *status quo* (increasingly so as its status as a great power has vanished), France has at times favoured a more positive view of small and peripheral Eastern European states. On the surface, France's foreign policy might provide only a skewed image of the way various elements interact, and render it difficult to decipher moments of sudden change. These have to be replaced in the general environment of France's action and completed by way of subtler incentives (personal relations, bilateral contacts, culture, networks, a history of long-term relations, etc.) found in the depths of France's foreign relations and political decision-making. To make full sense of rapidly changing French policy towards peripheral areas such as the Baltic states and Finland, all these elements have to be woven into the narrative.

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¹⁰⁰ 11/02/2015 - Paris - Déclaration Officielle - Ukraine - Russie - Entretien de M. Laurent Fabius, ministre des affaires étrangères et du développement international, avec France Inter, <<http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/exl-doc/EPJ00403905.pdf>> (accessed 20 May 2015).

¹⁰¹ Cf. Castelbajac, Gasquet, Soutou, *Recherches sur la France*, 127–139.

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KOKKUVÕTE: *Kas ainult “ettevaatlikkus, pragmatism ja künism”? Prantsusmaa ja Baltimaade suhted kriisiaastatel (1918–1922; 1988–1992)*

Prantsusmaa suhted Balti riikide ja Soomega on olnud uurimisobjektiks peamiselt geostrateegilistele aspektidele keskenduvatele käsitlustele. Need esitavad Prantsusmaa poliitikat kui künnilist ja ettevaatlikku, mis tegeles peamiselt Venemaa kui stabiliseeriva jõu toetamisega Baltikumis. Kuid siinkohal leiavad käsitlemist ka teistsugused komponendid Prantsuse suhtumises neisse väikeriikidesse, pakkudes mitmekesisema pildi Prantsusmaa Soome ja Balti riikide suunal teostatud poliitikast. See esitatav pilt, sealhulgas eriti kumulatiivse iseloomuga ajaloolise mälu ja isiklike võrgustike mõju, kinnitab Prantsuse poliitikas asetleidnud teistsuguseid arenguid, mis leidsid väljenduse just kriisiaastatel. Artikkel soovib näidata, et kuigi geopoliitiline olukord ja suhted Venemaaga panid paika Prantsuse Ida-Balti poliitika üldisema raamistiku, olid selle kõrval olulised ka teised aspektid, mida ei tohiks unustada.