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Journey to Latvia

By Michael R. Caputo

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RIGA, Latvia. -- Talbot's spilled all over the Riga Radisson Hotel last week. Brooks Brothers had a go too, from the looks of it. In fact, hundreds of Bush administration staffers were enjoying an agreeable Baltic springtime, preparing for the president's meeting with Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga and her colleagues from nearby Lithuania and Estonia.

The preppy invasion isn't remarkable just because Latvians don't wear chinos, whale belts or tartan plaid. Folks here live a distinctly post-communist life, still shaking off the hangover of 50 years of Soviet occupation. But since most Rigans are Russian, welcoming the Americans is like politely holding open the henhouse door for a phalanx of foxes.

While Mr. Bush meets with his Baltic contemporaries, more than a third of Latvia couldn't care less: local Russians, especially the youth. Many Latvian young people I spoke with also shrug off the visit but are proud to have the world watching.

They should be. Latvia's economic growth rivals that of any leading European Union nation while unemployment is dropping like a stone. Mortgages are flowing freely into the community at interest rates better than those in America, backed by pots of cheap money from the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development. But beneath this veneer of accomplishment, very real and deliberate racial discrimination stinks up the place.

Ethnic Russians, most living here for generations, were flatly denied citizenship when the Communist Party was run out in the early 1990s. Of course, after World War II the Soviets' deliberate "Russification" policy resulted in almost 10 Russians "immigrating" for each Latvian forcefully deported to Josef Stalin's labor camps. As a result, today up to 550,000 of the nation's 2.3 million inhabitants are Russian.

But in fact, Latvia is one of the thorniest battlegrounds of modern times. Nationalist sentiment is rooted somewhat in widespread collaboration with Nazi Germany, when Latvians fought to end a year of Soviet occupation in 1941. Later the Soviets, sweeping out the Nazis, picked up their own Latvian supporters. Across decades, many Latvians who chose sides fought their own brothers and cousins. This unique divide still inspires a lot of finger-pointing.

Nowadays, the Nazi Waffen-SS is more fashionable here. Recently, as Russian children marched to protest official cancellation of more than half their native language instruction, SS veterans gathered nearby to march in celebration of their Nazi past. Meanwhile, Russians born and raised in the country can't vote, join the police, or even staff key industries.

Unlike any other residents, Russians who want citizenship must endure a Latvian language proficiency exam. The accompanying bureaucracy takes sometimes up to a year

to finalize applications. Meanwhile, passports are held for paperwork purposes and the Byzantine process frustrates applicants at every turn.

But local Russians like Alexander Nacharov aren't much concerned about citizenship. Born and raised in Latvia, his Russian parents sent him to Moscow where he graduated from TOURO College in finance. Today, as the head of Baltic operations for a leading global investment firm, he embodies the "noncitizen" debate. Like many Russians at the entrepreneurial core of Latvia, he is unwilling to forgo the international travel associated with his nascent business.

"I am Russian to my toes," Mr. Nacharov told me over lunch in Jurmala, the picturesque nearby Baltic Sea resort. "I am also very proud of my Latvian roots. I don't think I truly suffer from discrimination; it's more an inconvenience, like a traffic jam."

In fact, his opinion mirrored those of most young Latvians I met: Only politicians really care about this debate. Comments by a Latvian legislator or Russian President Vladimir Putin on the issue, are ignored by most of the young professional class.

Despite popular indifference, the "noncitizen" issue repeatedly lights up the political landscape. Mrs. Vike-Freiberga has moved in the right direction recently, mostly because her anti-Soviet administration now recognizes Russia-oriented investment fuels its economic growth. As the historical crossroads of Eastern Europe, Latvia better hope it stays that way: Their economic opportunity will remain anchored in Russia for decades.

Perhaps the Bush Summit will help steer the Latvians away from this reeking policy of discrimination. But for everyday Latvians and Russians, who still rarely mix, the visit is politics as usual. "We know the debate must work itself out soon," Mr. Nacharov told me. "Meanwhile, I am a man without a country who is willing to wait and see."

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