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## WHY THE BALTICS WANT TO MOVE TO ANOTHER PART OF EUROPE

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If you happen to think the three Baltic nations -- Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia -- are East European, post-Soviet states, be careful not to say so to politicians from the three small nations. They are proud North Europeans or even Nordics, and they will take issue with those who disagree.

Last week, the ambassadors representing all three nations in Germany signed a letter to the editor of the daily Die Zeit asking him to exclude the Baltic states from a series on the Soviet Union's "successor states" tied to the 25th anniversary of the empire's fall. The missive, widely reported back in the Baltics, explained that Soviet Union's occupation of the three nations was illegal and also never formally recognized by the West.

On Sunday, Artis Pabriks, Latvia's former foreign minister and now a European Parliament member, joyfully tweeted a link to a United Nations Statistics Division web page, adding, "UN officially changes status of Baltic states from Eastern Europe to Northern Europe. This is where we belong." Though Pabriks was wrong -- the UN's classification hasn't changed in almost two decades -- the tweet set off press reports about the status change and sympathetic reactions from politicians. "Finally," Marko Mihkelson, head of the Estonian parliament's foreign affairs committee, wrote on Facebook. "It makes perfect sense in geographic and geopolitical terms."

This sore spot is not new. In 2014, when The Guardian set up the New East network -- a group of contributors from what is commonly known as Eastern Europe -- the Lithuanian ambassador in London objected to her country being called part of the "post-Soviet world." Toomas Hendrik Ilves, then-president of Estonia, was exasperated, too. "Maybe The Guardian can cover the U.S. in its 'Former British Empire' section," he tweeted.

These arguments, however, make little sense. Willing or not, the Baltic countries were part of the Soviet Union. They were subject to its economic planning and migration policies, a history that is far more recent than the colonial past of the U.S. or almost any former part of the British Empire. The Baltic nations' large, often disenfranchised, Russian minorities are a lasting legacy of the Soviet past, with Concord, the party representing the Russian-speaking population in Latvia, winning a plurality of the vote in the last parliamentary election. "Post-Soviet" is not an insult but a statement of fact.

Going back even further, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia spent most of the last two centuries as part of Russian-dominated empires. Russian military might forced them to gravitate east rather than

north, toward Sweden, or West, toward Germany across the Baltic Sea.

Yet the Baltics' desire to be part of Europe has some good reasons behind it.

Small countries have a problem: Few people who are not from them can place them on the map. To investors in their posh offices in New York, London and Singapore, "post-Soviet" practically means "Russian" and "East European" means "post-Communist." That carries connotations of corruption, poverty and the danger of a Russian invasion -- the latter something Baltic governments take extremely seriously themselves. North Atlantic Treaty Organization membership is a defense, but it doesn't put any distance between Russia and the Baltic states. Mental distance -- the kind Poles seek when they want their country to be part of Central, not Eastern Europe -- will have to suffice for lack of anything better.

And then there is the Baltic method of setting high goals and then working doggedly to meet them. In Latvia, many responded to Pabriks's tweet with open derision, pointing out that the country is one of the poorest in the European Union, while Nordic nations are among the wealthiest. Technically, that's true. In terms of nominal per capita economic output, Estonia, the wealthiest of the three nations, is only one-third as rich as Denmark or Sweden and 59 percent poorer than Finland.

#### Not Quite Nordics Yet

Economically, compared with the Nordics, the Baltics approach East Germany's position relative to West Germany right before the country's reunification. A little more than a quarter-century later, the eastern German states are at two-thirds the per capita economic output of the Western ones. The Baltic states would like to pull themselves up as the former East Germany did, knowing full well that it won't get anywhere near the massive aid Germany's new states received. This is the kind of lofty goal the Baltics set soon after the Soviet Union fell apart: EU and NATO membership. It seemed remote in the 1990's, and it took determination and sacrifice, but it worked. Estonia and Latvia are now members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development -- the developed nations' club set up to share the best practices of government and economic management.

Declaring themselves part of Northern Europe is intended to work in the same way: First you just say it, then it grows on you. Early last year, the Estonian capital of Tallinn signed an agreement with the Finnish capital of Helsinki to build a railroad connecting the two cities via a 57-mile tunnel under the Baltic Sea. At an estimated cost of \$14 billion, it would effectively turn the two cities into a single metropolis, stitching the Baltics to Scandinavia. It's unclear when the project may be completed, but Finland, not just Estonia, is keenly interested: It has a better land link with Russia than with most of Europe.

In the final analysis, Baltic aspirations for membership in a different part of Europe is about making Europe more homogeneous. The EU has done a middling job of it despite its best intentions, and perhaps it couldn't achieve relative economic homogeneity without the centralized budget that unified Germany had. That the three Baltic countries are determined to try it themselves is commendable, though on the surface, it may look as though they're merely unhappy with their geography.

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