

TOURISM AS A NATION-BUILDING TOOL IN THE BALTIC REPUBLICS

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ABSTRACT: *The development of tourism involves constructing an identity for the outside world to see and therefore requires deliberate choices about the representation of history, internal social dynamics, and relationships with neighboring countries. This paper explores the potential for tourism to serve as a political tool in the construction of national identity. An overview of existing research in this area is followed by discussion of emerging tourism rhetoric in the newly independent Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The paper explores the possibility that tourism rhetoric and other material intended for tourist consumption is consciously politicized to convey Anti-Soviet messages and to compliment and exhibit "Western" values such as freedom, democracy, and love of nature. The paper investigates the potential agenda behind this strategy – the courting of Americans and Europeans with hopes that tourist-host interaction will yield closer political and economic ties with the West. The paper also addresses the potentially divisive effects of pro-Western, Anti-Soviet rhetoric on the current population.*

INTRODUCTION

Analyses of the tourism industry in the newly independent Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania generally focus on the recent boom or potential for further development. According to Hofheinz, "[t]ourism could be to Latvia what crude oil is to Saudi Arabia" (Hofheinz, 1991:70). This paper explores the industry as more than an important economic sector. It is one means to a larger political and social end – stronger ties to the West. The first part of the paper considers tourism as "placemaking" – an exchange between host and guest in which the host conveys a highly tailored image of place. This process can be instrumental in the nation-building project of newly independent states. The second part of the paper addresses the Baltic tourism campaign, which seeks to connect the region with the West and disconnect it from Eastern Europe and especially Russia. Analysis explores the images and rhetoric a Western visitor to Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania might expect to consume, and it addresses the possible outcome of the pro-Western placemaking campaign – intensified alienation of an internal Russian population. The final section of the paper briefly considers the larger international relations picture and speculates about the role tourism may play in the

Baltic States' drive to join Western economic and political organizations such as the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

TOURISM AS PLACEMAKING

Tourism is the largest global industry in terms of employment and revenues. One estimate suggests that one of every 15 workers worldwide is engaged in transporting, feeding and otherwise serving tourists (Knox and Marston, 1998). At the same time, because tourism is a leisure industry it is extraordinarily vulnerable under circumstances of recession; tourists can also be diverted away from a particular place given the slightest disincentive. As the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on prominent US military and economic targets City's and the Tamil separatist attack several weeks earlier on Sri Lanka's Katunake airport reveal, the industry can crash at a moment's notice regardless of whether the locale is a metropolitan core city or a small South Asian island nation. Even under ideal circumstances of global economic upswing and relative peace, tourist locales must compete against each other for the fickle tourist's attention. Ultimately then, tourism planners must be strategic, aiming to attract a certain

clientele through the production of unique images that will differentiate one place from another in the tourist's consciousness (Williams, 1998).

The process of placemaking, described by Knox and Marston (1998) is one of deliberate selection of imagery and rhetoric that will represent and synopsize the history, culture, and environment of a location. The literature, rhetoric, and sights to which the tourist participating on an organized tour is exposed are designed to create an unambiguous image of life in the host region. Hosts anticipate the diffusion of this image upon the tourist's return home, for as MacCannell (1999 158) suggests, "It is in the act of sightseeing that the representation of the true society is formulated and refined...The tourists return home carrying souvenirs and talking of their experiences, spreading wherever they go a vicarious experience of the sight". While some tourists will surely seek and find a more complex reality, mass tourists engaged in organized tours are usually captive audiences awaiting the formulation of a consciousness about host locations and then processing the information among themselves. Tourists refer their questions to the original information source (the expert guide), hence the learning process is contained. Should the tourist venture away from the group, the diversion is generally controlled to some degree; he or she is provided with a list of appropriate excursions.

The proliferation of tourism has generated a corresponding proliferation of critiques, most questioning the degree to which packaging places and peoples for consumption constitutes exploitation of the host and at times, the tourist. In one particularly trenchant critique, Nicholson-Lord (1997) summarizes the concerns of many other critics of ecotourism and cultural tourism when he notes parallels between theoretically low-impact, "alternative" tourism and colonialism. The concern here is with the exploitative marketing of indigenous cultures and environmentally sensitive areas. On the heritage tourism front, Fjellmann (1992) points out the contradictions behind sights such as Disney World, which in seeking a mix of amusement and educational exhibits (e.g., "Frontier Land") may egregiously misrepresent history. Fjellmann claims that this process is supported by underpaid costumed laborers who represent the real American poverty that is explicitly not on display in Disney's world.

Tourism as a Political Tool

Critiques of tourism by authors such as Nicholson-Lord and Fjellman reveal that, far from having a low-level impact, the leisure industry rests precariously and heavily on the backs and the resources of others. These concerns are increasingly common. However, analyses that explore some of the more overt political dimensions of tourism are not as widespread. For example, few studies address tourism rhetoric as a tool in the construction of national identity. Sears (1989) and Vickers (1989) are notable exceptions. Sears explores the role of early American tourism sights such as Niagara Falls in unifying a fragmented, multi-denominational society around symbolic natural icons. He suggests that guidebooks and other descriptive literature attracted anyone (who could afford the trip) to sights that were inherently non-denominational, thus allowing Americans of all faiths to share a common, experience. Sears suggests that the early industry focus on *natural* sights as opposed to cultural sights helped to distinguish America, the frontier nation, from Europe, the cultural and urbanized landscape. In short, Sears argues that Niagara Falls and other sights were instrumental in building national consciousness, especially in a pluralistic society where common experiences were needed to unify the public. His commentary stops short, however, of exploring the implications of nation-building through tourism. For example, he does not discuss the Native American displacement process by which Yosemite became an American icon, or the fact that constructing Yosemite as an icon contributed to the legitimizing of that displacement.

More recent tourism analyses have addressed the social fallout of placemaking. Observers of tourism in Hawaii, Indonesia, Tahiti, and other "exotic" locales have noted the potential for real cultural transition when youth emulate the simplified culture displays intended for consumption by outsiders (Herman, 1999). Since the idealized images of life served up by the tourism industry may become real models for cultural practice, one must question their impact upon the host population. In his study of the evolution of Indonesian Bali as a tourist destination, Vickers (1989) argues that creating and reproducing images for tourist consumption can construct a culture where no definitive culture actually exists. In this case,

President Sukarno encouraged the display of a harmonious Balinese culture to tourists and visiting heads of state as a showcase of the success of Indonesia's early nationhood. This political imperative promoted the selective articulation of this particular Indonesian subculture as a means of exemplifying to outsiders the harmony of the new Indonesian state. Balinese artists were encouraged to perpetuate certain images. Vickers describes the effect of many decades of self-representation to outsiders on the Balinese people, suggesting that tourism produced a more defined vision of culture than what previously existed:

Balinese culture is strong because of tourism, not despite it. Tourism defines what Balinese culture is in a context where such definitions have hitherto not been needed, and it defines Balinese identity within Indonesia. Balinese and other Indonesians talk about tourism in terms of 'us' Balinese/Indonesians versus 'them', the tourists (Vickers, 1989:198).

While the Indonesian case reveals the political utility of tourism in providing representative cultural images where true cultural cohesion does not exist, the case of German post-war tourism reveals the unique potential of this industry to maintain nationalist consciousness, even when forces act to suppress such consciousness. Confino (2000) asserts that in the aftermath of the Second World War many Germans wished to preserve their faith in the Third Reich but could not openly do so. They found only a few means by which to celebrate their national socialist history; tourism was one method since the industry is inherently selective in its recounting of history. In short, tourism rhetoric focused on the glories of the autobahn project and not on the horrors of genocide. Tourism, Confino argues was a sanctioned tool in the maintenance of a national socialist consciousness in a post-war era when other expressions of support for the Third Reich would have been considered clear political statements, hence unthinkable. Ultimately, this study suggests that tourism can achieve political aims in part *because* the industry is perceived as apolitical.

The discussion of tourism in the Baltic republics seeks to extend the analysis of tourism as a political tool. The discussion asks whether tourism rhetoric, because of its tendency to deliberately

differentiate social groups from each other, can contribute to stereotyping or discrimination against particular groups? It also asks whether tourists can unknowingly or subconsciously join in such discrimination after absorbing skewed versions of history that present social groups in a particular light. Finally, it asks whether tourism can be considered a pseudo foreign-relations practice in which tourists replace diplomats in a political game aimed at ingratiating tourist-sending countries. These questions arise from a realization that the tourism agents of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian seem uniformly determined to portray their countries as spirited democracy-loving nations that possess a natural love of America and a shared Western history of victimization by the Russian/Soviet regime.

PLACEMAKING IN THE BALTIC STATES

Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia are not new to tourism. Estonia has been a favorite destination of Finns for decades, while Latvia's beaches and curative coastal mudbath resorts attracted Russian elite long before the Soviet era began. The modern industries that have arisen since independence in the early 1990s differ significantly though. They are clearly geared toward a wider variety of tourists, namely Northern and Western Europeans and Americans. The Russian market is no longer sought after. In addition, tourism rhetoric is highly nationalistic; this involves tales of persecution under the Soviet system and of glorious independence after the fall of the USSR. Indeed, the Baltic States have almost completely disassociated themselves with the imagery of the Soviet Union, choosing not to capitalize on communist icon souvenirs or mythology. This differentiates them from countries such as Hungary, where "KGB" wristwatches and Soviet era military paraphernalia are on sale from street vendors, and where dining at a Budapest restaurant once known to host secret police is part of the tourist expectation (Vamosm, 1997). The question is why the difference in strategy? Perhaps one could argue that the Baltics and other post-Soviet bloc countries must compete for European tourists and must therefore market themselves differently

from each other. So while Hungary represents its history through an embrace of cold war images, the Baltic States approach their history by emphasizing the end of the Soviet era and their rebirth as independent republics. Estonia's Russian neighbor, the port city of St Petersburg celebrates its rebirth too (although it has not changed the "Leningrad" sign that welcomes the visitor to the Neva River corridor into the city), and does so by reducing visa restrictions in hopes of attracting tourists away from Tallinn (Radio Free Europe, 2001). Different approaches to tourism are necessary in a fickle and competitive industry. But, it is naive to assume that Baltic tourism planners choose not to exploit cold war imagery only because this imagery is associated with other Eastern European tourist destinations. Baltic tourism developers are state agents and in addition to acting as economic planners, they can act on political agendas and utilize the industry as a tool of foreign relations. An exploration of Baltic tourism discourse and its possible underlying political agendas draws on tourist literature and the author's observations during a six-day regional cruise taken in June 2001.

Westward Ho!

Each of the Baltic States has its own tourism repertoire, including specific anecdotes, monuments, and tales of heritage and culture. Indeed, tour guides in each country appear to take great pains to differentiate their country from the others. Each country has its own history and its own linguistic and religious patterns; these differences are stressed. One learns that Lithuania has a strong tradition of Catholicism melded with paganism but that Estonia has a strong Lutheran tradition. One also learns that Estonian, as an Altaic language, is virtually incomprehensible to speakers of Indo-European languages such as Lithuanian. If one keeps count of the actual differences between the countries as deliberately detailed by tour guides, one will see that they are numerous. Yet, the average tourist on the ever-more common Baltic Sea Tour might still depart the Baltic States with an overwhelming sense of having toured different regions of a single country. There is a common "medieval" element in the urban landscapes across the region and there is the common history these states share as reluctant republics of the

Soviet Union. There is also the consistent disdain with which Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanian guides refer to their Soviet past. Finally, there is a ubiquitous celebration of Western individualism and economic practices, albeit tempered with recognition of capitalism's flaws (poverty among the elderly for example). At times, it seems a goal to convince American tourists that Baltic peoples somehow naturally emulate "Western" values when freed from the chains of communism. Tour guides portray their countries as victims rising from the ashes. The common message that ultimately emerges is this: "We want to return to our natural Western roots. We are friends. We are not comrades." Whether the individual tour guides themselves feel this way is another story, but in terms of the official sentiment conveyed by the largely state-run tourism industries, the Baltic States are moving along the bumpy, but nearly universally supported road of capitalism and are moving toward tighter ties with the West. A closer look at the content of tourism discourse and at the selection of sights presented to the American tourist reveals the deliberateness of the message.

One method of conveying the closeness of the Baltic States and the West is simply to substantiate the Western cultural roots and values of a society. Baltic state tourism rhetoric asserts not just that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are friends of the West, but that they are essentially Western (Bendure et al., 2001). This is especially true of Estonia, which is characterized by a popular British tourbook company as "the most Western of the [post] Soviet republics" (Bendure et al., 2001 119). The Estonian Tourist Board website also strongly proclaims this message. The website commences with a historical overview that asserts an unquestionable European-ness with the statement that Estonians "are the longest settled of the European peoples" (Estonian Tourism Board, 2001). If one peruses the website, one easily finds other references to the West: The Estonian Kroon is pegged to the German Mark and the country follows Eastern European time. There are also unmistakable references to sacred American values. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution. Religious services in most of Tallinn's (largely Lutheran) churches are in English, and the American love of nature park tourism is, according to the website shared by Estonians.¹ Indeed, the tourist learns that the "only way to really get to know nature and local culture is by hiking," in one of the four

national parks or 14 local reserves. For those who prefer a more leisurely day in the sun, golf courses designed in the "Florida style" are not hard to find. Apparently "golf is not just sports but a lifestyle" in Estonia (Estonian Tourist Board, 2001). Kurth (1999) also observes a surface layer of Americanization:

[I]t is impossible to miss. It is unavoidable not only because one now expects to find it in all of the ex-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but also one of its embodiments is the glittering high-rise office buildings that now loom over – and break up – the medieval, neoclassical or art nouveau skylines of Tallinn, Riga and even the Estonian university town of Tartu. This...reality consists of young and energetic entrepreneurs, high-tech business services and sleek retail stores.

Latvian and Lithuanian tourism rhetoric is not as overt in the suggestion that this region exemplifies Western values. However, the rhetoric does share the Estonian Tourist Board emphasis on a heritage *more* deeply rooted in Western cultural values rather than in Russian culture. This is no surprise given that guides across the region attend state-regulated tourism courses before they are deemed capable of leading international tours. If certified, guides are presumably knowledgeable about the demographics of their tourist populations and what these tourists should, in theory, want to hear. Lithuanian tour guides seem to think that American tourists appreciate classical European architecture. They anxiously convey the Westernness of their country by pointing to the pre-Soviet architectural influences in cities such as Vilnius. This is done by discounting the cultural validity of Soviet block housing (*mikrorayons*) that ring the suburbs and instead emphasizing the Italian influence of architecture in the urban center. Latvian guides laud other Western values, such as the ability to own private property. The Latvian love of this principle is conveyed through a recounting of the hardships of sharing kitchen facilities in Soviet-era cooperative housing and *mikrorayons*.

The critique of the Soviet system is embedded in pro-Western rhetoric but it is also carried out directly. Tour guides in all three Baltic countries consistently convey disdain for the Soviet system and, at times, the contemporary Russian

people. They do so in a way that suggests a natural camaraderie with Western tourists. It seems that some guides assume tourists share a continuing, post-Cold War suspicion and dislike of the East. The unstated message preceding anti-Soviet anecdotes is: "we all know how terrible the Soviet system was, and here are some examples to verify this." The anti-Soviet anecdotes are remarkably similar in all three countries. Soviet blight is a common theme. Tallinn tour guides point out the crumbling Olympic village complex built under the Soviet government for the 1980 games. The abandoned Soviet-era factories are also crumbling and deemed worthless. In Lithuania the tourist hears that the Ignalina region Soviet-era nuclear power plant is unfortunately of Russian design and destined to become another Chernobyl if it is not closed. And in the countryside the tourist hears that agriculture is one hundred years behind because of the failure of collectivization and decline of Soviet-era machinery. Only the depth of Russian incompetence matches the depth of this aesthetic and economic blight. The incompetence theme is exemplified by a tale of a botched Soviet bombing raid in Tallinn in 1944. Pilots mistook a frozen lake for an airfield and a residential district for the old city.

One final theme common to tourism in all three Baltic countries is the struggle for independence from the USSR. This theme is not surprising because independence is a recent phenomenon and an important aspect of the region's history. Yet, the vehemence and emotion with which tales are told can compel nationalist sentiments in visitors as well. The tourist learns that on August 23, 1989, the fiftieth anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that led the Baltic States into the Soviet sphere, an estimated two million people linked hands across the three republics in a call for independence (Bendure et al., 2001). Estonian guides also tell their own story of a gradual and persistent affront to the Soviets, beginning in 1989 with the posting of the Estonian flag on an ancient fortress complex in Tallinn. The tale ultimately reveals a victory of independence through song. According to Estonian Tourism Bureau guides, a population lacking a sense of national unity until the mid nineteenth century came together in a Tallinn stadium for a national song festival and sang nationalist songs after the official Soviet program was over (Kurth, 1999).² The story of the "singing revolution" is matched by Lithuanian

stories of death and patriotism at a rally near a Vilnius television tower. Here, Soviet tanks and troops killed 14 people and injured many more as they fought through a crowd encircling it and calling for independence on January 12, 1991. Latvian tourism discourse also has an independence theme. Tourists in Riga should expect to see Riga's Freedom Monument, where over 5000 people rallied for freedom on June 14, 1987, and the Occupation Museum (Davidoff et al., 1995).

Tourism and Ethnic Divisiveness

In essence, Baltic tourism discourse clarifies social and cultural identities and divisions. Several outcomes are already apparent or are imminent. First, the practice of repeatedly denigrating the Soviet system through tourism rhetoric can reinforce the contemporary tensions between "natives" and the substantial Russian minorities that remain in each of these countries. Such reinforcement can occur because tourism rhetoric *does* very often trickle into the host society (witness the Hawaii case), and can influence behavior of citizens. In the case of Estonia and Latvia, tour guides laud current citizenship policies that require minority Russians be proficient in the native language before being granted full citizenship rights. The "Russian Question" of whether minority Russian speakers should in fact face such restrictions to citizenship, is no small issue. In Latvia, 35% of the population is Russian and Latvians themselves compose only 56% of the country's population. In Estonia, 28% of the population is Russian (Bendure et al., 2001). There is some evidence that Russians are learning native language out of economic necessity in these two countries (The Economist, 2001). If they do not, their political disenfranchisement affects job options. Concession by Russians is not complete, however. Nor does it indicate a resolution of tensions. One need only consider the continuing tensions between Tamil and Sinhala speakers in Sri Lanka or tensions between Francophones and Anglophones in Quebec to realize that cultural adaptation by coercion does not make for good longstanding inter-ethnic relations. The average tourist does not see the entirety of The Russian Question though and, based on commentary by tour guides, is led to believe that the citizenship policy is a sort of "affirmative action" policy to

redress mistreatment of natives, who were minorities within the USSR.

Tourism also reinforces the message that the Russians in society are not as westernized as Baltic natives. If the discourse serves to create an image of Western values, then it also indirectly suggests that those who are somehow less Western to begin with might be less well adjusted in the post-Cold War period. Lauristin and Vihalemm (1997) do observe a more profound value shift from collectivism to individualism in Estonian society based on a comparison of social behavior shifts in Russian and native populations between 1991 and 1995 (Jablonski, 1999). The sense that there is more catching up necessary for the Russian population is only reinforced through tourism rhetoric that defines Baltic natives as inherently Western. The message of ethnic discrepancies in westernization is surely conveyed to tourists. Kurth (1999) comments on how the anti-Russian commentary he encountered on a visit to Latvia and Estonia led him to believe, against his own intuition, that "the typical Russian male is "the most contemptible human being found on the face of the earth – a mean spirited crude drunken lout who degrades public places, abuses his wife, and disgraces himself" (Kurth, 1999 84). In short, even the most socially conscious tourists might find their perspectives shaped to accept ethnic stereotyping. At times this stereotyping is obvious. For example, in Lithuania, the American tourist might learn that people in the lowland region are naturally "slow and stubborn," while those in the highland are wealthy from their bountiful wheat production but also "naturally stubborn." Statements about Russian minorities are not always so obviously stereotypical, hence even vigilant tourists can be taken in.

PLACEMAKING: THE BROADER FOREIGN RELATIONS CONTEXT

Given the potential for tourism rhetoric to fuel ethnic divisiveness in the region, there is clearly a cost to this placemaking strategy. However, the gain may be worth it if tourists leave with a true sense of camaraderie with their Baltic hosts. A positive experience could translate into repeat visits

and long-term commitments to the region. For example, retirees may decide to purchase summer homes here, as many Finns have already done. As is evidenced in South and Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, repeat visitors (and part-time residents) are liable to eventually invest in the region, very often beginning with tourism-related ventures (e.g., hotels, restaurants). In turn these investors tend to protect their interests by promoting positive foreign relations between their home and adopted countries. In short, one can see that the tailoring of tourism discourse to court the West may have benefits that extend beyond the initial tourist exchange. Stepping back a bit, one can see a bigger picture in which the stronger economic and social integration spawned in part by tourism may facilitate a major goal of all three Baltic governments – acceptance into the European Union and NATO.

Since their independence, the Baltic States have lobbied for inclusion in the European Union. At that time, it was a common belief that the success of economic revitalization would rely on ties with the West rather than with Russia, which was itself in turmoil. With Soviet-era industries languishing and with agricultural yields suffering in the aftermath of decollectivization, the Baltic Republics were heavily reliant on foreign investment to jump start new enterprises (Hofheinz, 1991). This remains true more than a decade after independence. By some accounts, Estonia is the furthest ahead because it has always been an economic innovation hearth in the area (Liuhto, 1996). It has historic economic ties to Germany and Britain, both of which invested heavily in its paper mills and other industries prior to Soviet occupation. It also has strong contemporary ties with Finland, Sweden, and Egypt. By other accounts, Lithuania fancies itself the future “Hong Kong of the West” and has aggressively sought to establish joint ventures with Polish, German, and American investors immediately following independence (Hofheinz, 1991). There has even been talk of making the Baltic States a large cheap manufacturing zone to attract industry from Western Europe. This would reduce the Baltics to a free trade zone economy on the border of the European Union.

From the Baltic perspective, a better solution would be membership in the European Union. Currently this goal is thwarted by the Baltic States’ failure to meet necessary economic criteria (The Economist, 2001). Moreover, some Western

countries consider it to be a human rights violation that Estonia and Latvia refuse to grant ethnic Russians citizenship unless they master the native language. Tourism may be a means of moderating these barriers to EU membership by marketing a better image on both the economic growth front and the so-called “Russian Question.” With respect to the economic deficiencies, one observer notes that “[t]he cities are deceptive showcases for their countries. Tourists and visiting officials are charmed by the architecture and impressed by the friendliness. They see good restaurants and hotels but they do not see the bleak housing estates, the factories and bumpy roads” (The Economist, 2001, 23). As for the Russian Question, tourist guides in Estonia and Latvia aggressively and repetitively seek to overturn the Western European image of Russians as victims of an intolerant ethnocentric language policy. Rather, they assert that national citizenship policy is a matter of cultural preservation – a reality of life on the border of mother Russia where years of Russification have destabilized local language and religion. Clearly, winning the hearts of Western tourists is not enough to win membership in the European Union, but at the same time, tourism should not be overlooked as part of a body of foreign relations practices aimed at winning the hearts and political support of Westerners.

In addition to supporting a push for EU membership, tourism may support the push for Baltic membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. According to Kurth (1999 85)

The Baltic States themselves intensely long for membership in NATO...They see it as the ultimate, perhaps the only, guarantee that they will never again be plunged into the depths of Russian occupation and oppression. They have learned, perhaps, overlearned, the lesson that any national independence that they might have can only exist within a more general dependence upon the greatest power to the West, and in this role America...is the perfect performer. The NA in NATO really stands not just for North Atlantic but for nuclear America. This is one of reason why the Baltic definition of what it means to be Western is so enthusiastically American.

American tourists cannot miss the great lengths to which the Baltic governments and public goes to conflate “West” with America, right down to the

“Missisipi” Riverboat moored on the Daugava River in Riga. In addition to the prevalence of such images in public places that travelers are sure to frequent, tour guides continually point out that the Baltics, like America, experienced the Cold War. Lithuanian guides point to the mikrorayons and tell of their infestation with secret police and other Soviet agents during the Cold War. Tourists also learn of the throngs of Soviet sailors and soldiers who manned the Baltic Sea ports (Bendure et al., 2001, Kurth, 1999). The descriptions are convincing enough to create perhaps an iota of belief in more impressionable older tourists that a Russian agenda of world domination still lurks and that Russians advancing toward Europe could again occupy the Baltic States.

Mass tourism is only one means of convincing the West that inclusion of the Baltics in NATO would be mutually beneficial. The Baltics also play host to NATO-based military exercises. There is the annual Baltic Challenge exercise, which includes military units from all NATO members bordering the Baltic Sea and large units from the United States. One high ranking Lithuanian military official admitted that this exercise is intended to showcase his country as fit for NATO: “We feel this exercise is very important in letting the soldiers of NATO countries come to Lithuania and see our cities and speak with our people...They will see that we identify ourselves as a European country” (Kitfield, 1998 2306). This is in effect a cross between military maneuver and tourist activity for the visiting troops. The Baltic Challenge is not an anomaly. Michigan, a state with a large Latvian population, sends National Guard units to Latvia annually to join local troops for summer exercises. One year, the governor accompanied the force (Kurth, 1999). In effect, he was a high-ranking tourist with political clout to support the Baltic interest in NATO.

Ultimately, the power of tourism to facilitate major foreign relations shifts such as Baltic inclusion in the EU or NATO should not be underestimated. Indeed, tourism may be extraordinarily powerful given that it is perceived of as an apolitical and thus unthreatening act. Consider the transformation of Cuba due to tourism development. One might argue that American tourist interest in Cuba will create an inroad to better relations. Tourism has been a primary mechanism for better relations between European countries and Cuba (Macaulay, 1994).

This is not to say that boatloads of American tourists will rush home from the Baltics and call their elected representatives to plea for a more open NATO. Rather, tourism might be considered an activity that subtly and cumulatively complements other foreign relations efforts.

ENDNOTES

1. Unwin (1996) takes issue with Estonian promotion of rural tourism, claiming that this is essentially an inaccurate representation of a population that is decidedly cosmopolitan in its outlook.
2. Despite rhetoric of the singing revolution’s importance to Estonian culture, Kurth found little evidence that people listen to nationalist songs. In each city he found one cassette with music from the song festival.

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