

POLITICALTOURS

Travel beyond the headlines

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The Baltics

Dates:

2020, 8 nights

Vilnius, Daugavpils, Ignalina, Riga, & Tallinn

Led by Leonid Ragozin

With the US-NATO alliance in question and a resurgent Russia on their doorstep the **Baltic states** are understandably nervous. Our tour looks at relations with their former Soviet ally, tracks tales of espionage and examines the uneasy situation with the region's Russian minority. There will be meetings with senior politicians, diplomats and members of the intelligence community for their views throughout.

We start in **Vilnius** where a new government has increased military expenditure and is one of the most vocal opponents of a resurgent Russia. The animosity isn't new. Lithuanians and Russians will give us differing accounts of Soviet times.

In neighbouring **Latvia** we find possibly the most nervous of the Baltic nations with its large Russian minority. A visit to Daugavpils "the most Russian city in the EU" illustrates worries on both sides.

We end in **Estonia** one of the most web-savvy nations in the world with its beautiful Old Town in Tallinn, where explore the possibility of a different kind of relationship with Russia.

Leonid Ragozin former BBC Russian correspondent leads the tour with contributions from leading journalists in each state.

Price: on request

Single Supplement: TBC

Most meals and all accommodation are included in the price. As on all our expert-led tours the groups are deliberately small and will not exceed 14 people. Limited spaces are available. Flights are not included in the price and need to be arranged by customers themselves or with an agent.

Like all our tours the itinerary is focused on current affairs. Events on the ground may change and the final schedule may be adjusted accordingly.

Itinerary

Day One – Vilnius

Meet at 7pm for an introduction to the week ahead with Political Tours and Leonid Ragozin. *Overnight Vilnius*

Day Two – Vilnius

We look at an overview of Lithuanian history and the Baltic's fraught relationship with its former soviet neighbour Russia. A short walk from the hotel we visit the former KGB prison used to interrogate people that only closed in 1991. After lunch we head out of the city to join Lithuanian volunteers training to resist a possible Russian invasion. Conscription was reintroduced in 2014, and 4000 civilians a year are also receiving military training. A new government was elected in 2016 promising to increase defense expenditure, but it is also concerned about the emigration of young people to Western Europe. Is Lithuania's militant opposition to Russia based on paranoia or reality? We discuss over dinner. *Overnight Vilnius*

Day Three – Vilnius – Ignalina

In the morning there is some time off to explore the wonderful city centre. Lithuania remains conservative and catholic – and we discuss the tensions that exist in society. After lunch we head north and visit a village where memories of Russia's involvement with the region are long. Many were sent from here to the gulag during and after the war only to be returned home in the mid-1950s. Others suggest the region has been too quick to jettison its ties with an erstwhile ally. We stay overnight in Ignalina, an entirely Russian city and get a very different viewpoint. *Overnight Ignalina*

Day Four – Ignalina – Daugavpils

Ignalina is as near one can get to the Soviet ideal – a city surrounded by woodland and lakes, beautifully groomed, and filled with a well cared for and highly educated Russian population. Its continued existence is thanks largely to the EU. The city's main purpose is to staff the nearby nuclear power station which is now gradually being taken to pieces. We briefly tour the town, meet local inhabitants and take a walk back in

time in a visit to the decommissioned power plant. Many here resent the fracture with Russia; does that mean they have loyalty to the Kremlin or Vilnius? Next we cross the border into neighbouring Latvia and visit one of the most Russian cities in the EU that has fared less well than Ignalina. We stay overnight in a converted manor house close to Daugavpils. *Overnight Daugavpils*

Day Five – Daugavpils – Riga

Latvia is possibly the most nervous of the Baltic states with a substantial Russian minority which it has reluctantly awarded citizenship. Latvian nationalists are as concerned about the “enemy within” as they are about Russians across the border. Daugavpils in eastern Latvia is 80% Russian and it is here that NATO planners fear a “Donetsk” scenario with Russia creating a local insurgency and possible cause to intervene and “rescue its own ethnic kin”. The city has been affected by sanctions designed to punish Russia over Ukraine – cross border trade has been hit. Many blame America for their demise. We visit an engineering plant that supplied the whole of the Russian rail network and now faces a difficult future. The city's pro-Russian mayor outlines their dilemma and wonders why the region has turned its back on what was after all it's largest market. After lunch we head to the capital, Riga. Free evening and time to explore the historic city centre. *Overnight Riga.*

Day Six – Riga

Over the next day and half we meet with senior politicians and former member of the security services to get their assessment of current relations with Russia. This includes a visit to NATO's Stratcom Unit, which deals with countering Russian propaganda and the threat of a “hybrid war” as seen in Ukraine. We also talk to Latvian and Russian nationalists for their views; 12% of Latvia's residents are still “non-citizens” – mostly ethnic Russians who didn't qualify for Latvian citizenship in 1991. The current coalition has the closure of all Russian schools written into the

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Itinerary

agreement. Dinner with leading Latvian commentators.
Overnight Riga

Day Seven – *Flight to Tallinn*

More briefings over breakfast and then a mid-day departure by plane for Tallinn (we will advise you which flight to book nearer the tour). After checking in we take a short tour of Tallinn's walled city. The Danes, Germans, and Swedes have all competed for power here but Russia has dominated in the 20th century. Today Estonia is one of the most successful states in Eastern Europe and is arguably the most web-savvy. A local journalist gives us an update on Estonian politics and at dinner a former defence minister gives his assessment of the threat from Russia. Recent incidents include the abduction of a senior intelligence officer and frequent incursions into Estonian airspace. *Overnight Tallinn*

Day Eight – *Tallinn*

While Estonia remains fiercely wedded to NATO and the EU, a new prime-minister was elected in late 2016 with strong support from the country's Russian minority. But NATO has also stationed a new brigade in the Baltics in response to Russian activity. What scope is there for a different relationship with Russia? A Latvian think tank give us their assessment. We ask supporters if there is room for an improvement in relations? At dinner we look back over the tour.
Overnight Tallinn

Day Nine – *Tallinn*

Our tour ends after breakfast