

Latvia becomes a victim of the East-West confrontation

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The foreign policy of Latvia has been providing a surprising case of balancing policy between economic wisdom and political situation for some decades. Being the EU and NATO member state, Latvia managed to fulfill its commitments and at the same time Riga maintained fruitful relationship in the economic sphere with neighbouring countries – Russia and Belarus. And this despite the fact that these two countries are seen by the European Union and the Alliance as opponents rather than friends.

But cooling of the EU and NATO's relations with Russia made such a balance impossible and forced Latvia to take such political decisions that totally harmed its economy. Thus, Latvia has gradually become a victim of the East-West confrontation.

Only one of the negative results of this confrontation is dramatic reduction of transit cargo. Russia's cargo volume has fallen sharply.

Russia's decision to build its own ports and divert traffic to them has become a direct consequence of the EU economic sanctions imposed against Russia.

In October, the largest decrease in Latvian ports was for coal transported to the main coal terminal on the Russian Island in Riga. Of the planned average of 118 wagons, only 39 were received per day.

The more so, in October, the Russian side did not coordinate 94% of the requested amount of coal cargo – customers wanted to receive more than 4,800 coal wagons to Latvian ports, but got only 279. In November, 100% of the requested amount was

not agreed, which means a complete stop of coal cargo delivery. And it is clear that gradually less and less cargo will pass through Latvia and maybe not at all because of the destructive foreign policies toward relations with Russia.

On the one hand, Latvian authorities understand that the country needs Russian cargoes. Latvian Minister of Transport Tālis Linkaits points out: "It is the need of the Latvian state to ensure the operation of the infrastructure of "Latvijas dzelzceļš". And we are interested in every ton of cargo that could come through Latvia or to Latvia." On the other hand, during the annual Rīga Conference which took place in November Latvian Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg both emphasized that Russia remains a threat. „Russia remains a great big problem,” Kariņš said. Latvia as well as other Baltic States deployed NATO troops on its territory and thereby endangering good neighborly relations with Russia and regional security in general. Russia has taken measures to build up its military capabilities as well.

Former President of Latvia Valdis Zatlers says: "Prayers will not help. This is Russian policy."

Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevichs admitted: "I don't understand what we sometimes have in Latvia, that it is somehow difficult for us to drive in the middle of the road – to be proportionate, to be principled in matters of principle, to be practical, but not to carry from one ditch to another."

So, Latvia maneuvers between politics and the desire not to lose important partner. Russia in its turn does not hide its intention and is not going to play along. If Latvia's political views prevent it from developing fruitful partnership with neighbour states, this is Latvia's choice. Latvia's economy today is hostage to its foreign policy.

Latvia's failure in cooperation with Russia reflects the bleak

economic prospects if Russia ceases to see the region as a territory of special economic importance. In recent years, Moscow has already made it clear that it considers the gain in the struggle for the region too small to participate in it.

The situation resembles an old Latin proverb: „Between two stools, one falls to the ground.” Latvia is almost on the ground.

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