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The Soviet Union is long dead. But its unrepentant ghost still roams the dark corridors of our collective intellectual enterprise. Aided by the passage of time and inspired by the unfailing relevance of the subject-matter, historians have begun the painstaking process of re-examining the story of the Soviet collapse, producing an impressive bookshelf of illuminating and depressing studies.¹

Una Bergmane’s timely history, Politics of Uncertainty: The United States, the Baltic Question, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union, adds an important angle to the debate, highlighting the agency of the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, in the drama that has so often been told and retold from Moscow. This new perspective is refreshing. The book is a fantastic read. The reader emerges from the experience with a fuller appreciation of how the three nations, helped by friendly diasporas in the West and confusion in Moscow, took control of their own destiny and bid atsisveikink/ardievu/hüvasti to the broken Soviet behemoth.

This roundtable brings together four reviewers to probe the author’s arguments and challenge her conclusions. They find the book convincing in its central claim: the Baltics mattered, not as pawns in someone else’s game but as actors with their own ends and means. Tuomas Forsberg sums it up nicely: “When world politics is viewed through the lens of the big rational game of the most powerful, not only does it forget the real dynamics that drove changes at the end of the Cold War and immediately thereafter, it also obstructs us from seeing how today’s policies are also formed in an environment of uncertainty where actors who are labeled as marginal may nevertheless influence the course of the events as they unfold.”

Violeta Davoliūtė praises Bergmane’s “exceptionally coherent narrative of how the Baltic question metamorphosed from a marginal concern to an improbable success.” She echoes Maria Mälksoo in scolding “intellectual indolence” of those of us who blissfully indulge in writing histories of great powers at the expense of smaller actors and calls for de-colonizing our thinking about Eastern Europe.² Davoliūtė justly argues that the book holds considerable relevance for the present in view of Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine. She writes of a “striking parallel between the struggle of Ukraine and the Baltic independence movements to secure tangible Western support against Russian/Soviet imperialism.” (The parallel arguably ends here: Gorbachev and Putin, after all, significantly differ in their respective imperial methodologies, one being the grave-digger of an empire, the other—a bona fide imperialist).

Liliane Stadler hails Politics of Uncertainty as “a timely and necessary addition to the nascent ‘origins debate’ of the post-Cold War order,” while Yuliya Yurchuk predicts, rightly that this “excellent work… will certainly become a standard reading for everyone interested in the Cold War history, the history of Baltic states, and the history of the Soviet Union and its dissolution.”

The reviewers pose important additional questions to the author, which Bergmane graciously and convincingly answers at the end of the roundtable. What else is there to say? This is a superb book by a


thorough historian who drew on her multiple scholarly and linguistic talents to eloquently tell a story that we thought we knew, but tell it very differently, and thus advance the state of the field. And so, the Soviet Union is dead, but the debate continues.

I congratulate Una Bergmane on her monumental achievement, and thank all reviewers for their thoughtful contributions.

Contributors:

Una Bergmane is a researcher at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki and a Baltics Sea Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (Philadelphia). Before joining the Aleksanteri Institute, she was a postdoctoral fellow at Cornell University and a teaching fellow at the London School of Economics. She holds a PhD from sciences Po Paris. Her research has been published in journals like Journal of Cold War Studies and The International History Review.

Sergey Radchenko is the Wilson E. Schmidt Distinguished Professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He has written extensively on the Cold War, nuclear history, and on Russian and Chinese foreign and security policies.


Dr. Tuomas Forsberg is Professor of International Relations at Tampere University. He was Director of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (HCAS) at the University of Helsinki 2018–2023. His recent publications include The Psychology of Foreign Policy (co-authored with Christer Pursiainen, Cham: Palgrave 2021) Russia’s Cultural Statecraft (co-edited with Sirke Mäkinen, Abingdon: Routledge 2022), and Debating the War in Ukraine (co-authored with Heikki Patomäki, Abingdon: Routledge 2023).

Liliane Stadler is a Lecturer in the History of International Relations at the Department of History and Art History at the University of Utrecht. Her research revolves around the role of permanently neutral states in multilateral diplomacy and conflict resolution during the late Cold War and early post-Cold War periods. She completed her doctorate in History at the University of Oxford (St. Antony’s) in 2021, where she focused on Swiss good offices and humanitarian diplomacy in Afghanistan during and after the Soviet occupation of 1979 to 1989 under the supervision of Prof. Anne Deighton and Prof. Paul Betts. She is a member of the Cold War Research Network at the University of Utrecht and an affiliated researcher at Documents Diplomatiques de la Suisse (DODIS) in Berne, Switzerland.

Yuliya Yurchuk is a Senior Lecturer of History of Ideas at Södertörn University, Sweden. She holds a PhD degree in history and specializes in memory studies, history of religion, and study of nationalism in East European countries. She is the author of the book Reordering of Meaningful Worlds: Memory of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Post-Soviet Ukraine (Acta, 2014). Her articles have appeared in Memory Studies, Nationalities Papers, Europe-Asia Studies, Nordisk Oxförum, Baltic Worlds, Ukraina Moderna. Her recent work focused on memory and religion. She is one of the editors of “Memory and Religion from a Postsecular Perspective” (Routledge, 2022, co-edited with Zuzanna Bogumil). She also
translates Swedish literature into Ukrainian and is an author of the book “Sweden: a model kit” (Vihola, 2022, in Ukrainian). Currently she is working on a project in the field of the transnational intellectual history titled “From Sweden with Love: Circulation and interpretation of Ellen Key’s ideas about love, motherhood, and upbringing in the late Russian Empire and the early Soviet Union (1890–1930s)” that is funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.
Una Bergmane’s *Politics of Uncertainty* advances a deceptively simple thesis about relations between powerful and marginal actors in international affairs. To explain the success of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian movements for national independence against the background of Soviet collapse, she argues that uncertainty arising from the disruption of existing power structures “limits the agency of the powerful and opens windows of opportunity for those seen as marginal” (13).

To substantiate this claim, she develops a rare analysis of the interplay between international and domestic processes focused on a short period of time, i.e., the triangular relations among the US government, Baltic independence movements, and Moscow, from the launch of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms to the collapse of the USSR. In the process, she develops an exceptionally coherent narrative of how the Baltic question metamorphosed from a marginal concern to an improbable success.

In this regard, Bergmane stakes her claim on a relatively exclusive patch of turf. Except for Anatol Lieven’s *The Baltic Revolution*, there have been few notable monographs, and just a few edited volumes on the emergence of the Baltic States from the rubble of the USSR. More numerous studies of Baltic-nation building and identity formation by scholars like Richard Mole and Dovile Budrytė have taken the Soviet collapse as the starting or turning point of a story leading to accession to the European Union.

There have been several studies of Soviet collapse that assign a key role to the emergence of nationalist movements in the non-Russian republics of the USSR. Of these, Mark Beissinger has been perhaps the most forceful in arguing that the rise of nationalist movements along the periphery generated sufficient resonance to mobilize Russians in the core of the Soviet empire, creating waves of instability that overwhelmed the capacity of the Soviet state to defend itself.

Other scholars like Stephen Kotkin and Vladislav Zubok, on the other hand, assign a secondary role to peripheral nationalism in Soviet collapse. Kotkin associates the demise of the USSR primarily with the disintegration of communist ideology. Accompanied by more than half a dozen civil wars, the collapse of the Union could well have resulted in a nationalist Armageddon of the kind seen in Yugoslavia, but it did not. In a similar vein, Vladislav Zubok assigns primary responsibility for the Soviet fall to the voluntarism of Gorbachev.

In this regard, Bergmane does not seek to demonstrate that the independence movements of the Baltic States were a decisive or even a key factor in the collapse of the USSR. Instead, by weaving into a single narrative a series of events that are typically addressed in separate studies devoted to international relations or the domestic politics of the Baltic States, she draws attention to an understudied topic. For example, chapter 2 juxtaposes the intensifying communication between the Baltic independence movements and Gorbachev’s

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liberal advisors with the failure of President George H. W. Bush and Gorbachev to communicate their respective positions on the Baltic question at the Malta Summit on 2-3 December 1989. This juxtaposition foreshadows how domestic developments outpaced international diplomacy leading to the failed putsch of August 1991.

Likewise in chapter 4, Gorbachev’s so-called “turn to the right” and Moscow’s use of force to crush demonstrations in Vilnius and Riga in January 1991 are set against the expulsion of the Baltic delegations from the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) Summit in Paris just a few months before, vividly demonstrating how the (in)security of small nations depends on their (in)visibility on the international stage. Having personally witnessed the January events as part of the crowd surrounding the Lithuanian parliament, I found this contextualization of the emergence of the Paris Charter for a New Europe a real eye-opener.

Bergmane’s contextualization of international affairs in domestic and transnational politics has the additional advantage of exposing how the sausage of foreign policy is made, at least in the US. Paradoxically, the very marginality of the Baltic question magnified the role of Congress and the Baltic diaspora in this messy process. In the absence of a coherent policy, Bergmane characterizes the attempts of the White House to defuse the crisis as hesitant, chaotic, and reactive to domestic lobbying and to the unfolding of events on the ground.

Rich in empirical analysis, the text is also theoretically informed, providing significant insights into, among other things, the role of norms and normative expectations, hierarchy, and uncertainty in international relations. The tension between norms and interests is vividly highlighted in the contrast between the robustness of US policy and support for German reunification and the perception of Soviet consent as a precondition to international recognition of Baltic independence. Along with geopolitical interest, the marginal status of the Baltic question in US policy also reflects the importance of hierarchy in international society.

The publication of this book in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine is especially timely insofar as Bergmane’s elevation of the “marginal” struggles of small nations contributes to the “decolonizing moment” of International Relations (IR), when the focus of study has turned to “why the weak resist and the forms their resistance takes.”

More specifically, Politics of Uncertainty narrates precisely one of those “many endings of the Cold War” that Maria Mälksoo hopes will help IR “expand its historical grasp and imagination,” overcome “intellectual indolence in appreciating the (supposedly) lesser actors in world politics,” and address the “yet-to-be decolonized thinking pattern about Eastern Europe as a region which sovereign space of maneuver supposedly always comes determined by the more powerful, or allegedly more responsible and rational others.”

Read against the background of the Russo-Ukraine war, Bergmane’s lucid analysis is indeed likely to inform efforts to analyze the analogous triangle of relations among the US, Ukraine, and Moscow. Passages like the following disclose a striking parallel between the struggle of Ukraine and the Baltic independence movements to secure tangible Western support against Russian/Soviet imperialism:

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Between 1989 and 1991, Washington and its European allies moved from extreme prudence regarding the Baltic claims to unconditional support for their independence. However, this change was reluctant and driven much more by domestic pressures and last-minute decisions than realpolitik calculations and long-term strategy (2).

At this point I would register a minor point of disagreement with Bergman’s articulation of the role of uncertainty in “limiting the agency of the powerful” (163). States routinely manage uncertainty by adopting strategies that outline priorities and exclude non-priorities from their gaze. If an issue is not covered by a strategy, this may reflect not uncertainty, but rather the issue’s perceived lack of relevance to core national interests.

As concerns the determination of which states pertain to core national interests and thus belong in the club of allies, Bergmane’s book provides a clear analysis of the role of hierarchy and the concept of international society, which may be a more relevant factor in the agency and attitude of powerful states towards outliers like Ukraine. As Ukraine seeks to accede to the EU and NATO, the historical example of Baltic efforts to secure recognition through visibility on the international stage may prove instructive.
Russia’s invasion of Ukraine marks the end of the post-Cold War era. For many, this epochal change calls for a thorough review of the end of the Cold War and its aftermath in order to better comprehend the root causes of the war as well to reflect how the prevailing conflict can be solved and transformed into a more stable security order.

Una Bergmane’s book deals with one of the key elements of the multifaceted shift from the Cold War to the post-Cold war era: the restored independence of the Baltic states. In various accounts of the end of the Cold War, the Baltic question has always been regarded as part of the story, but so far a focused but comprehensive treatment based on the archival sources has been lacking.¹

Bergmane examines the Baltic question from the point of view of the Baltic states, Moscow, and the West and deals with all the relationships in this triangle. After exploring the historical introduction of the inter-war independence and the incorporation of the Baltic states to the Soviet Union, the book deals with all the relationships in this triangle starting from the formation of the nationalist civic movements in 1987–1988 to the fulfillment of the restored independence in 1991. Bergmane has done an excellent job in the evenhanded way her narrative scrutinizes the three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. When it comes to the West, she homes in mostly on the United States, which is perfectly justified, but also pays also considerable attention to the positions of European states or opinions of the press as well as the civil society.

It is difficult to summarize a well-researched and detailed story offered by a book like Bergmane’s in some straightforward takeaways. Bergmane’s interpretations are sharp but not pointed. Yet, the book has some key lessons to offer both to experts as well as to the wider audience with regard to each of the corner of the triangle.

Starting with the United States and the West, the book’s title Politics of Uncertainty captures something essential in their attitudes and implementation of policies. The restored Baltic independence was not the result of a self-assertive victory of the West but a series of hesitant and procrastinated decisions.² US policy was reactive rather than active and was cautious in avoiding launching some unforeseen consequences. President George H.W. Bush had already raised the Baltic issue at the Malta Summit in 1989. Had Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev resorted to military force in the Baltic states, Bush also threatened not to conclude the negotiated trade treaty and to cut economic aid to the Soviet Union in 1990–1991. Yet, the priority was always given to preserving the stability of US-Soviet relations and securing a peaceful outcome of German unification. Even the United States’ final recognition of the restored independence of Baltic states in 1991 came days later than that of most European and other western states. Congress and the pro-Baltic lobby groups played a role, perhaps not so much in the actual decision but in shaping policy by offering arguments and putting pressure on US officials (127-129).

In Europe, both Germany and France were not particularly sympathetic towards the Baltic independence movement. Germany’s focus was on its own unification, while the French priority was laid on Western European integration. Both countries feared the negative consequences if Gorbachev’s regime met growing difficulties at home. International support was in fact spearheaded by small states, such as Iceland and


Denmark as well as Poland. Their diplomacy alone would not have led to the restoration of the independence of the Baltic states, but they kept the ball rolling to that direction when the great powers shunned the topic. For this, they did not need the US leadership. On the contrary, in August 1991, when Bush asked the American allies to wait before restoring diplomatic relations with the Baltic states, that did not happen.

Since Bergmane’s book offers an inspiring ground for writing complementary accounts from the vantage points of specific actors about how their policies evolved in the very rapidly changing international context, here I will add a marginal comment on Finland. Unlike the other Nordic countries, Finland was very prudent in its official policy towards the Baltic states. The Finnish president was widely criticized by the press and the public for his ultra-realist attitude and acceptance of Gorbachev’s interpretation of the situation. However, he allowed an expansion of cultural relations between Finland and Estonia in particular as well as a widening interpretation of what could be done under the label of “culture,” thereby also using the resources of the Finnish Ministry of Culture. For example, the Estonian–Finnish cultural association Tuglas Society in Helsinki provided the Estonian foreign minister Lennart Meri a base for his diplomatic activity during the critical time leading to the recognition of the restored independence in August 1991.

For Gorbachev, the nationality question, coupled with the history of the Soviet Union, was a blind spot. He did not understand the demands of the national movements and feared that they would spoil his attempts to reform the Soviet Union. Gorbachev supported self-determination and was reluctant to use military force, but the independence of the Baltic states set a limit to this policy. This was particularly the case after Gorbachev’s turn to a more conservative mode in autumn 1990, which was reflected in his hardening stance towards the Baltic states. Gorbachev’s sudden insistence on expelling the representatives of the Baltic states who were invited as observers from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) summit that was held in Paris in November 1990, to which the hosts acquiesced, was probably a counterproductive move from his perspective. The French hosts acceded to the Soviet demand since had they done otherwise the whole summit would have failed. Even so, the Baltic questions received much more sympathetic publicity because of the incident. In September 1991, Gorbachev was still not willing to recognize the independence of the Baltic states without a constitutional procedure, but at the end of the day the Soviet State Council accepted it unanimously.

Bergmane does not give a direct answer to the question of whether the Soviet Union could have been saved had Moscow let the Baltic States go a year or two earlier. She does relay the fact that the Communist Latvian leader Anatolijs Gorbunovs became convinced that a negotiated outcome through constitutional reform was impossible because of Gorbachev’s stubbornness (43). Furthermore, she argues that the process towards independence was “accelerated by Moscow’s failures to meaningfully respond to Baltic grievances” (164). Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Republic Boris Yeltsin for his part, accepted the Baltic independence already before he advocated the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a whole. The erosion of the Soviet power, both ideologically as well as materially, was nevertheless a precondition for the success of the independence movements in the Baltic states.

The popular fronts in the Baltic states, as Bergmane describes, were more self-conscious in their striving for independence, although could hardly have been able to predict the successful outcome. Since they did not have military or economic power assets of their own, their means was to gather visibility and recognition. They managed to receive support by demonstrating their unity and broad base and by relying on various transnational networks. The large peaceful demonstrations, the elections, and the referendums indicating that a clear majority in all the three Baltic state supported the goal of independence legitimized the struggle both

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domestically and internationally. Even in the Soviet Union, the Baltic states had the image of being more western and progressive than the other republics. Although the pro-independence movements were willing to moderate some of their immediate goals, there was no willingness to give up their goal of full independence even though the strategy was risky.

Overall, Bergmane argues that the restored independence of the Baltic states was neither a historical miracle nor a pre-determined outcome. Gorbachev’s glasnost triggered the rising nationalist consciousness with embedded feelings of historical injustice, but the final stroke was the failed coup d’état in 1991 that delegitimized the remaining Soviet power. Since the Soviet presence in the Baltic states was never challenged militarily, and the economic instruments of the West were only loosely connected to the Baltic question, Baltic independence was only to a small degree an outcome of the material power relations in which the West was able to set terms to the Soviet Union. Independence was much more the result of the skillful management of images and moral values by the Baltic independent movements and other materially small players such as the Scandinavian states and the diaspora lobby groups in the United States.

The formal non-recognition of the annexation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union, which for 50 years had not played any practical role in the policies of the Western states, turned out to be a useful legal-political device for facilitating the new policy of support for the restoration of the Baltic independence. After the failed August 1991 coup d’état, the framing changed overnight: the independence of the Baltic states became a factor contributing to stability rather than instability. The almost analogical change of framing enabled the entry of the Baltic states to the European Union and NATO a decade later.

In terms of potential lessons for the present day, in addition to the very practical significance that the de jure non-recognition policy had in the altered circumstances of the early 1990s, the role of the agency of the small groups and states is perhaps the most important. The narrative about the omnipotent US hegemon that was pulling the strings coupled with overarching optimism just does not stand the test of history. When world politics is viewed through the lens of the big rational game of the most powerful, not only does it forget the real dynamics that drove changes at the end of the Cold War and immediately thereafter, it also obstructs us from seeing how today’s policies are also formed in an environment of uncertainty where actors who are labeled as marginal may nevertheless influence the course of the events as they unfold.

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Una Bergmane’s *Politics of Uncertainty: The United States, the Baltic Question, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* is a timely and necessary addition to the nascent “origins debate” of the post-Cold War order. It is also a great example of a doctoral dissertation which the author has successfully transformed into a book. It strikes just the right balance between clarity, readability, and originality that William Germano encourages in all those who transition their work from dissertation to monograph.¹ Bergmane sets herself apart from other contributions to the nascent “origins debate” of our time by focusing not only on the roles of major powers, but on “the relations between those at the top of international and domestic power hierarchies with those situated at their margins” (163).² As such, she builds upon Laurien Crump’s and Susanna Erlandsson’s approach to the so-called “margins of maneuver” for smaller state and non-state actors from the Cold War into the early post-Cold War period.³ After all, the so-called Baltic Question was both intricately related to the demise of the Soviet Union and to Soviet-American relations during the early 1990s. Given that the process of Baltic independence also has lasting effects on the present-day geographic constellation and on the geopolitical salience of North-Eastern Europe, the subject of investigation is of particular current-day relevance.

The puzzle that drives *Politics of Uncertainty* is that around 1987, there appeared to be no need to “worry about Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” (2). All three republics were relatively peaceful until suddenly, in 1990, it already appeared to be too late to stop their respective drives for independence. All three Soviet republics had begun the relentless pursuit of national sovereignty and to cultivate active foreign policies of their own (3). On 11 March 1990, Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to declare independence. Estonia and Latvia announced their intentions to transition towards full sovereignty on 30 March and 4 May respectively (1). Yet it took until August 1991 for their independence to receive international recognition. This conundrum constituted the so-called Baltic Question, which is at the heart of Bergmane’s investigation. The book traces the origins of this question over a span of approximately fifty years. Chapter 1 begins with the occupation of the Baltic states in 1940 and ends with the perestroika era in the Soviet Union. The remaining four chapters cover the events that led to the rise of Baltic popular movements, the domestic and international debates on recognition, as well as the violent and non-violent developments that ultimately led to independence of the three Baltic states and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The value of Bergmane’s contribution on the Baltic Question is that it shows “how at the time of deep historical change, the disruption of existing power structures causes uncertainty that limits the agency of the former and opens windows of opportunity for the latter” (163). This insight is as relevant to the early 1990s as it is to the present-day geopolitical climate in Northern and Eastern Europe. Strikingly, Bergmane avoids “reproducing imperial as well as strictly national perspectives” (163). Instead, her narrative analyzes the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian pursuit of independence as a “regional endeavor embedded in the larger dynamics of Perestroika, the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union” (163). In accordance with her line of argument, the transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War international order was as much the product of marginal actors and regional dynamics as it was the result of great-power politics.

Three main themes that run evenly through Bergmane’s narrative that are relevant for both historians and present-day International Relations scholars alike: uncertainty, marginality and the interactive dynamics between state and non-state actors. Bergmane recounts in detail, for instance, how American policymakers

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were forced into a challenging balancing act on account of the Baltic Question. While “affirming their full support for the reformer [and Soviet leader] Mikhail Gorbachev,” and his attempt to preserve the Soviet Union, they had to admit that “in principle, the three Baltic states deserved their independence” (2). The resulting uncertainty, Bergmane argues, was caused not by a lack of information, but rather by the abundance of information surrounding the drive for independence among the three Baltic states, as well as the tensions that this created within them, between them, and in their immediate vicinity. Assessments about the outcome of this particular balancing act were in constant flux and therefore highly uncertain throughout the period of 1989 to 1991. After all, as Bergmane also shows, “The scope and depth of reforms in both domestic and foreign policy envisioned by…Soviet liberal thinkers required no less than a reconceptualization of… the nature of the Soviet state and its place in the world” (5). The direction and the outcome of this process arguably remained unclear for protagonists and observers alike up until December of 1991.

While Gorbachev hesitated and procrastinated, the three Baltic republics accelerated their demands for autonomy and ultimately pushed for independence (5). At this moment of profound historical change, they defied their marginality and gained a remarkable degree of “visibility on the international stage,” arguably also in defiance of the uncertainties that constrained larger, more powerful state actors at the time (3). This was also in part due to the diverse constellation of actors who had driven the demands for Baltic independence since before the 1980s. Bergmane includes the Baltic American diaspora and a changing constellation of domestic Baltic independence movements in her analysis alongside government officials and political authorities. Collectively, they succeeded in rendering the Baltic Question into a one of identity, regional security, as well as superpower foreign policy (2).

To create a full picture of the triangular relations among the Baltic states, the Soviet Union, and the United States, Bergmane conducted 27 original interviews with former diplomats, civil servants and diaspora activists (11). She also relies on multiple European, American, and Russian archives. These include the Estonian national archives, the Latvian national and diplomatic archives, as well as the Lithuanian diplomatic archives. Lastly, she draws on archival materials from the Gorbachev Foundation and, for American sources, on papers from the Bush administration, congressional records, and documents held at the National Security Archive.

Overall, both the narrative and the source base of Bergmane’s contribution provide a valuable and original addition to the emerging literature that seeks to better understand the conceptual transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period in Europe. For a wider audience of academics and practitioners alike, her contribution also invites and demands further discussion on at least three points. First, particularly for non-specialists, it raises the question of what defines both the term “Baltic” and the associated concept of a “Baltic identity”? Second, which elements of the “Baltic Question” were unique at the time? Third, does the concept of uncertainty mean the same thing for both greater and smaller powers in the Baltic region today as it did during the late 1980s and the early 1990s?

With regards to the first question, Bergmane concedes that despite their geographical proximity, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia have often been considered too distinct to be put under the same “Baltic” label. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term “Balt” was arguably used to refer to Baltic Germans, who constituted the ruling class in large parts of current-day Estonia and Latvia (9). During the inter-war period term “Baltic” also extended to Finland and, according to Bergmane, it was only during the Cold War that the international community began to use the term “Baltic states” to refer to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Meanwhile, inside the Soviet Union, they were commonly known as the “Baltic republics” (9). For a wider

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audience, it would be constructive had Bergmane delved even more deeply into these conceptual nuances, perhaps venturing her own definition of the term “Baltic,” and exploring how the meaning of the term has changed since Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian independence.

Concerning the second question, there are two elements of Bergmane’s analysis that stand out in particular with regards to the current-day relevance of the “Baltic Question.” Initially, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian leaderships looked for an “international solution to their situation” (166). During the spring of 1991, however, they increasingly began to realize that “the decisive support for their independence might actually come from inside the Soviet Union” (166). To what extent was this assessment unique? What does it tell us about changing dynamics and tensions within independence movements and were there perhaps instances of tensions between the Baltic independence movements that might shed light on the overarching meaning of the Baltic region today?

Last—and this is the main concept that Bergmane’s analysis revolves around—what tools do state and non-state actors have for dealing with uncertainty in times of international change, especially when the issue is not caused by lack of information, but by the abundance of information? Bergmane argues that the concept has conventionally been understood as “a fear or ignorance due to the lack of information or as confusion and indeterminacy arising from the ambiguity of information” (3). How can domestic, international, and transnational actors recognize the presence and absence of uncertainty in each other? How can they reveal the issue around which uncertainty revolves in a particular geopolitical context and how can they identify what risks and opportunities it carries for either competition or cooperation? These questions are arguably of particular importance for so-called marginal actors, who—as the Baltic states have done—have sought ways to turn Cold War constraints into opportunities. As Crump and Erlandsson argue, marginal actors have often succeeded in finding ways to turn constraints into opportunities. They also contend that “a more multifaceted approach towards the Cold War can also help to interpret the post-Cold War order in which we find ourselves today.”

6 Una Bergmane’s Politics of Uncertainty is a solid example of the most up-to-date research in this direction.

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6 Crump and Erlandsson. Margins for Manoeuvre in Cold War Europe, 250.
It seems that as late as 1990 no one predicted the fall of the Soviet Union. No big power wanted it, and smaller countries like the Baltic states could only dream about getting independence on their own. With hindsight we can now say that there were many signs that pointed to the looming end of the Soviet regime, with armed unrests in Kazakhstan and Georgia that casted shadow on Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika. But indeed, why was it the Baltic states that succeeded in leaving the Soviet Union first? Was their role decisive in the final collapse of the Soviet Union? Recently historians have suggest that without Ukraine, the second largest country, the Soviet Union was impossible to hold together.1 While many nations want to proudly boast about their decisive roles in the dissolution of the Union, as Una Bergmane convincingly shows in her book, *Politics of Uncertainty*, the role of the Baltic countries was indeed unique.

Most importantly, the author shows that the role of the Baltic states in re-gaining independence was not that of second-tier actors but of important agents who were equal to the “superpowers,” the US and the USSR. Without the specific order of actions that took place in the Baltic countries during dramatic years of 1989–1991, history would have taken another turn. Bergmane addresses the nature of these specific events and outline the Baltic states’ success in five distinguished chapters, each of which approaches the contexts and actors who were decisive in specific points of time that led to the recognition of independence of each Baltic state and subsequently to the collapse of the Soviet empire.

The first chapter “The Origins of the Baltic Question” traces the occupation of the Baltic countries in 1940 until perestroika. 1940 marked the beginning of the period of non-recognition and the emergence of the Baltic-American diaspora that became a driving force in lobbying pro-independence politics in the US Congress. The author shows that in the late 1980s, arguments about the illegality of Soviet occupation in 1940 were used for social mobilization of people and intensification of claims for independence. In this way, the agendas of diaspora and internal groups inside the Baltic countries, and the arguments they used for independence merged, which led to a weakening of the differences (tensions, distrust and hostilities) between the diasporic communities and Baltic societies (16). The memories of the Second World War and mass deportations became a driving force for mobilization for the independence movement in the Baltic countries. In addition to this, the non-recognition of the Soviet rule over the Baltic countries in the Western democracies was used as the legal grounds for renewal of independence.

Chapter 2, “Have you not noticed our absence?: The Baltic Question during the Annus Mirabilis of 1989,” focuses on the anxieties of Baltic states that their aspirations for liberation would be overshadowed by the Eastern European revolutions and ignored by the United States. This led to the intensification of the Baltic Question and the active Baltic struggle for visibility. Here the author places the main focus on the popular movements formed by the Communist Party members in the Baltic countries that to Gorbachev’s surprise supported the claims for independence and challenged the Soviet center showing that even local communists in the Baltic republics supported the popular drive for independence. Again, the author shows that the questions of memory, historical justice, history (knowledge about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty) became central in the movements for independence (54), the feature that was crucial in all the republics which pursued liberation agenda.2 In this way, struggle for memory became an integral part of the struggle for visibility.

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2 For example, in Ukraine the struggle for historical truth and independence went hand in hand since the second part of 1980s, including the claims for truth about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty, see Tetiana Zhurzhenko, “From the ‘Reunification of the Ukrainian Lands’ to ‘Soviet Occupation’: The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in the
Chapter 3, “Building a New World Order? The Lithuanian Crisis of Spring 1990” analyzes the tensions between the USSR and the Baltic states that began with the Lithuanian declaration of independence on 11 March 1990. Bergmane argues that this crisis should be understood in the broader context of German unification and the European responses to the Baltic declarations. During this period the dominant understanding was that without formal recognition of independence of the Baltic states by the USSR, the Baltic states can hardly succeed in their struggle for liberation. At the same time, the US was more and more conscious about the danger of other republics following the path of independence once the Baltic states gained it. The US saw the preservation of the Soviet Union as the best solution for keeping the power balance in the world. President George H.W. Bush and his administration were not planning expansion of the NATO beyond Germany (76). There were still great hopes for Gorbachev-led Soviet reforms on part of the US. But all these hopes were broken in the beginning of 1990 when the Soviet Union used Army forces against Lithuania and Latvia, which Bergmane reviews in the next chapter.

Chapter 4, “The End of Perestroika?: The Baltic Quest for Visibility and the Soviet Crackdown” examines Baltic attempts to cooperate closer with international community in the second half of the 1990 and the Western rejection of Baltic states in the CSCE Paris summit. The author draws our attention that Western response should be understood in the context of the Gulf crisis that started with Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. At the same time, the Soviet violence that resulted in twenty deaths in Vilnius and Riga led to Bush taking concrete steps towards the hardening of his approach to the USSR. The Gulf crisis was the deliberating factor that restricted the US maneuvering space. Finally, the internal tensions within the USSR and Boris Yeltsin’s growing power within the Russian Federation turned the history and brought Baltic states closer to independence.

Chapter 5, “The Rise of the Republics, the Fall of the Center: the Baltic Exception and the Collapse of the USSR” approaches the growing tension within the USSR and Yeltsin’s turn towards the Baltic states and his readiness to move towards independence which he expressed in the Latvian city of Jurmala on 27 July 1990. This move led to further confusion on part of the United States that was still hesitant to support anyone but Gorbachev. The struggle for independence put Gorbachev before impossible choice, as the author shows: the choice between democratization or preservation of the Soviet empire. With democratization the empire could not survive as there was no will in the republics to remain members of the Union, with forceful keeping of the republics in the Soviet Union the proclaimed democratization would have failed. At the same time, more and more countries in Europe were openly supporting independence of the Baltic states, with Nordic countries showing the example of solidarity to others. The August coup in Moscow in 1991 became the final move towards recognition of the Baltic countries’ independence and disintegration of the Union at the end.

To sum up, Bergmane’s main argument is that the uniqueness of the Baltic states’ way can be explained by their past. Thanks to the fact that these countries were independent in the interwar period they had the memory of independence on which they could ground their future aspirations for independence. At the same time, the fact that most Western countries did not recognize the 1940 Soviet annexation of the Baltic states made it easier for them to recognize independence of the Baltic states in 1991. Moreover, other republics in the Soviet Union perceived Baltic states as different, not totally Soviet, it was the Soviet own “west”, closest to democratic world and most distant culturally from the Russian center. Nevertheless withstanding the differences, the Soviet Union was not ready to let the Baltics states go which led to the violence that was implemented by the Union against the republics, mainly in Lithuania. The use of violence became the tipping point after which the United States realized that the perestroika’s period was over. Both Gorbachev and Bush reached a cul-de-sac in February 1991: with violence being used there was nothing left from expectations and hopes that the Soviet Union can be reformed. Opposition to Gorbachev within the RFSSR also understood it and Boris Yeltsin’s support of the Baltic independence became the final hit that split the Union and gave

Bush grounds for hesitation and distancing from Gorbachev and consequently it led him closer towards the recognition of Baltic independence. All these factors created a momentum after which there was no return to the pre-1990 existence and the independence of the Baltic states was a fact. But without the specific forces inside and outside the Baltic states such momentum would never have been possible. These forces were systematically examined in the book: Baltic diaspora consolidation and influence on the Congress and the US policies; formation of people’s fronts that explicitly joined pro-independence movements; power crisis in the Soviet center in which Gorbachev lost his position and Yeltsin gained both popularity and power, and the US’ challenges in the transformed post-1989 world in which Bush tried to navigate the situation in the Eastern Europe with united Germany and cope with the Gulf crisis that broke just in time of Baltic most persistent demands to support their independence.

Theoretically, the Bergmane approaches the Baltic states and the international arena as whole during the discussed period through the concepts of visibility and uncertainty. She argues that for smaller actors it is crucial to be visible as it leads to recognition of their rights for self-determination. In contrast to big actors, the smaller countries do not enjoy visibility and recognition of their rights as a given fact. Bergmane argues that visibility is a main element in social movements’ strategies and small-state foreign policy. On the other hand, it is only the specific time of uncertainty that generated momentum that could lead to a dramatic transformation both in Baltic countries and in superpowers. In this way, as Bergmane concisely sums up her approach, the book is about “superpower struggles with uncertainty and Baltic struggles with invisibility” (3). But Baltic states struggled with uncertainty as well. Indeed, uncertainty was an integral part of Soviet period after 1985 when Gorbachev launched his perestroika. His reforms, as the author argues, “pushed the Soviet society into an unknown territory, making uncertainty the everyday experience of all Soviet citizens” (4). On the level of international relations and high-level politics, Bergmane shows how uncertainty affected the decisionmaking processes that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, uncertainty was pervasive in all spheres of life, as discussed by the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, who studied everyday discourses and practices in the late Soviet years. As he shows, the uncertainty was created by the very official discourse in the late Soviet Union, which was devoid of meaning, and resulted in a society that probed the limits of what was possible.

Methodologically the book can serve as inspiration for those whose ambition is to overcome “national bias” by focusing solely on specific nations and “super-power bias” focusing solely on the big actors who assumingly decide upon the fates of smaller players. As Bergmane convincingly shows that “at the time of deep historical change the disruption of existing power structures causes uncertainty that limits the agency of the powerful and opens windows of opportunity for those seen as marginal” (13). By choosing to analyze multiple archives throughout Europe, United States and the Russian Federation the author worked with diverse material that included diplomatic archives, memoires, official reports, and unofficial notes, as well as 27 interviews with decisionmakers and participants of the meetings where the most crucial decisions were taken. In this way, Bergmane could shed light on a broad range of actors whose positions and roles were carefully discussed. Chapter after chapter, the author meticulously analyses the role of different actors in leading the Baltic states to independence and to the final disintegration of the Soviet Union.

While the focus of the book in respect to the international sphere is United States, it would be interesting to mention why exactly the diasporas in the US was so influential in comparison to diasporas in other countries and how different diasporic groups worked across borders. Previous research showed that “socialization” of diasporic groups considerably depends on the receiving country. It would be interesting to know how the diasporas that were socialized in different countries could find common ground with each other. Bergmane mentions, e.g. Northern countries and their special role in approaching independence. It sheds light on the


potential of solidarity building across transnational actors, and indeed the role of memory in such consolidation. For instance, the Måndagsrörelsen (the Monday Movement) that consolidated in Sweden in 1990–1991 to promote Baltic independence by gathering every Monday on the central square has been re-activated since the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022. Some activists that were gathering in 1990 are now standing for the right of self-determination of Ukrainians.

This is an excellent work that will certainly become a standard reading for everyone interested in the Cold War history, the history of Baltic states, and the history of the Soviet Union and its dissolution. There is no doubt that many studies will take up the threads that this book so meticulously weaved. In the future, it would be interesting to see comparison between the similar processes during the last years and months of the Soviet existence in other republics.5

5 Some works can be mentioned here: Nilsson, Niklas’s Beacon of Liberty: Role Conceptions, Crises and Stability in Georgia’s Foreign Policy, 2004–2012 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2015) that only cursorily touches upon this problem; or Bennich-Björkman’s Bakom och bortom järnridan: De sovjetiska åren och frigörelsen i Baltikum och Ukraina, (Stockholm:Appel Förlag, 2022), which takes a comparative approach in addressing mainly post-Soviet developments of Baltic countries and Ukraine; unfortunately the book is available only in Swedish.
Response by Una Bergmane, University of Helsinki

I’m deeply grateful to Violeta Davoliūtė, Tuomas Forsberg, Liliane Stadler, and Yuliya Yurchuk for their careful reading of my book and their insightful comments. I am humbled and delighted by their positive assessment of my work. I also thank Sergey Radchenko for his thoughtful introduction and the H-Diplo editors for organizing this roundtable.

At first, I will discuss some of my methodological choices that the reviewers have noted, and then answer their questions.

As all four readers have mentioned, Politics of Uncertainty is a book about the agency of those labeled as “small” and “marginal.” My approach is rooted in the understanding that in order to fully understand the collapse of the Soviet empire we have to study how the imperial link—the asymmetrical power relations between its center and periphery—were first transformed and then severed. My case study is the Baltic states, but this process unfolded in different ways in different parts of the Soviet Union. Soviet rule over for example Central Asia did not end in the same way as it ended in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, or the Caucasus region. Thus, I very much subscribe to Yuliya Yurchuk’s hope that in the future there will be more and more comparative studies about Soviet republics and regions during the Soviet collapse.

My understanding of the many Soviet collapses resonates with Maria Mälksoo’s call for a “modern history of the many endings of the Cold War,” as is mentioned by Davoliūtė in her review, as well as Laurien Crump’s and Susanna Erlandsson’s call for “a more multifaceted approach towards the Cold War,” mentioned by Stadler in her review. In her article “The Postcolonial Moment in Russia’s War against Ukraine” Mälksoo argues against the notion that “we all lost the Cold War” pointing out that for Baltic societies the restoration of independence felt like a victory. This is true also for the collapse of the USSR. For example, the recent BBC documentary Trauma Zone. What It Felt Like to Live through The Collapse of Communism and Democracy portrays the Soviet collapse as a bleak and anxious era.

The unused footage from BBC’s Moscow bureau is indeed impressive as well as deeply depressive, yet it mostly covers events in Moscow and Russia. In the Baltic countries, living through the collapse of Communism was overall a joyous experience that lingers in the public memory as a golden era of national unity. Whether the Russian experience of perestroika was as bleak as the film shows is an interesting question, as it seems that despite later Putinist narratives about victimhood and geopolitical tragedy, many Russians embraced the new era of unprecedented freedoms and opportunities. Moreover, it would be crucial to learn how perestroika and collapse were experienced in those parts of the USSR that have usually been overlooked by the studies of the Soviet collapse, namely the non-Russian republics. Projects like Juliane Fürst’s “Perestroika from below” make me hopeful that in the coming years, the field will move further towards “humanization” and “decentralization” of our understanding of this era.

Davoliūtė points out that my book develops “a rare analysis” of the interplay between international and domestic processes. This approach was indeed a key methodological choice I made very early in my writing. I strongly believe that good international history can be written only when the domestic roots of external action

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3 Mälksoo, “The Postcolonial Moment in Russia’s War against Ukraine,”
4 See the website of the European Research Council funded project: https://perestroika-from-below.com/.
are understood, while the domestic dynamics should always be analyzed in their regional and international context. In the Baltic case, engagement with the international community was a crucial part of those states’ attempts to restore their independence and cut their ties with Moscow. As I note in the book, their international visibility was a political capital that Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius used in their dealings with Moscow.

Forsberg acknowledges the “even-handed way” my book scrutinizes three Baltic countries and Stadler notes my attempts to avoid “reproducing imperial as well as strictly national perspectives.” While most Western scholarship mentions the Baltic role in the Soviet collapse only in passing without making a difference between the three of them, academic and non-academic accounts published in the Baltic countries are often written from a strictly national perspective. In my book, I tried both to show the differences between Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian domestic situations and to highlight regional trends and spillover effects. All in all, I wanted to demonstrate that these were (and are) three different states that amplified their chances to regain independence not only by simultaneously moving in the same political direction but also by making a conscious decision to cooperate.

In her review, Stadler enquires about my own definition of the term “Baltic” and how the meaning of this word has changed since the restoration of independence. As I note in the book after 1991 the three Baltic countries were in quest of new identity exploring their Nordic connections and Central European heritage, and sometimes claimed that the Baltic label was a geopolitical construct imposed by the outsiders—either the Soviets or the Westerners. However, 30 years of independence have taught the Baltic countries what they already knew in 1989—that they are bound to cooperate by both geography and history. What defines the Baltic region today is its historical experience: in the twentieth century, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania twice gained independence from a Russian imperial formation—first the Russian Empire and then the USSR. This not only forged the outside perception of them as one region but also created a shared historical memory and trauma that shapes their identities, threat perceptions, and understanding of the world.

At the end of her review, Davoliūtė points out that the lack of a US strategy in the Baltic case might not be an indicator of general uncertainty as I argue, but may be just a sign of the Baltic irrelevance in the eyes of American decisionmakers. While Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were indeed not at the top of the US foreign policy priorities, Congress, the White House, the State Department, and the US media spent a considerable amount of time discussing the Baltic issue. The reason that Baltic countries mattered to the US was also the reason why the US did not have a coherent strategy towards this problem: for the White House there was an obvious connection between the Baltic question and the question of the Soviet future. Would Baltic independence lead to the fall of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev? Would it lead to the general collapse of the USSR? Would the use of force in the Baltic countries be the end of perestroika? In other words, the Baltic problem was part and parcel of the generally unstable situation in the USSR which confused the US decision-makers and limited their agency.

Stadler asks how “How can domestic, international, and transnational actors recognize the presence and absence of uncertainty in each other?” This is an excellent question to which I can give only a very unsatisfying answer: it depends. It depends on the historical context, power relations between the involved parties, cultural proximity of the actors, etc. It is always a complicated task because states intentionally work on projecting an image of resolve and strength. Meanwhile those analyzing their actions (both scholars and policymakers) have the tendency to assume the existence of a plan and strategy rather than to consider the possibility of uncertainty and improvisation. Uncertainty is especially hard to detect in the case of asymmetric power relations, as the capacities of the “powerful” are often overestimated. That was also the case in the Baltic relations with the US and USSR. The only ones to realize the extent of Gorbachev’s uncertainty were

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5 This experience is similar to that of Poland, yet the Polish case differs. During the Cold War, it became part of the Soviet outer, not inner empire, and the size of Poland gives it more weight in the international relations.
the leading members of the Baltic Communist parties, who had first-hand experience with the confusion and unpreparedness of the Politburo. Most other Baltic actors not only did not suspect uncertainty on the Soviet or the American side but also feared that the two superpowers were acting according to a secret agreement made in Malta.

Finally, Forsberg points out that in the book I do not give a direct answer to the question of whether “the Soviet Union could have been saved had Moscow let the Baltic States go a year or two earlier.” This is another excellent question, and to this one, I feel able to give a straightforward answer. I do not believe that an early Baltic independence would have saved the Soviet Union. The Baltic states did contribute to the Soviet collapse by showing the other Soviet republics (including the Russian one) what tools could be used to gain greater autonomy or even independence from Moscow, but they were not the key reason why the Soviet Union collapsed. The disintegration of the USSR resulted from a perfect storm of deep long-term problems and bold reform attempts that accentuated them. While a lot of attention has been paid to Gorbachev’s (failed) economic reforms, his (successful) political reforms contributed to the Soviet collapse even more. Gorbachev did an impressive job in democratizing the Soviet Union, yet he did not anticipate that this process would interfere with the preservation of the empire. Perestroika and glasnost not only allowed the expression of national and other long-term grievances but also enabled those who were critical of the Soviet state to reach positions of power through democratic elections.

An important question to ask is why so few come to the defense of the Soviet state, especially its renewed perestroika version. The economic decline, the failure of the ideological promise, and the comparisons with life in the West, all these factors made the Soviet project less and less appealing. Even those who did not seek its definite demise felt little enthusiasm towards the idea of actively defending it. While an increasing number of people in non-Russian republics started to contemplate a life outside the Russian-dominated Soviet Union, Russians under Yeltsin’s leadership started to perceive the USSR not as a tool of Russian greatness, but as a burden hindering their potential. As Mark Beissinger convincingly demonstrated, the Soviet state was weakened by nationalist mobilization, but ethnic nationalism in the Soviet Union was not a product of perestroika.

It was a result of Soviet long-term nationality policies which enforced national identities while at the same time positioning the Russian “elder brother” on the top of an imagined system of ethnic hierarchies. To these already well-discussed factors, I would like to add another one that my current project explores: the intensive, trauma-revealing debates about the Soviet past that took place during Gorbachev’s tenure. When faced with popular demand to address Soviet crimes, Gorbachev tried to channel this conversation into the old framework of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in which the Communist Party was the main victim and Joseph Stalin the only perpetrator. Yet, these debates quickly moved out of control and revealed that the Soviet state was built upon immense human suffering. Open discussions about both the scope of Soviet crimes and the diversity of its victims—from “class enemies” to entire ethnic groups—contributed to the delegitimization of not only ideological project but also the imperial formation in whose name they were committed.

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7 This project is funded by the Research Council of Finland.