

Finland's history is so different from Ukraine's

From Mr René Nyberg.

Sir, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrongly suggests that Ukraine should follow the example of Finland. ("Russia needs a 'Finland option' for Ukraine", February 24) in order to find a modus vivendi with Russia. The argument is superficially attractive because Finland shares a long border with Russia and has not sought to join Nato. Beyond that, the comparison is misleading because the history of Finland's relations with Russia is so different from Ukraine's.

Russia has problems with all its neighbours with the notable exception of Finland. This is solely an achievement of Finland. This was underlined at the Sochi Olympics when Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the outspoken leader of Russia's Liberal Democratic party, said that the Finns hate Russians because of the winter war. He was speaking after the Finnish ice-hockey team had beaten Russia with Vladimir Putin in attendance. Who in the west remembers the short war fought in the winter of 1939-40, when Hitler was still an ally of Stalin? The Russians do because the Finnish footnote to history is the debacle suffered by the Red Army when it tried to invade Finland. This episode had profound consequences for the course of the war, opening the eyes of Stalin to the deficiencies of the Red Army and making Hitler draw the wrong conclusions about the Wehrmacht's superiority.

Finland remains the only example of a country that said no to Stalin and got away with it. As a result, it was never occupied. History caught up later with Tito's Yugoslavia.

Instead of comparing Finland and Ukraine, we should all, and the Russians in particular, consider instead the remarkable achievements of the central European and Baltic countries over the past two decades. In the face of serious challenges, they have built viable societies and dynamic economies free of crony capitalism and its associated vices. Ukraine is a very different case because of its history and size. Nevertheless, a significant portion of Ukrainian society senses the rapid progress these countries have made and wants to develop along a similar path. For all its shared historical experience and cultural closeness to Ukraine, Russia does not at present offer the same appeal.

René Nyberg, Helsinki, Finland, Finnish Ambassador to Russia 2000-04

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Khan

Mar 4, 2014

Brzezinsky wants the US to have the Ukrainian cake and eat it all. He wants the European to pay for the mess (created mainly by the US) in Ukraine while his country watch. Keeping his gun on someone else's shoulder.

"When you break it you own it"

Minna Helin

Mar 2, 2014

Mr. Nyberg, thank you so much for this very excellent letter. Now, as Finns we can hardly expect the whole world to know our history, so when necessary, we have to be active and correct any misconceptions. My own first reaction wasn't very civilized. It was soothing to notice you took care of that, the diplomat you are :)

Olli Valkonen

Feb 28, 2014

Mr. Crowley,

While I thank you of your interest in Finnish history, I must correct your points:

1. Hotel Tornî wasn't the headquarters of the KGB. It was the Allied Control Commission (ACC) that occupied the hotel. The job of the ACC, that was made up of 15 British and 200 Russian commission members, was to control the Finnish compliance with the peace treaty.
2. You write: "Russian had to be taught in all Finnish schools". This is as false as it can be.
3. The relations between Finland and Russia were (and are) so completely different from Ukraine-Russia relations that seeing something similar in the paths of Finland (as it took place) and Ukraine (as it may take place) to the EU is a major mistake, and mirrors insufficient knowledge about both Finland and Ukraine.

Patrick M. Crowley

Feb 26, 2014

Great letter!!

One important extra point should be added here. The Finnish relationship with Russia was not a comfortable one for the Finns either - the Hotel Tornî used to be the KGB headquarters in Helsinki and the Russians made sure that it dominated the skyline, Russian had to be taught in all Finnish schools, and Finland had to give up a large chunk of it's eastern territories (Eastern Karelia) to the Russians in order to hold the peace. At the first opportunity Finland broke away from it's (forced) relationship with Russia to embrace the European Union in the same way that Ukraine is currently trying to break away from Russia too. If the original author of the piece in the FT meant that Ukraine should start negotiations to cede part of it's territory to the Russians then there might be a case for following a "Finnish option", but somehow I don't think this was in his mind when he made this suggestion!

jarame

Feb 25, 2014

Mr. Ambassador,

Thank you for your great piece.

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