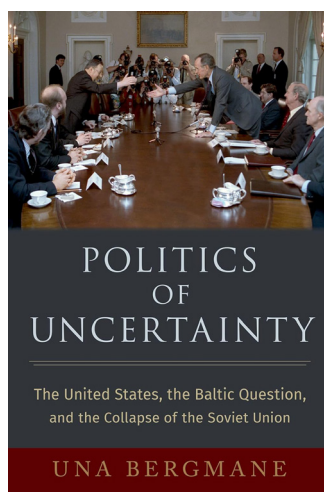


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Una Bergmane. *Politics of Uncertainty: The United States, the Baltic Question, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 256 p. ISBN 9780197578346



Nenoteiktības koncepcijas unikalitāte un skatījums no Baltijas valstu perspektīvas ļauj Unai Bergmanei piedāvāt savu oriģinālu stāstījumu par PSRS sabrukumu un baltiešu lomu šajā procesā. Grāmata iezīmē ārkārtīgi dinamisku ainu. Nenoteiktības kategorija ir veiksmīga interpretācijas pieeja, kas ļauj lasītājam cieši sekot autores stāstījumam par mainīgo politisko situāciju, nevis liek iztēloties situāciju kā procesu sākumā skaidri definētu. Grāmatas lielākais devums zinātnes literatūrā ir tās detalizētā norišu analīze; tā ir balstīta bagātīgā avotu klāstā un atklāj problēmas, ar kurām saskārās galvenie politikas spēlētāji. Autore daudz uzmanības velta iekšpolitiskajām debatēm ASV, baltiešu diasporas aktīvajai nostājai, īpaši brīžos, kad nenoteiktība un kavēšanās iesaldēja prezidenta Džordža Buša administrācijas rīcību un perestroikas politiku PSRS.

Grāmatai ir loģiski pamatota struktūra. To veido ievads, piecas hronoloģiski secībā sakārtotas nodaļas un plaši secinājumi, kuros ne tikai apkopoti stāstījuma galvenie pieturas punkti, bet arī ieskicētas politiskās tendences, kas bija vērojamas pēc Baltijas valstu neatkarības atgūšanas un starptautiskās atzišanas.

The book has a seemingly very indeterminate title: politics of uncertainty. However, the explanation that follows – “the United States, the Baltic question,

and the collapse of the Soviet Union” – defines the issue very clearly: it is the US policy on the Baltic question during the period of 1988–1991. Much has been written on the collapse of the USSR in literature highlighting its various causes. Mention should also be made of Vlad Zubok’s excellent recently published book on the same subject.¹ Yet it is precisely the uniqueness of the concept of uncertainty and the look from the vantage point of the Baltic countries that allows Bergmane to present her original narrative on the collapse of the USSR and the role of the Baltic countries in it.

Uncertainty, a cautious assessment of the situation, and the procrastination, which are documented and described in detail in the book, would seem to contradict the image entrenched in our memories and the evaluations of the situation that changed abruptly at the end of the 1990s and took one clear direction – that of liberation. The book presents a highly dynamic picture. Its greatest contribution to the scholarly literature lies in its detailed analysis of the events; it is based on a wealth of sources and reveals the problems faced by the main political actors. As the narrative of the book makes clear, decision-making and coordination of political processes was a complex mechanism. The picture usual for us, in which the main agents are major international figures, superpowers like the US or the Soviet Union, is replaced by a wide range of governmental agencies and a plethora of political actors who function in debate, conflict, initiation of action, or in securing support, even within the same country. The author devotes much space to the internal political debates in the USA, the active position of the Baltic diaspora, especially at the moments when uncertainty and delay froze the actions of President George Bush’s administration. It is the multitude of these agents that helps to reveal the possibilities of choices and the existing doubts.

The range of sources, both archival and published, is indeed impressive, as is the list of references. The author has used material not only from public and university library collections, but also from private archives. She has conducted nearly thirty interviews with important political figures of the time. Perhaps the book could have benefitted from the work of Česlovas Laurinavičius and Vladas Sirutavičius, which is certainly the most comprehensive study of the *Sąjūdis* period in Lithuania.²

The idea underlying the book could be described as a narrative about how the policy of non-recognition of the occupation of the Baltic countries, overlooked

1 Vladislav M. Zubok (2021). *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*. Yale University Press.

2 Česlovas Laurinavičius, Vladas Sirutavičius (2008). *Lietuvos istorija*. Vol. 12/1: *Sąjūdis: nuo 'Persitvarkymo' iki Kovo 11-osios*. Vilnius: LII leidykla.

and underestimated by the great powers during the Second World War and the Cold War that followed it, shaped the distinct international identity of this small region.

The process was not simple and straightforward. The question of non-recognition of the occupation of the Baltic countries or the exceptional status of these three republics was a problem not only for the Soviet Union but also for the Western European countries and even for the United States. Una Bergmane tells us how the internationally insignificant Baltic issue, which slipped through the diplomatic agendas even without the Soviet dictator Josif Stalin's categorical demand for the West to abandon its policy of non-recognition of the Baltic countries (23), was later transformed into a major issue of particular importance, especially in the United States due to the emphasis placed on it by the Baltic diaspora. Its importance was highlighted by the diaspora as the Baltic question was becoming an element of building and sustaining the émigré identity, ensuring the meaning of their existence and the continuation of their nationhood.

Along with the policy of non-recognition of the Baltic occupation, the book introduces another, equally significant vector in the period under review: the policy of *perestroika* in the Soviet Union. The author convincingly demonstrates the interaction between these two political vectors: on the one hand, the political promise of the USA and the Western powers not to recognise the occupation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the maintenance of the viability of this promise through the active involvement of the diaspora, and the ambition of the leaders of the Baltic republics to attach even more significance to this promise and to put it on a broad international stage; on the other hand, the commitment of Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Eduard Shevardnadze, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, and other Soviet reformist leaders to continue the policy of transformation. The latter understood well and declared to their Western partners that violence and coercion towards the people of the Baltic republics would mean the end of the *perestroika* policy (66). Uncertainty and insecurity about the extent, to which the aspirations of the Baltic republics to establish a policy of non-recognition of the occupation at the international level would actually be supported, and whether Moscow would adhere to the *perestroika* policy shaped this field of insecurity.

From the very first pages of the book we can trace how Moscow more often preferred to wait and observe than make things happen (for example, p. 47). At this point we can also refer to the memoirs of Vadim Medvedev, the secretary for ideology of the Central Committee of the CPSU at that time, who wondered why the representatives of the Soviet Baltic republics were unhappy when Moscow was

almost always conceding and agreeing to their demands.³ However, in the context of intense political dynamics, timing and the moment of initiative were central. Some time would pass after the leaders of the Baltic republics made a demand, and the situation was already leading them towards new objectives. Moscow was desperately late in its response to events. One has to agree with the author that even Gorbachev's visit to Lithuania in January 1990, seemingly only a month after the secession of the Lithuanian Communist Party from the CPSU (Soviet Union-wide, it was the first party secession from the most important All-Union ruling organisation), happened too late as well (74). Already at the beginning of 1990, the Baltic leaders distrusted Gorbachev and were well aware that delay was not an option, because it was a crucial time for action (79). They, and in particular the Lithuanian leaders, were quick to take advantage of the window of opportunity that arose in the spring of 1990, when the issue of German reunification emerged (76). Admittedly, unlike those of Lithuania, the leaders of Latvia and Estonia were somewhat constrained by the fear that Moscow might activate the large Russian-speaking ethnic minorities living in these countries (96).

The political aspect of non-recognition of the occupation of the Baltic countries and the geographical factor created the uniqueness of the region in the context of other Soviet republics. The book convincingly outlines the political trajectories of these three republics situated in the west of the USSR as distinct from those of other republics, and exceptional attention paid to them. As can be seen, other former "fraternal republics" such as Georgia, Moldavia, and even Ukraine, especially the enthusiasts of their democratic movements, were even somewhat annoyed by this Baltic exclusivity and the clear boundaries drawn by Western politicians that provided the three Baltic republics with a different international potential. Una Bergmane observes a certain ethnic hierarchy in Soviet politics. Not only the West but also Moscow paid special attention to these three republics in the western part of the USSR. According to her, "the belief that the Baltic countries were more 'civilised' than other Soviet regions was shared at the highest levels of Soviet and republic leadership" (123). The historical and cultural identity of the Baltic countries created a commonality with other countries of Eastern and Northern Europe (124), which is why it is possible to trace the origins of the exclusivity of the Baltic region in the wider context of the USSR: the international policy of non-recognition of the Baltic occupation was paralleled by cultural or "civilizational" aspects.

3 V. A. Medvedev (1994). *V komande Gorbacheva: vzgljad iznutri* [In Gorbachev's Team: A Look from Inside]. Moscow: Bylina.

It would have been desirable to cover internal developments in the USSR a little more extensively in the book. Understandably though, as the book is primarily concerned with the period of 1988–1991, it would have been difficult to accommodate a broader narrative of the Soviet nationality policy and the attitudes of the elites of the Soviet republics. Indeed, the internal hierarchy drawn by Soviet politics is an interesting question that requires further detailed research revealing the manner of interaction of individual regions of the Soviet empire, the *nomenklaturas* of the republics, and the cultural and academic elites with the institutions of the centre and the extent to which societies were involved in the creation of a common Soviet identity and took part in the process of the transformation into a Soviet people. Currently emerging studies show that in the common Soviet space there were different elite strategies that resorted even to the Soviet context for a stronger representation of their ethnicity in the context of the USSR as a whole (such as, for example, Georgia); there existed higher “rankings”⁴ of the All-Union status of the *nomenklaturas*, or, on the contrary, the elites of some of the republics also exerted effort to distance themselves from Moscow.⁵ Further research in this direction is also promising in the context of the theme of the book under review as it would allow us to investigate whether there already were certain trends of internal politics and national expression in the late Soviet period, which eventually evolved into new geopolitical realities in the period of *perestroika* and the collapse of the USSR. The narrative of the book makes it clear that geopolitical lines were already being drawn at the time, even before the collapse. They divided the former Soviet empire and programmed further political, economic, and social development of these regions – clearly attributing one region to the West and questioning the orientation of the others.

At the heart of the book is the concept of uncertainty. It can be understood as an uncertainty about one’s next steps and the intentions of one’s political opponent or as an uncertainty about the path to follow. Such uncertainty can be paralysing and lead to the freezing of action and postponement of decision-making. At the same time, though, taking time or even avoiding making decisions can also be a tactic and a policy, like freezing or suspending a conflict. Clear and unambiguous solutions are not always possible in all cases. Yet uncertainty can suggest not only a strategy but also a paralysing state or emotion, surrendering to the moment, or doing nothing. Today, historical scholarship is increasingly

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- 4 Saulius Grybkauskas (2022). *Governing the Soviet Union's National Republics. The Second Secretaries of the Communist Party*. London: Routledge (Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies).
 - 5 Vilius Ivanauskas (2015). *Įrėmintą tapatybę. Lietuvos rašytojai Tautų draugystės imperijoje*. Vilnius: LII leidykla, p. 277.

focusing on circumstances, rituals, and the history of emotions, which would seem to be irrelevant where established rational strategies are in place, at least at the political level. Still, emotions, the states of mind, and their exploitation allow the leaders to restructure their management in new ways, to find new paths to approach the challenges they are facing. Thus, in her study of Brezhnev's political biography, Susanne Schattenberg points to the importance of political ceremonies in Soviet politics.⁶ In the same way, the moment, the right timing, and the use of that timing become crucial in a state of uncertainty. This is what Una Bergmane's book is about.

The author does a great job of showing how, when one group of agents stop, procrastinate, and doubt, other agents become active, even in the same country, for instance, the USA.

Uncertainty is a good approach that allows the reader to follow closely the author's narrative of a changing situation instead of imagining the situation as having been well-defined from the start, where the agents' stable and hardly-changing positions predominate. The author looks at events as a dynamic shift of the situation. In fact, the steps of the Balts are shown as following a clear strategy with a clear goal – the achievement of national independence. Therefore, if uncertainty is observed in the actions of the Baltic leaders, it is only because of the limits of how far Moscow allowed them to go and where the limits of *pere-stroika* were. Such a glimpse is somewhat static, as if one knows how the story will end. This is a way of supporting the currently dominant narrative in the Baltic countries, enshrined in the statements of the leaders of the Popular Fronts, that right from the very beginning nothing less than independence was set as a goal and sought. All other actions from the part of the Balts, including the support to Gorbachev's attempts to reform the USSR, was just tactical steps towards independence. However, as detailed studies of the events of the summer of 1988 and 1989 in Lithuania show, there were all sorts of political trajectories within this Baltic country.

The structure of the book is sound. It consists of an introduction, five parts arranged in a chronological-problem manner, and comprehensive conclusions, which not only set out the main points of the narrative but also sketch the political trends that followed in the wake of the achievement of Baltic independence and international recognition. The European Union and NATO membership and the West's expectations towards the Baltic countries are closely linked to the main theme of the book. And that is understandable. The geopolitical situation today

6 Susanne Schattenberg (2021). *Brezhnev: The Making of a Statesman*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

is closely linked to the period described in the book; one could say that it is its direct derivative. Some may argue that the phase we are going through is the predicted last convulsion of the empire defeated in the 1990s. Others, more sceptical observers, see the situation as more complicated and intricate, pointing out that the optimism about the successful destruction of the empire was too hasty an assessment.

The author should also be commended for her engaging text and narrative. The last sentences of almost every paragraph in the book are an introduction to the next part. The narrative is designed to be intriguing, because upon finishing one part you want to know what comes next.

To sum up, Una Bergmane's book is a significant contribution to the understanding of not only the collapse of the USSR and the independence of the Baltic countries, but also of the origins and evolution of current international politics in the region. I recommend it both to the scholars interested in the region and a wider readership.

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